

**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AT THE MARGINS:
NURTURING HOPE AMONG WOMEN**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This action in ministry submitted for the Doctor of Ministry explores the experience of hope in the lives of women who live with mental illness. I began this research project confident that Christianity is a faith tradition that supports and fosters hope and wholeness among people. Using the theoretical foundations of adult religious educators and the insights of Christian feminist liberation theologians, I facilitated a spirituality gathering of women at *Our Place, Community of Hope*. I chose to use Christian feminist theologians because these women have influenced my life profoundly, nurturing my hope and giving me courage to own my place in church and society. My greatest desire for the women who gathered together was that they develop a deepening sense of hope as they learn of a God who loves them unconditionally. In my research, I wanted to learn about the experience of hope in women who participated in the women's spirituality gatherings as well as to determine if their hope was nurtured by these gatherings. To do this I used the question: **How does adult education nurture hope among women at *Our Place*.** The findings of this research illuminates the fact that hope lies deep within the consciousness of these women and that the women's spirituality gathering played a momentous role in nurturing their hope.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Before entering the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax I worked as a laboratory technologist in medical microbiology at the University of Alberta Hospital for fourteen years. During the later years of this work, I volunteered at the Boyle McCauley Health Clinic and the Sacred Heart Food Bank. I served as an advocate for hospitalized patients from the Boyle McCauley Heath Clinic who had no family or other support systems. As a volunteer at the Sacred Heart Food Bank I welcomed people and assisted them in getting the food they needed.

In 1986 I entered the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax. My ministry experiences during the initial formation period as a Sister of Charity involved a variety of pastoral ministries. These ministries include working with homeless women at Adsum House, a shelter for homeless women in Halifax. Here, my ministry was primarily one of hospitality to the women as well as accompanying women for court appearances and to medical appointments. I also ministered at St. Michael's parish in the RCIA program and in their St. Vincent DePaul food bank program. The ministry at St. Michael had afforded me the opportunity to journey with people in their faith journey as they discerned their desire to be a member of the Roman Catholic Church. In my ministry at the food bank visited the homes of the poor that lived in the area. Another ministry that I engaged in was hospital pastoral care at the Halifax Infirmary.

In 1990 I moved to Vancouver where I enrolled in two units of Clinical Pastoral Education at the University of British Columbia Hospital in preparation to ministry as a hospital chaplain. From 1991 to 1994, I ministered as a chaplain at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver. My ministry involved ministering to patients, families and staff in the critical care areas of the hospital. This ministry involved preparing and presiding at memorial services, serving on the hospital ethics education committee and serving on interdisciplinary teams in patient care planning.

During my years in Vancouver, I also undertook other ministries. I volunteered at the Franciscan Soup Kitchen where I helped to serve the meals. I facilitated the RCIA program in my parish, Holy Cross Church in Burnaby. I was a member of the Sisters Association of Vancouver Vocation Awareness Committee where I prepared and facilitated discernment retreats as well as journeyed with women who were discerning religious life. I also journeyed with these women in spiritual direction.

In Toronto I have continued to be involved in ministry with the poor. First, in the Out of the Cold Program and then at Our Place, my ministry base for the Doctor of Ministry Program. Since 1998 I have been the Director of Field Education at Regis College in Toronto.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to all persons who experience marginalization because of their gender, age, race, religion or class and especially those who live with mental health challenges.

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Many people have helped this research and action in ministry to come to completion and for them I am most sincerely grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

Setting the Context for Ministry

1. My personal story

My interest in feminist liberation theology and religious education comes directly by way of personal experience. Both are significant partners on my journey and in the ministries I have undertaken. The experience that evoked these interests began with the death of my father followed closely by the deaths of two friends. At the time, the why questions came fast and furiously but they did not help to relieve the ache of loss I was experiencing. I tried to run from the pain. Despite my attempts to alleviate it, I began to feel depressed and it frightened me. This experience of depression eventually became a turning point and I began to ask the “what” questions. What is the purpose of life? What am I doing with my life? These “what” questions focused my search for understanding and meaning.

Looking back over my life today, I can see how this time of loss allowed me to stop and review my life. An old Chinese proverb defines crisis as an opportunity to change. This was my opportunity to deepen my search for meaning.¹ What I discovered in my search was not what I expected. The death of two friends, both peers, were stark reminders of my own mortality and inevitable death. However, their deaths also gave me courage, the kind of courage that sustains and empowers a person to live life more fully. My fear of depression became a catalyst for the courage that enabled me to examine my life. I began to ask questions that ultimately led me deeper into my pain.

¹ This experience inevitably led me on a journey toward deepening my faith. James Fowler notes the role of crisis in faith development: “Growth and development in faith also result from life crisis, challenges and the kinds of disruptions that theologians call revelation. Each of these brings disequilibrium and requires

The death of my father, however, set me on a journey unknown to me at the time and only in the unfolding, has it become clearer. My father's death invited me into a deeper search for meaning. I began to re-explore what I wanted to do with my life. Somewhere along the way I had lost a sense of purpose. There was something missing in my life and I was unable to put my finger on it. A review of my life awakened questions about my place as a woman in a society and family dominated by men. I was the only daughter in a family of seven children. In my exploration I began to recognize the significance of my experiences and to understand the differences of gender. The research and work of Carol Gilligan has served to bring some clarity and understanding to my experiences. She says:

From the different dynamics of separation and attachment in their gender identity formation through the divergence of identity and intimacy that marks their experience in the adolescent years, male and female voices typically speak of the importance of different truths, the former of the role of separation as it defines and empowers the self, the latter of the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community.²

Not only did questions of belonging arise but also questions of self-identity and of my role as a woman. Here I touched deep-seated roots of inner pain.

The pain showed itself in those times when I experienced a lack of self-assertion, lack of confidence and feelings of inferiority. I was relieved, however, to find I was not alone in this experience. Anne Carr notes:

Women's temptation or "sin," conversely, relates to lack of self-assertion in relation to cultural and familial expectations, failure to assume responsibility and make choices for themselves, failure to discover their

changes in our ways of seeing and being in faith." James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith, the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1981), 100 – 101.

² Carol Gilligan, "In a Different Voice: Visions of Maturity," in *Women's Spirituality, Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 110. For a fuller development of gender differences see Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986).

own personhood and uniqueness rather than finding their whole meaning in the too-easy sacrifice of self for others.³

These experiences are all too familiar to many women and they are the demons that haunt me. I recognize more and more just how debilitating these “sins” are for me and for women in general. At the same time, these experiences constantly challenge me to trust my intuition and to find my voice.

The process of awareness and personal growth was only possible because I was not alone. Women threw me lifelines, supported and journeyed with me into finding my voice. As Nelle Morton would say “They heard me into voice.”⁴ With the support of other women, I began to merge myself wholeheartedly into feminist liberation theology⁵ where I have found a place of belonging and a home in my faith. I re-discovered God as intimate and loving and I found myself once again falling in love with God. My experience had all the hallmarks of a conversion.⁶

³ Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace, Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 8. Carr references this work to Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in *Womenspirit Rising, A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979), 25 – 42.

⁴ Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 202.

⁵ In a later chapter, I explore in more detail Christian feminist liberation theology. I think the broad definition of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's is helpful at this point: “A feminist theology of liberation must remain first and foremost a critical theology of liberation as long as women suffer injustice and oppression of patriarchal structures. The theology explores the particular experiences of women struggling for liberation from systemic patriarchy and at the same time indicts all patriarchal structures and texts, especially those of biblical religion. Such a theology seeks to name theologically the alienation, anger, pain, and dehumanization engendered by patriarchal sexism and racism in society and church. At the same time it seeks to articulate an alternative vision of liberation by exploring women's experiences of survival and salvation in our struggle against patriarchal oppression and degradation, as well as by assessing Christian texts, traditions, and communities in terms of such liberation from patriarchal oppression.” Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Women-Church: The Hermeneutical Center of Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” in *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 6. Also see Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective – A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974).

⁶ “Christian conversion means a re-centering of our passion. It is falling in love with God who became like us and who invites and empowers us to a relation like that of a parent to an adult son or daughter. It means making an attachment to the passion of Jesus the Christ loving, committed, and ready-to-suffer passion for the inbreaking commonwealth of love.” In James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian, Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 140.

2. Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul Halifax

As a result of these experiences I began to explore how I could serve God. The challenges and insights from study and reflection were constant companions in my search as was the companionship of a spiritual guide. Using the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, my discernment⁷ eventually led me to religious life.⁸ As a Sister of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax⁹ my desire to serve God was nurtured, as was my love for the poor by other Sisters of Charity and by those whom I served. Our Constitutions¹⁰ express how the charism¹¹ of love for the poor was being nurtured in me:

Our Congregation came into being through the action of the Holy Spirit in the heart of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton who found in the rule of Saint Vincent de Paul the expression of its purpose: The principle end for which God has called and assembled the Sisters of Charity is to honour Jesus Christ our Lord as the source and model of all charity, by rendering to him every temporal and spiritual service in their power, in the persons of the

⁷ Discernment is a process of decision making by which the person analyzes the spiritual movements within themselves. "[He] learns to discern what Ignatius calls the "good" from the "evil" spirit." Ralph, E. Metts, S.J., *Ignatius Knew* (Washington: Jesuit Secondary Education Association, 1995), 130. See also John J. English, S.J., *Spiritual Freedom, From an Experience of the Ignatian Exercises to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Guelph: Loyola House, 1990) 124 – 141 and 190 – 209.

⁸ Religious life is a permanent, visible, and public state of life in the church that gives expression to one aspect of the many charisms within the church. It is a life distinct from both the ordained and the lay. Religious make a public profession of poverty, chastity and obedience. Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., *Religious Life in the New Millennium, Vol. One. Finding the Treasure, Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 127 – 128. For a brief historical overview of religious life see Juliana Casey, IHM, "Religious Life" in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Mary Collins, Joseph A. Komonchak and Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 868 – 873.

⁹ The Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax is a religious congregation of women which has its foundation in Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton who established the first congregation of Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg in 1809. In 1856 the Halifax sisters were officially approved as a new congregation.

¹⁰ "Each institute has a rule or constitution which interprets these counsels (*evangelical counsels of poverty, voluntary celibacy, and obedience*) for the particular group, which gives form to its life, and which guides the members in their search for God and struggles for perfect charity." Juliana Casey, IHM, "Religious Orders," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 873. I have added the italics. The Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, *Constitutions and Directives*, was published at Mount Saint Vincent Motherhouse in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1985.

¹¹ Charism is a gift given to an individual or a community for the sake of building up the Church. For a more detailed treatment of charism see Wilfred Harrington, "Charism," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 180 – 83.

poor, either sick, children, prisoners or others who through shame would conceal their necessities.¹²

The Sisters of Charity was founded by Elizabeth Ann Seton to serve those in need, especially the marginalized. Our constitutions reflect Elizabeth's commitment to serve God in the poor and her dedication to their education. Her particular passion was to teach others about God's love.

Elizabeth chose the rule of religious life from Vincent de Paul who committed his life to serving the poor. In his ministry with the poor, Vincent was always concerned about their spiritual needs. Although he served the poor in hospitals, caring for their needs of health care, food, clothing, and shelter, he continued to insist that spiritual needs were also important to life. He encouraged those who worked with the poor to be teachers of the gospel in whatever ministry they were doing.

For Vincent, loving God was expressed in teaching others of God's love. He identified his life with Jesus, declaring that his life's mission was to bring the good news to the poor. St. Vincent's desire for his life was to be "The Evangelizer of the Poor." Of perhaps his most famous conference on "The End of the Congregation" (December 6, 1658), Robert Maloney quoting Vincent de Paul writes:

...to make God known to the poor, to announce Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and that it is for the poor. O how great that is...so sublime is it to preach the gospel to the poor that it is above all the office of the Son of God.¹³

In another conference, Vincent says:

In his passion, he had scarcely the appearance of being human. In the eyes of the gentiles he passed for a fool. To the Jews he was a stumbling block.

¹² Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, Halifax, *Constitutions and Directives* (Halifax: Mount St. Vincent, [1985]), 3.

¹³ Robert P. Maloney, C.M. *The Way of Vincent de Paul, A Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor* (New York: New York Press 1992), 22.

But with all that, he described himself as the Evangelizer of the Poor. “To preach the good news to the poor he has sent me.”¹⁴

Vincent was passionately convinced of the importance of proclaiming the gospel to the poor.

These words continued to stay with me as I began ministry as a Sister of Charity. I often pondered what these words of Vincent might mean today. More specifically, what did they mean in terms of my own ministry with the poor? Vincent invited me to see Christ in the poor. His conversion experience, which led him to serve God in the poor, challenged me to continue to reflect on how God is present in the people with whom I minister.

The ongoing life of The Sisters of Charity continues to nurture and challenge me. Reflection on our constitutions and our daily life continually invites us to ongoing conversion¹⁵ in the attempt to express more clearly by our lives and ministries how we are living the charism of Vincent and Elizabeth today. At our Eighteenth General Chapter¹⁶ we again affirmed our roots in Elizabeth Seton and Vincent de Paul when we stood together in solidarity around our commitment:

We affirm our commitment to a contemplative stance that gives joyful witness to love, stands on the side of the poor, addresses unjust structures. Empowered by the Spirit of God, enriched by the lives of one another we stand in the fire of gospel values and respond to a world wounded by violence and stripped of hope.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 22.

¹⁵ “...by conversion I mean an ongoing process—with, of course, a series of important moments of perspective altering convictions and illumination—through which people(or a group) gradually bring the lived story of their lives into congruence with the core story of the Christian faith.” James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian, Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 140.

¹⁶ “The general chapter is the representative assembly of the sisters and when in session the highest authority in the congregation. Its role is to consider the life and mission of the congregation in light of our spirit and the needs of the Church and society.” Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, *Constitutions and Directives*, (Halifax: Mount Saint Vincent, 1985), 26.

¹⁷ Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul Eighteenth General Chapter, (April, 1996).

This statement from our chapter reflects our experiences of mission and ministry in the world today. It also challenges each of us to authenticity in our continued expression of our charism in the world today.

Our Chapter statement challenged me to question how I was to witness to the charism of Charity today. While ministering in a woman's shelter in Halifax, I listened to many stories of lives broken from abuse, addictions and poverty. I heard very similar stories in Vancouver while ministering as chaplain in an inner city hospital and as a volunteer at a soup kitchen. I heard these all too familiar stories again in Toronto as I listened to people in the Out of the Cold Program¹⁸ and in my present ministry base, *Our Place*. In most of the stories, I heard a deep longing for God. Sometimes the questions were clear and direct: Where is God? Is there a God? How can God allow this to happen? What does God have to do with real life? How can I make sense of my life? Other questions were not so direct and only hinted at someone's search. Such questions bring me back to St. Vincent's words. I am also reminded of my own crisis. I have become especially aware of the needs of women, particularly those most marginalized. From my own experience, I want to support others in their time of need and to assist them in their search for meaning.

The yearnings and desires that have arisen out of my ministry are close to the roots of my religious congregation. I have felt a strong call to minister with the poor and the marginalized, especially women who have little or no support on their journey. I

¹⁸ The Out of the Cold Program was founded in 1987 in Toronto by Sister Susan Morgan from Our Lady's Missionaries, Roman Catholic priest Father John Murphy, and Anglican priest, Rev. John Erb. The purpose of the program is to provide food and shelter for the homeless during the winter months. This has become an ecumenical as well as interfaith enterprise. Both Christian churches and synagogues have opened their doors to provide this service. Two local health facilities have also become involved.

often wonder if anyone is bringing them the good news, and if they are, how they present it. I remember from my own experience that I needed to hear God's word in a way that would empower me and give me hope.¹⁹ Thus, I have focused my research question on hope: **How does adult religious education nurture hope among women at *Our Place*?**²⁰ I pursued research in religious education with adults in order to learn how to express the good news to the women to whom I minister. I also believe that religious education has the power and potential to change and to transform lives.²¹ Christian feminist liberation theology has given shape to what I teach as well as how I teach.

In the following chapters I will develop how the research question for this study developed and how I have responded to the question. In Chapter One I explore my own theology of ministry. Using the work of Vatican Council II as a starting place, I then explore the expression of ministry from the following perspectives: theological exploration, Christian scriptures, discipleship, ministry with the poor, and the new cosmology. I conclude with an articulation of spirituality for ministry. This final section

¹⁹ Although I will continue to define hope in its many contexts in this document what I mean by hope here is simply the need to have something to hang on to during a difficult time. I think that any experience of hope has the potential to empower and to lead to deeper experiences: "As one of the "theological virtues," and the "three things that last" (1Cor 13:13), hope has traditionally been understood together with faith and love as the modalities which describes Christian existence." "Christian hope is a learned hope but it is also fundamentally a human construct; it is a will to live that presupposes life to be worthwhile. Theologians have come to understand Christian hope as a receptivity to God 'who has come and who will come'." "Hope opens us to a future to be filled by the praxis of liberation which is the creation of provisional anticipations of that ultimate realm of freedom which is the Kingdom of God." For a greater explanation of hope, see Michael J. Scanlon, OSA, "Hope," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 492 – 498 passim.

²⁰ *Our Place, Community of Hope* is where my action in minister took place. Chapter Three gives a complete description of it.

²¹ For further definition of religious education see the following resources: Parker J. Palmer, "The Violence of Our Knowledge, Toward a Spirituality of Higher Education," *The Way*, Vol. 11, Issue 3, September (1995), 93 – 113, Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1980). See also Paulo Friere's work in education for the poor: Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum, 1989) and *Education for Critical Consciousness*. (New York: Continuum, 1997).

on my spirituality for ministry includes Joan Chittister's²² work on spirituality for religious life as well as Maria Harris's²³ and Diarmuid O'Murchu's²⁴ work on spirituality for today.

In chapter two I begin by tracing the journey to find a ministry base from which to do my research. Once established, I explain how the ministry has developed through the years and how the research question evolved. First, I describe my ministry site, giving both a historical overview of its development as well as its focus on Christian values. From this broader overview I lay the foundations for the women's spirituality gathering which initially began with a spirituality gathering for both men and women. In this section I explain some of the challenges that faced the development of the spirituality gathering and in particular the impact of Christian fundamentalism. This chapter concludes with a description of my ministry base group and the assumptions operative in this study.

Chapter three is an exploration of the theoretical and theological framework for religious education of adults and Christian feminist liberation theology. This chapter commences with the work of religious educators. First, I describe the faith community. Then, what follows is an exploration of the work of religious education with adults from the following perspectives: the foundations of scripture and tradition, feminist theology, feminist approaches and liberation theology approaches. This work laid out the foundations for education. The next section discusses the work of Christian feminist liberation theologies that I employed as the foundations for theology. Here the work,

²² Joan Chittister, O.S.B., *The Fire In These Ashes, A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 8.

²³ Maria Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee, A Spirituality For the Twenty-First Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

primarily of Third World Christian feminist liberation theology gives an overview of my approach to theology for the women's spirituality gathering.

Chapter four is a description of the qualitative research method I employed for this study. I include in this chapter an explanation of my action in ministry and the interview process I used, as well as how I analyzed and validated the data. I conclude with a brief description of my approach to the analysis and the major findings that surfaced.

Chapter five is the analysis of the interviews. I begin by setting the stage for the interview and a description of the participants. The analysis is the description of the themes that I identified in the interviews. As far as possible these themes are described through the participant's stories and their voice. In the analysis I identify five major themes as well as other themes that I felt were important. I included as well the images of God that were operative in the women's stories. This chapter gives a good overview of how the participants have experienced hope in their lives as well as the importance of the women's spirituality gathering.

The sixth chapter is the synthesis of the themes I identified in the previous chapter. Here I bring into dialogue the identified themes with the theoretical and theological underpinnings of religious education with adults and Christian feminist liberation theology. From this dialogue I identify the major learning and their impact on the spirituality gathering. At the conclusion of this chapter I identify some implications from this research for both society and church.

²⁴ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 1998).

In the final chapter I revisit my research question and reflect on the impact of this study according to my own understanding of ministry and the exhortation by Vincent de Paul to bring the good news to the poor.

CHAPTER ONE

Theology of Ministry

Introduction

There seems to be much confusion about ministry today in the Roman Catholic Church. Ministry has taken on many faces both in context and in practice; people are ministering in shelters for the homeless and youth, in hospitals, in soup kitchens, in ecological centres, in parishes. The actual function in these ministries is diverse and includes such work as preparing meals, preparing children or adults for the sacraments, counselling and advocacy. In my community, sisters are involved in a variety of ministries both within and outside of ecclesial structures. Although words of caution echo in my ear, “everything is not ministry,” I do not want to let these words hinder my exploration of ministry. My exploration of a theology of ministry is deeply rooted in my experience of it as a Sister of Charity committed to “making the love of God visible in the world today” and “to give joyful witness to love.”²⁵

It is evident to me as I deepen my understanding of ministry that there are several diverse factors and experiences that have shaped this understanding. I have come to see the need to explore ministry from a broader perspective. Diarmuid O’Murchu speaks passionately to this:

...the growing realization that nothing in our world—religious or otherwise – can be comprehensively understood apart from a multi-disciplinary mode of exploration; the captivating mystical visions of astronauts from outer space confirming our unity-within-diversity in what seems to be an alive planet Earth; finally, the nauseating disgust that after centuries of religious fervor, moralizing and proselytizing, we are left with a world divided, lacerated and desecrated by pain, inequality, barbarity and warfare, much of which is fuelled by religious bigotry.²⁶

²⁵ Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, *Constitutions and Directives*, 2.

²⁶ O’Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality*, 171.

O'Murchu points out clearly the contrasting pictures between seeing a more diverse, larger picture and the dangers of limiting our perspectives.

In the attempt to create a fuller picture of a theology of ministry, I explore it from seven perspectives, which have given life to my ministry and have shaped my understanding of it. I begin with teachings from the Second Vatican Council and how they have unfolded in the Roman Catholic Church; 2) I then review the theological perspective of ministry; 3) I explore ministry in the New Testament; 4) I look at ministry from the perspective of discipleship; 5) I take a close look at ministry with the poor; 6) I include the new cosmological findings; and 7) I explore the spirituality required for ministry.

1. Vatican Council II

Changes in the understanding and practice of ministry in the Roman Catholic Church followed the Second Vatican Council, which heralded a new understanding of church as the people of God. The council document "Lumen Gentium" discussed in detail the church as the people of God.²⁷ By defining church as the people of God, the responsibility for God's mission was moved from the hierarchy to each person in the church. This shift in responsibility required a redefinition of ministry. As a result, "Lumen Gentium" caused much turmoil and confusion within the Catholic community especially in regard to the emphasis now placed on personal responsibility and the call to ministry for all people. For many, the changes that the document invited were like a breath of fresh air and were taken as a vision to be lived. However, for others, they were

²⁷ Austin Flannery, O.P., "Lumen Gentium," in *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, New Revised Edition, 1992* (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), 359 – 369.

unacceptable and consequently, many of the implications from Vatican II have yet to be realized.

In 1988, Pope John Paul II followed up on the teachings from Vatican II in his document *Christifideles Laici*²⁸ in which he looked at the role of laity in the church. He writes that the purpose of the synod leading up to the document was, "...to stir and promote a deeper awareness among all the faithful of the gift and responsibility they share, both as a group and as individuals, in the communion and mission of the Church."²⁹ He also added that the role of the laity is "...to take an active, conscientious and responsible part in the mission of the Church in this great moment in history."³⁰ Here Pope John Paul II reminds the laity of their role in working with Christ to bring about the reign of God.

Then, in the fall of 1997, John Paul II identified ministry in the church as the sole domain of the ordained.³¹ Even more poignant for women is the Vatican instruction to the Roman Catholic community in silencing any discussion about women's ordination, which would allow women to fully participate in the church's ministry. Breaking the silence could result in punishment as severe as excommunication. Pope John Paul II states, "...I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's

²⁸ John Paul II, *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World: Christifideles Laici* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation) (Washington, D.C. : United States Catholic conference, 1988), 3. The topic of this synod was: "The vocation and mission in the church and in the world twenty years after the Second Vatican Council."

²⁹ Ibid., 9.

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ "Instruction on certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priest." *Libreria Editrice Vaticana* (Vatican City, 1997), 6. [database on-line]; available from Vaticancity.com.

faithful.”³² These statements are confusing as laity work to understand their role in ministry.

Laity, however, have continued to respond to their call to ministry. In the 1980s James Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead³³ looked closely at the impact of Vatican Council II and the development of the call to ministry among the laity in the United States. The response to God’s call is evident in the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church as more people take their spiritual journeys seriously and accept personal responsibility for living their faith. Increased participation in the ministry of the local church contributed to the confusion in a common understanding of ministry. As the Whiteheads note, “Challenged to move to a more mature exercise of faith, ministry, which had come to be seen as the sole domain of the official leader, was being re-imaged as the responsibility of the entire community.”³⁴ There has been a great impetus throughout Canada and the United States by the laity of the Roman Catholic Church for further theological education and spiritual development.³⁵

As a result of an increased consciousness of faith, many people took more responsibility for their faith. People were empowered by their growing relationship with God and many communities experienced new life. The Whiteheads noted:

Communities of faith are coming alive today in a renewed sense of their vocation and conscience. They are listening carefully, to discern their own special instincts of faith – about justice, or sexuality, or celebration. As they listen, and learn to trust these instincts they become more authoritative in the faith. And they remember that this authority comes

³² Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (May 1994), 2. [database on-line]; available from Vaticancity.com. In his letter John Paul states the church has no authority to ordain women and definitive assent must be given to this teaching.

³³ James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Emerging Laity, Returning Leadership to the Community of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1986).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵ The schools of theology are experiencing an increase in admissions of lay people preparing for ministry.

from the spirit and is an authority shared with others, different communities.³⁶

Ministries flow naturally from these active communities as people recognize God's faithfulness at work in their lives and in the world around them. Such grass roots developments will not be stopped and will be significant for the church of the future.

As people respond to God's call, God's reign is being realized more and more in the midst of everyday life. Thomas Groome states, "All functions of Christian ministry are ways of representing Jesus Christ in service to the community for the building up of the body."³⁷ He emphasizes the power of the Christian tradition in its call to ministry:

It is a faith tradition to be acted upon, to be appropriated, recreated and integrated into one's own faith identity. Faithfulness to the tradition demands such critical appropriation of it. It is to be co-creators of God's reign in the world. Lived faith in the world calls us to continually recreate the forms of social, political, cultural and economic life and to build social and ecclesial structures that are more capable of promoting the value of God's reign.³⁸

Commitment to re-creating a just society is evident in the work of the Parish Social Ministries that have been developed in the Toronto Archdiocese. This ministry calls parishioners to be active in caring for the needy in their community and advocating change where present structures are inadequate. "The dimensions of Parish Social Ministry include direct service, education, advocacy, social action and justice."³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., 62.

³⁷ Thomas H. Groome, "Walking Humbly With Our God" in *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly, An Agenda for Ministers*, Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks, Thomas H. Groome (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 57.

³⁸ Ibid., 61 – 62.

³⁹ Catholic Charities, *Parish Social Ministry Developmental Manual* (Toronto: Archdiocese of Toronto, 1998), 1.

Although fewer people today are entering religious congregations or seeking ordination within the Roman Catholic Church as a way of ministering within the church, many are pursuing vocations in ministry. Maria Harris writes:

In other words, many people today are acknowledging—as persons, as communities, as nations—the existence of the reality of a “call,” a religious vocation. ...it is a force calling for response to liberation, to connectedness, and to suffering both within and beyond ourselves, through the use of creative power.⁴⁰

There is much reason to hope when people recognize that the fundamental base of their call is a response to their creative potential to be agents of God to the suffering and the wounded of the world, whether it be their own, that of others, or of the earth,

2. A theological exploration of ministry

In my theological exploration of ministry, I have drawn on some of the main points emphasized by theologians writing in this area. In *The New Dictionary of Theology*: Thomas O’Meara defines ministry:

Christian ministry is the public activity of a baptized follower of Jesus Christ flowing from the Spirit’s charism and an individual personality on behalf of a Christian community to witness to, serve and realize the kingdom of God.⁴¹

The primary reason for ministry flows from our relationship with God and its expression is a culmination of discernment of the individual gifts and the needs of the community. Called in baptism, each member of the community shares in the work of the reign of God.

Ministry is both mystery and grace in that it is the result of a call, which ultimately flows from our relationship with God.⁴² Ministry is a charism and a gift of the

⁴⁰ Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee, A Spirituality For the Twenty-First Century*, 15.

⁴¹ Thomas Franklin O’Meara, O.P., “Ministry” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 660.

⁴² “...a fundamental theology of ministry is ultimately a theology of grace.” For a fuller explanation see Thomas Franklin O’Meara, O.P., *Theology of Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 14.

Spirit that is given to a particular community to serve the reign of God. The fundamental point of ministry is the reign of God, "...the kingdom of God is the source, the milieu, the goal of ministry. The presence of God in our complex world enables ministry, gives ministry its life and its freedom."⁴³ The Spirit continues to hold up new ministries and to call people to these ministries in order to meet the needs of our communities and to build the reign of God.

As indicated above, the particular expression ministry takes is unique and is determined by discerning individual gifts as well as the needs of the community. The types of ministry that the community calls forth are important to it. In other words, we ask: "To what kind of community is Christian ministry directed?" Ministry called forth from the community identifies both the quality of the community as well as express its theology of ministry. Most importantly ministerial needs form the basis from which the community functions. Particular needs of the church such as apostolicity, mission, communion, sacramentality, service, discipleship, holiness, diversity and rooted in the gifts of the Spirit, will determine the shape and theology of ministry.⁴⁴ The ministry that the community undertakes enfleshes and makes visible the mission of Jesus Christ.

Ministry is also leadership in the Christian community. The role of the ministry of leadership can take a variety of forms. No matter what these forms are, the essence of the ministry of leadership is identified by the ability to call people forth to service, to break open God's word, and to inspire the community by modeling the gospel in their lives.⁴⁵

⁴³ John A. Coleman, "The Theology of Ministry," *The Way* 25 (1985), 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry, Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad 1981), 29 – 30.

3. Exploration of ministry in Christian scriptures

The gospels and the letters in Christian Scriptures are stories of ministry and about ministry. Christian scriptures reveal a wide diversity of ministries.⁴⁶ Thomas O'Meara describes ministry in the letters of St. Paul.⁴⁷ Paul spells out a philosophy of ministry rooted in the teachings of Jesus who has left us the gift of his spirit. In most of the communities that Paul founded all were welcome to share their gifts with the community. For Paul, ministry was an expression of charism. He emphasized these charisms as a unity of the works of the spirit given for service and the building up the body of Christ. Paul speaks of ministry as service grounded in the spirit.⁴⁸ It is the spirit that calls forth ministries. The variety and diversity of gifts are for building up the community. The early communities of Paul experienced a diversity of ministries and saw those who used their gifts for the community as so "wondrous that they were called co-workers for the kingdom of God."⁴⁹ Although Paul spoke of a hierarchy of gifts, he stressed that no one gift is greater than any other. Ministry was not a position of power and honour but rather of action and service, something you actually did. The ministry of leadership was one among many. It was not greater than any other ministry. Women

⁴⁶ As a woman I have learned however, to be cautious about how scripture is interpreted, especially where women are excluded or silenced. As a woman in the Roman Catholic Church, I have seen scripture interpreted in such a way as to prevent women from ministering. In my research, I have chosen to emphasize scripture that affirmation of the role of women and/or laity in their ministry. This does not in any way deny the value of other scripture passages that exclude women; they are simply are not congruent with my experience and understanding of ministry. I am grateful for the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza on the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion. Her work has helped to raise my consciousness when reading scripture and other theological works where women are excluded. It has also helped me to recognize contradictions in the texts and interpretations that are different from what I experience and my personal values. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

⁴⁷ Thomas Franklin O'Meara, O.P., "Ministry" in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 657 – 661.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 658.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 658.

were included in the ministries of the community and were among the followers of Jesus from the beginning.⁵⁰ We see them staying faithful to Jesus, standing by his side at his crucifixion and being the first to visit his tomb.⁵¹

Given my place as a woman and having no decision-making authority in the church, I felt it necessary to see how authority was understood in scripture.⁵² Scripture scholar David Bartlett is helpful in this area. According to Bartlett, the authority of ministry is primarily that of witnessing to Jesus.⁵³ Beginning with Paul's letters, Bartlett describes the apostle as a person of authority who has received that authority from both God and the communities he founded.⁵⁴ In his conversion, Paul experienced a call and we see his call validated through his reception in the communities he founded. The authority of Paul was not in his power over the people but rather it was in his power to serve. Ministry for Paul was to be first a servant to God and then a servant to God's people. "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as slaves for Jesus' sake."⁵⁵

Bartlett describes authority for Matthew's community where it resided in teaching God's Word. All who heard God's word were invited to be followers of Jesus and to share in a community in which all members are both learners and interpreters of the one teacher Jesus.⁵⁶ In John's gospel, we hear a similar yet slightly different version of authority. The authority given to the beloved disciple in the Johannine community was to

⁵⁰ I recognize that there were times when Paul was exclusive of women such as in Timothy 2.

⁵¹ Ibid., 658 - 59.

⁵² My experience of authority in the church has been primarily one of a patriarchal understanding of power and I think women, myself included, need to own our place of authority and power.

⁵³ David L. Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 83.

bear witness to Jesus and to his resurrection.⁵⁷ Authority in John's community also lies in the ability to be in relationship and to be a friend with others. This we see clearly in the emphasis on the washing of feet Jesus calls his disciples to love others by serving.⁵⁸ Bartlett's understanding of leadership in the New Testament affirms the involvement of the whole community in ministry. He identifies the core of that ministry as being deeply rooted in the love of God.

Scripture scholar Luise Schottroff⁵⁹ finds in scriptures the basis for affirming women in ministry and their place of ministry in the church. She reclaims the place of women as journeying alongside Jesus. Women, like Mary of Magdala, shared fully in the poor and vagrant life of Jesus.⁶⁰ Like the other apostles, she left her home behind to follow Jesus. She was among the women who served Jesus in proclaiming the reign of God in Galilee.⁶¹ Schottroff notes, "The women who followed Jesus before and after his death played a full part in the proclamation of the prophetic message of Jesus."⁶² Her description of Mary of Magdala's place alongside Jesus and her role as disciple is not something we hear often. For many people, it is new information.

In the Pauline congregations, we also see the participation and significance of women. Schottroff writes:

The active role of women in public within the Pauline congregations can be deduced from their relevance for all congregations, shown especially in the greetings-list in Rom. 16:3-16. In that list one-third of the persons mentioned by name are women (nine out of twenty-six), and women like

⁵⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁹ Luise Schottroff, "Women as Followers of Jesus in New Testament Times: An Exercise in Social-Historical Exegesis of the Bible," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. N. K. Gottweld (London: Orbis, 1993), 418 – 427.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 419.

⁶¹ Ibid., 421.

⁶² Ibid., 422.

men are distinguished by their work for the congregations, without any apparent ranking.⁶³

The work of women as proclaimers and followers of Jesus continued throughout the Pauline communities. The work of women continues today yet still goes largely unrecognized.

4. Discipleship

An understanding of discipleship is integral to any discussion of ministry. To be a disciple of Christ, that is, to follow Christ, is a foundational call to all Christians. Jesus went about the work of building the reign of God and inviting others to work with him in its creation. If ministry is work of the reign of God, then I must explore what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Also, each person needs to claim their place of discipleship. For me, as a woman, this needs to be in a community where we have a recognized “discipleship of equals.”⁶⁴

Theologian Kenan Osborne⁶⁵ maintains that the New Testament is a manual of discipleship which gives us a thorough explanation of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

We are presented with a powerful portrait of true discipleship, which all who believe in Jesus must strive to replicate in their own lives. If one is a leader in the community, then he or she must clearly evidence this discipleship, and if one is not a leader, one must likewise reflect the same image of discipleship. The New Testament as such is much more a manual of discipleship for all Christians.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid., 425.

⁶⁴ “The theological notion of ‘discipleship of equals’ has been developed in the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as a radical democratic feminist concept that is rooted in biblical language.” Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Discipleship of Equals” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 70 – 71.

⁶⁵ Kenan B. Osborne, OFM, *Ministry, Lay Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church, Its History and Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

⁶⁶ Ibid., 110.

Very simply, to be a disciple of Jesus is to follow Jesus, to become like him, and to be workers in building the reign of God. “Above all, Jesus’ own life, death and resurrection was, in Mark’s view, the clearest expression of what God’s kingdom was and is all about.”⁶⁷ This is our life as disciples of Jesus. We recognize the paschal mystery in our own lives each time we experience the death of our dreams or the death of our false selves and later witness the rising of our new selves. Thus we participate in the paschal mystery of Jesus in our daily lives.

In Luke, we see Jesus and his disciples, both men and women, bringing about the reign of God, which is meant for all people. It is, in Osborne’s words, “...a kingdom of peace, reconciliation, openness and inclusiveness. It is a reconstituted kingdom which makes room for sinners, for the poor, for the sick, for the dying, for the oppressed, for the downtrodden.”⁶⁸ Luke provides us with instruction for discipleship. Following in Jesus’ steps is not easy and there is a cost to discipleship. Like in Mark, we are warned of the danger to those who are workers in the mission of God’s reign.⁶⁹ However, there is also a clear sense that no matter how much opposition there is to God’s reign, the reign of God will continue to be born in the world.⁷⁰ The Lucan perspectives on discipleship that Osborne describes affirm a way of life centred in Jesus as essential to followers of Christ.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes discipleship as a central theme in Mark. Mark understands the twelve as primarily disciples and attributes to them no other distinctive

⁶⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 73

function and mission. According to him, the mission of the disciple to do what Jesus did is not restricted to the twelve apostles but is given to all people.⁷¹

The call of discipleship as described in Mark is demanding, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes:

The second part of the gospel therefore stresses again and again that the disciples have to suffer the same consequences that Jesus had to suffer for his preaching and mission. Just as the way of Jesus led to suffering and death, so does the way of the true disciples. Connected with each passion prediction are statements stressing that no possibility of discipleship exists apart from taking upon oneself its consequence of suffering.⁷²

Schüssler Fiorenza highlights also the seriousness with which women took up their role as disciples in the Marcan account. The women disciples were the functional successors of Jesus, and continued his mission and ministry in the “New Family” of God.⁷³ It was the women in Mark’s gospel who stayed with Jesus at his death. Despite the danger involved, it was the women who were the first to go to Jesus’ tomb.

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.⁷⁴

It was a woman who was the first to bring the news of his resurrection to the community of disciples.

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and

⁷¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals, A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 112. See also Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. “The Gospel According to Mark,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), 597.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁷⁴ “Mark 16:1 – 2,” All biblical references are from, *Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.⁷⁵

These stories of women in scripture who centre their life on Jesus send a powerful message, affirming women's place in ministry.

5. Ministry with the poor

I include ministry with the poor in my theology of ministry not only because it is my ministry but also because it is a primary focus of the ministry of the Sisters of Charity. It is a topic we often grapple with during our assemblies or chapters. A recent publication from the leaders of The Canadian Religious Conference⁷⁶ dealt entirely with this issue. Most people recognize the call to minister with the poor as deeply rooted in gospel values. I think, however, that Christian community needs to continually grapple with what it means to be "in solidarity with the poor."

As noted earlier, the commitment of Vincent and Elizabeth to the poor underlies our life as Sisters of Charity. The Constitutions articulate how we share in the commitment of these two remarkable persons to the poor:

Corporately and individually we strive to develop a sensitivity toward those who the world oppresses, to right in great ways or small the injustices we see around us, to heal the wounds of the embittered, to speak peace to the troubled, to urge the mighty to right wrongs, that we may bring the compassion of Christ to all whose lives we touch. We do this faithful to our charism and in accordance with Church teaching.⁷⁷

Such a commitment always deserves revisiting and re-commitment. Thus, in 1986 our re-commitment to "stand on the side of the poor."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Mark 16: 9 – 11.

⁷⁶ The Canadian Religious Conference or CRC is the Canadian national organization of men and women elected to leadership in Canadian Religious communities. The CRC publishes the *CRC Bulletin* quarterly.

⁷⁷ Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. *Constitutions and Directives* (Halifax: Mount Saint Vincent, 1985), 3.

⁷⁸ Sisters of Charity of Halifax, St. Vincent de Paul, Eighteenth General Chapter (April, 1996).

This commitment means we learn from one another what it means to be ministering with the poor and in solidarity with the poor. For theologian Christine Smith,⁷⁹ a Christian life includes ministry with the poor that aims at solidarity:

I understand Christian ministry to be the liberating and salvific movement and activity of the people of God, guided and shaped by the spirit of the Christ revealed to us in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This liberating and salvific activity has to do with eschatological vision and liberating praxis. As eschatological vision, the people of God seek to articulate, proclaim and embody the hope of Shalom, the promise of healing and restoration, the transforming reality of God's saving justice and love. As liberating praxis, the people of God place their lives in solidarity with the oppressed, transform structures of human injustice, confront and challenge powers of domination, identify with and stand alongside the marginalized and disenfranchised of our world.⁸⁰

How can I serve the poor and how can I minister in our world today if I do not have this vision? These visions of God's reign enable us to dream and to see and, thereby, to realize new possibilities.

Walter Brueggemann⁸¹ calls this ability to see prophecy. He emphasizes that prophecy is a crucial element in ministry. For Brueggemann, prophecy brings to the community a new vision, an alternative to the dominant vision of the culture that oppresses. He sees that the vision of a new community can only be realized when the prophet is able to hold together a critique of the dominant culture and a hope for a new culture. Such a vision empowers people to act on their reality.⁸² He goes on to say:

...and if the task of prophecy is to empower people to engage in history, then it means evoking cries that expect answers, learning to address them where they will be taken seriously, and ceasing to look to the numbed and dull empire that never intended to answer in the first place.

⁷⁹ Christine M. Smith, "Preaching as an Art of Resistance" in *The Arts of Ministry, Feminist-Womanist Approaches*, ed. Christie Cozad Neuger (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 39 – 59.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁸¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

⁸² Ibid., 9 - 14.

This evokes the passion that is necessary to enable the people to care, to suffer and even to die for the sake of the realization of God's reign in the community.⁸³

For Latin American liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino,⁸⁴ the needs of the poor should be our primary concern. For him, it is in the poor that God is manifesting God's self. In Latin America, Sobrino sees God's love poured out for the poor

...in his scandalous and partisan love for the poor and his intention that these poor should receive life and thus inaugurate his kingdom. Correspondingly, the proper way of being conformed to God is to be concerned actively with the justice of the kingdom of God and with making the poor the basis of this concern.⁸⁵

The churches of Latin America have made the concern for the poor a central focus. They are being faithful to signs of the times by recognizing the cry of the poor and centring their mission on service of the poor.⁸⁶

Paying attention to the signs of our times in Toronto also calls the churches to centre their concern on the poor. In the city of Toronto, I see the poor increasing in numbers as governments cut back on resources and support services. More responsibility is placed on municipal governments to provide social assistance as federal and provincial governments download these responsibilities to their municipal counterparts. As a result the number of poor on the streets of Toronto is growing daily. Just as the churches in Latin America, our churches too are called to respond to the poor in our city. As disciples of Christ, we are called to show forth the love of God by loving justice and sharing the good news of liberation with the poor.

⁸³ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁴ Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984).

⁸⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 3.

Sobrino goes on to speak of justice. He says, “By justice I mean the love that seeks effectively to humanize, to give life in abundance to the poor and oppressed majorities of the human race.”⁸⁷ This means that the poor must have enough food, clothing and shelter. Justice is an essential demand of the gospel and of those who choose to follow Christ. In Sobrino’s words, justice is a love that generates evangelical values:

The acknowledgement of God’s creation is precisely that, the unmasking of sin as basically the practice of murder, union with the poor in order to give them life, the adaptation of a partisan subjective outlook, the achievement of an objective conversion and kenosis, the practice of being a neighbor, the setting aside of self in order to serve, the readiness to suffer persecution – all these to a greater or lesser degree accompany the practice of justice and demonstrate its authenticity from the standpoint of the gospel.⁸⁸

Practising justice sustains our faith in God. It brings us face to face with the presence of God in our midst and ultimately with the mystery of God.

In places where we experience justice, our hope is renewed and we are able to see God’s reign manifested:

Faith can be sustained if in the practice of justice sufficient signs are found to support hope. If the poor have the gospel preached to them, if they become survivors of who they really are, if they struggle in their own behalf to attain a greater humanization, if the miracle of kenosis and solidarity takes place, if fear and resignation are conquered – then life is given to those who are deprived of it. These are the signs that are bases for hope.⁸⁹

In this way, we experience the poor as our teachers and as signs of hope in the struggle for wholeness. They show us the face of God and teach us how to love. The practice of

⁸⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 60.

justice as a manifestation of hope brings us back full circle to serving the poor and living our call of discipleship as the realization of God's reign in our midst.

6. The new cosmology

Over the last several years I have become increasingly aware of the new cosmology⁹⁰ and its impact on my understanding of theology. I include this not only because of its role in my journey but also because I believe it will be an area of critical dialogue for our church in the future. I recognize that I will not be able to fully explore all the implications, however I do want to highlight findings from the new cosmology that challenge me and shift my world view.

Human beings are at a time in history in which scientific research has allowed us to know that the earth and the cosmos are living organisms of which we human beings are a part. Scientists recognize that there is a great intelligence in our living, evolving, expanding universe. O'Murchu notes the work of science:

Science now understands our world – in both its nature and evolution – as being endowed with an enormous capacity for self-renewal. It is a growing awareness that we inhabit and belong to a self-organizing universe that provides the most impressive evidence of a spirit filled world.⁹¹

The recognition of our universe as a living organism has implications for our understanding of faith, the universe, God and ourselves. It has challenged us to realize,

⁹⁰ The dominant understanding of cosmos, the nature of the universe relies primarily on Greek concepts. "Feminists are developing new cosmologies. A major one is relational, sometimes described in ecological terms. In this, there is no essential being; there are relatives. All of us (all creatures, the earth and God) are becoming, in and through relationships. Body, soul, nature, spirit are not separate and hierarchically valued substances but dimension of an ultimate universal web of relatedness." Eleanor H. Haney, "Cosmos" in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 57 – 58.

⁹¹ O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality*, 48.

sometimes shockingly, that we human beings are not the centre of the universe nor of the spiritual journey:

It is the process of evolution itself, rather than any set of human experiences, that lies at the heart of our spiritual story. Out of the primordial silence, there irrupted a massive, explosive burst of energy, which we now call the Big Bang. Where it came from remains, and probably always will, the eternal enigma for some, the eternal mystery for others.⁹²

I question what it means for me and for our communities to be part of this much larger and ever-expanding reality? Can our spiritual lives be focused solely on a relationship between God and ourselves or do we need to ground ourselves in a reality that includes all beings of creation as also central to this journey?

When we see ourselves as connected to this larger picture, which is endowed with mystery and a deep sense of the holy, we cannot fail to recognize that it is of primary importance that we reconnect with this place of our beginning; the moment of the creation of the universe. How our spiritual journey unfolds from this connection is crucial. In O'Murchu's words:

More importantly, however, is the need to reconnect with the spiritual impetus of evolution itself, the unfolding cosmic drama, which begets life in abundance, enlivening our weary hearts and re-awakening our petrified imaginations.⁹³

Recognizing our place in the evolving universe will both challenge us and enable us to work with God as co-creators of God's reign.

⁹² Ibid., 47.

⁹³ Ibid., 50.

7. A spirituality for ministry

Essential to understanding the theology of ministry is the identification of how this ministry is lived out in the life of the minister. This is what I mean by spirituality for ministry: it is our lived expression of ministry that flows from our theology. I begin with the work of Chittister. Although she writes about spirituality for religious life her work is applicable to anyone engaged in ministry. She identifies spirituality as an essential aspect of religious life. Most importantly, spirituality in religious life is connected to the world in which religious live. Chittister states the necessity of finding meaning in the world:

The revitalization of religious life does not lie in being different from the culture in which it grows; it lies in being keepers of the cultural values needed to save it. Revitalization does not lie in symbolic separation from the world; it lies in being genuine stewards of what is best in it.⁹⁴

To be stewards of the essential values that are life-giving is to be rooted in our baptism and the call to discipleship. Only by actively engaging in the life of our culture will we be able to know and to understand it. It is from within the culture in which we live that we devote ourselves to maintaining its life. To be keepers and stewards of essential values is an activity central to who we are as religious and we must "...do it always, do it publicly and do it consistently from the vantage point of the poorest of the poor on whom the gospel concentrates."⁹⁵

One way in which women religious preserve the essential values of religious life is by affirming feminism. Through their confidence in and commitment to Jesus, who called women to walk with him and to proclaim his message to the world, women religious are insisting and encouraging other women to take their rightful place in the

⁹⁴ Chittister, *The Fire In These Ashes, A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life*, 8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

church and in the world. This seemingly endless struggle needs courage and commitment. Women religious need to continually and concretely affirm their commitment to all women. Chittister notes the importance of this commitment:

Religious orders must demonstrate this commitment to the development of women in ways that are real: in structures that are equal, in liturgy that is inclusive, in a lifestyle that is independent, and in ministries that not simply serve the oppressed but resist the oppression.⁹⁶

Chittister's challenge cuts to the heart of women religious both individually and congregationally because, in reality, religious life lies within the church where women religious themselves experience oppression and exclusion. This commitment to all women is one that needs continual realization in our own lives.

Religious share in the same fundamental purpose of all human life; that is, to seek God. Stunning in its simplicity, this is the only reason that makes any sense or meaning to religious life. "Religious life is not another way of life. It is a way of life intentionally organized to pursue the human quest for God."⁹⁷ With the purpose of religious life in mind, Chittister emphasizes that nurturing the desire to know God must be a priority. It is important then that religious continue to learn and to grow in their understanding of God through education, service, mentoring and a developing prayer life. How we understand and know God is expressed in our spirituality. "Spirituality is theology walking. Spirituality is what we do because of what we say we believe."⁹⁸

Confident in the companionship of God, religious are called to risk for the sake of the reign of God. Chittister writes:

The religious congregation that risks its reputation for the sake of new questions and its benefactors for the sake of peace and its clerical support

⁹⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 103.

for the sake of women and its lifestyle for the sake of the ecological stewardship of the planet and its retirement monies for the sake of the poor walks the way of holy risk.⁹⁹

If religious life is to be real, such risk is essential. Chittister plays a powerful drawing card, “There is nothing in life more meaningful than gambling with our lives. In fact, isn’t that why disciples become disciples in the first place?”¹⁰⁰ Is it not the passion birthed from a vision of God’s reign that enables us to carry on and even to take risks?

With the entrance of the new millennium, the theme of jubilee brings new challenges to our culture, ministry and spirituality. Harris describes the jubilee themes as “flash points” that hail a significant moment or time in our history.¹⁰¹ She notes that the weight of this moment is calling organizations throughout the world to. “...use the time to grow in commitment to non-violence through prayer, education, organizing and witnessing to the God of life and resisting the forces of violence that threaten our communities, nation and world.”¹⁰² For Harris, jubilee is the model of a way of life of ministry and of religious education, for deep in the roots of jubilee is the vehicle for the work of repair of the world.¹⁰³ With jubilee we can envision a new world and live our commitment to building God’s reign.

Jubilee arises from the cries of the earth and all its inhabitants, heralding a time of healing and joy. “Eventually jubilee enters into an era of forgiveness, freedom, justice, and jubilation. It begins, however, with a not-doing, the decision to pause and to let the land lie fallow.”¹⁰⁴ The jubilee themes of rest, forgiveness, freedom, justice and jubilation

⁹⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 67.

¹⁰¹ Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee, A Spirituality For the Twenty-First Century*, 18 – 19.

¹⁰² Ibid., 18.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 16.

are intertwined with each other; they constantly overlap and mingle together in the person who pursues the repair of the world.

Jubilee frees us to take on the work or repair of the world, for we know that God will partner us in our work. Harris describes the work of jubilee:

This divine-human partnership is described in the midrash, as “finishing the world,” but it is actually the work of repair and recreation to which the ending century challenges and for which Jubilee frees God’s people. Sabbath is in the center of this freedom, meaning as it does that having contemplated the Creator of the world, we take up the vocation of recreating, repairing and finishing it once the Sabbath is over.¹⁰⁵

To participate with God in renewing the world, we need to be contemplatives. That is, we need to be able to know God deep within ourselves and our experiences so as to be confident of God’s continual presence and activity in our lives.

Harris, like Chittister, describes spirituality as a way of being in the world in the light of God, the Mystery at the core of the universe, and in the light of our understanding of what that Mystery requires of us. As Harris says, we hear this call clearly in Micah,¹⁰⁶ “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”¹⁰⁷ The work of justice demanded by the Holy One is a central component of spirituality and jubilee. Justice is also demanded in the doing of religious education by highlighting and bringing forth both issues of justice and injustice in our teaching. “It is a fiery, prophetic, unrelenting justice, urged on us by a God of justice who demands not only that we preach it but that we do it.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰⁶ Micah: 6: 8.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 76.

O'Murchu describes spirituality for today as flowing from the theological ferment in our time of reclaiming the Basileia.¹⁰⁹ This theme recurs in all the gospels. In the gospels Jesus' teaching about the reign of God overturned many set beliefs and practices of the day. He stretched the boundaries of inclusiveness. O'Murchu writes as well of the early church of Paul, where there is mutual service and support, especially with the marginalized. Jesus' inclusiveness laid out a new scheme in relationships.¹¹⁰

When Jesus proclaimed the Basileia he was talking about the Basileia as being already at work in the here and now.¹¹¹ For us "...to engage authentically with the Basileia, to be converted to live out its meaning and challenges, we must hear its summons to us in the lives and witness of the poor of the earth."¹¹² Hearing the gospel's demands for the poor moves us to work with Jesus to create a new world in which there will be no poor or oppressed.

Making right relationships today necessarily includes all life forms as well as the Earth and the cosmos. For our spiritual journey O'Murchu says:

What we need above all else is a spiritual vision that will enable us to reclaim the divine-human co-creativity what has impregnated our evolution over the millions of years and is synthesized evocatively in the vision of the new reign of God.¹¹³

The spirituality of the Basileia opens us to engage in right relationships, which will be about a new world order and will include all of creation. In this spirituality relationships will be characterized by justice, love, peace, and liberation for all God's creation.

¹⁰⁹ O'Murchu uses the term Basileia when speaking of the reign of God. Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 1998).

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 160.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 163.

¹¹² Ibid., 166.

¹¹³ Ibid., 168.

Conclusion

The areas I have explored have convinced me that ministry is, first of all, a response to God in Jesus Christ who calls us to be disciples. Whatever a particular ministry may be, it is first and foremost the work of God. We participate in it as co-creators to bring about the reign of God. Ministry is not confined to the church or ecclesial community; ministry involves working in the world to bring about the reign of God. Ministry is primarily an act of service. Thus, the actual places where ministry is lived out are as varied as the respondents who hear the call to ministry.

Participating in the mission of Jesus as co-creators with God to bring about the reign of God calls us to see people ministering in a variety of places. It means we see people ministering with the poor, in social service agencies, in the courts and in working to change unjust structures that imprison people in poverty or oppression. It means that we see people ministering with children, with adults, with the elderly through activities such as education, healthcare, parenting, peacekeeping, and prayer circles. It also means that we see people ministering with the earth, caring for nature, helping to stop harmful emissions that kill the earth, and being educators in earth literacy programs. These are only a few of the many places that I see God calling people to ministry.

Our world is in a time of crisis, a crisis of poverty which includes the ecological crisis as much as it does the person living on the street in Toronto or the single parent who is barely able to feed her or his child. If we as Christians are to be of any significance, if we are to heed the call to discipleship, I think we must care for those in need wherever they may be. I have no doubt that God is calling and will continue to call people to ministry.

CHAPTER TWO

Ministry of religious education on the margins

1. Searching for a ministry place, ministering with women

The experiences of spiritual poverty, journeying with women, ministering with the poor and the charism of the Sisters of Charity have all shaped my passion to minister with women who live in poverty and to share with them a theology that is rooted in a feminist liberation theology. My personal experiences of spiritual poverty have helped me to recognize the need to celebrate my faith in places of equality and mutuality. When I began to look for a ministry, I wanted a setting where I could create a safe place for women to gather.

The exclusion of women in the Roman Catholic Church continues in subtle and even in not so subtle ways to remind us that we are of lesser value. Mary Hines recognizes the difficulty:

Church traditions and structures seem intractably patriarchal and hierarchical. Church documents continue to legitimize the exclusion of women from important areas of church life, especially from leadership roles, simply because they are women.¹¹⁴

This constant reminder to women of their supposed inadequacy through their exclusion from leadership positions in the church helps to maintain a belief that women are inferior and, even, less than human. The fact that women are not seen as capable leaders but as inferior beings in the church community has only contributed to the oppression and violence that women experience.

¹¹⁴ Mary E. Hines, "Community for Liberation – Church," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry Lacugna (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 161.

When our places of sharing faith and worship do not value women, they perpetuate a mindset that keeps women in the background. Exclusive language not only excludes women from participation in church services but it also renders women invisible. Rosemary Radford Ruether noted fifteen years ago that:

Women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and eucharistic famine. They no longer nurture their souls in alienating words that ignore or systematically deny their existence. They are starving for words of life, for symbolic forms that fully and wholeheartedly affirm their personhood.¹¹⁵

The situation continues today. These experiences in our places of worship contribute to women's feelings of inequality and alienation. "Thus the hierarchy of God-male-female does not merely make woman secondary in relation to God, it also gives her a negative identity in relation to the divine."¹¹⁶ How can women know and see themselves as created in the image and likeness of God when they have been led to believe that God is male? Is Mary Daly's summation "If God is male, then male is God,"¹¹⁷ borne out in our rituals?

It is only in the last few years that I have recognized and identified the effects of not being permitted to participate more fully in our Church. As I have become more purposeful in developing and nurturing my relationship with God, I am more aware of

¹¹⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church, Theology and Practice*, 4.

¹¹⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Sexism and God-Language," in *Weaving the Visions, New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (Harper San Francisco, 1989), 151. See also Christine Downing, "Artemis," in *Weaving the Visions, New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (Harper San Francisco, 1989), 120. Downing notes the effects of only male imagery of God on the needs of women. "To be fed only male images of the divine is to be badly malnourished. We are starved for images that recognize the sacredness of the feminine and the complexity, richness, and nurturing power of female energy." See Also Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite, Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 61. She speaks bluntly on the issues of exclusive male language, "...any use of androcentric language renders women invisible. This has philosophical, moral, and semantic implications. The moral implications of the invisibility of women lie in the ability of language to create what it names. Invisible women have no voice, make no claims for themselves, possess no rights, exercise no moral agency."

¹¹⁷ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 38.

how my experience of Church has formed my understanding of God as well as my relationship with myself. I know how certain images and understandings of God can affirm a poor self-image. The Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee¹¹⁸ of the National Council of churches demonstrates how this has developed. Using the term “man” to mean “human being” and “woman” to mean “female,” identifies woman by their sex men by their humanity. In this example, we see not only “how language reflects the way in which we think but also informs the way in which we think.”¹¹⁹ In the process of breaking out of these narrow and limiting concepts of myself as woman, I needed to find ways to affirm my identity and to know myself as a woman who is created in the image and likeness of God.

Being able to celebrate and to share my faith with other women in inclusive settings was a powerful means of breaking down old concepts and bringing forth new ways of experiencing God. Katherine Zappone¹²⁰ explains why there is a need for women to gather in inclusive settings:

The way we pray is the way we believe.... This is the heart of ritual's power at the personal level. But it is also the crux of why feminists have had to distance themselves from the rituals that maintain the patriarchal essence of religions. The rituals of the fathers not only exclude women's experience, they reinforce dualistic beliefs and sacralize the superiority of maleness. Since embarking on the feminist spiritual journey, I, along with countless other feminist, have realized and felt that the rituals of our childhood negate the spiritual insights and practices of living interdependently. Consequently, to continue to seek nourishment and

¹¹⁸ “The *Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee* was appointed by the Division of Education and Ministry of the National Council of Churches. The committee's members come from a variety of denominations and liturgical traditions and represent expertise in Hebrew, Greek, linguistics, English, worship, Old and New Testaments, theology, and education.” “Selections from the Inclusive Language Lectionary, Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee of the National Council of Churches,” in *Weaving the Visions, New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (Harper San Francisco, 1989), 163.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 163.

¹²⁰ Katherine Zappone, *The Hope for Wholeness, Spirituality for Feminists* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991).

Sacred presence within the rhythm of patriarchal ritual is dangerous to our health.¹²¹

It makes sense that women are not empowered by prayer and ritual that in its very essence discounts or renders them invisible. In reality, however, there are few places where we can celebrate our faith together in mutual and reciprocal fashion. My experiences and my life as a Sister of Charity has afforded me opportunities to have experiences for celebrations of liturgy in settings of mutuality and equality. Creating such places is absolutely critical for women if they are to flourish physically, psychologically and spiritually.

As I listened to people's stories and their desire to know God, I was not surprised to also hear their pain when they spoke of not having a welcoming space to worship and to pray. Not only was there a lack of welcoming communities, but many also found it difficult to experience God as welcoming. Although they were taught that God was a loving God, for them God was also portrayed primarily as a judgemental and punishing God. Many were fearful of God in an unhealthy way. For example, some were fearful of being close to God because they saw God as judgmental. For me, God as liberator lies at the core of Christianity. Could learning about the Holy One as one who essentially liberates us, who brings us to freedom, be discovered in one another's stories as well as in scripture and tradition? Could other women be empowered by Christian feminist liberation theology, which has so influenced my life? As I questioned and dreamed of ways in which women could explore such issues and their understanding of God, the need for a safe place and a setting of prayer, trust and community in which to share their experiences was affirmed.

¹²¹ Ibid., 148.

I asked what it would look like to gather women together. Would this be possible in a shelter for the homeless or in a parish that serves the poor in our city? Can these places that provide for the necessary needs of shelter, clothing, and food, also provide resources for the spiritual needs that St. Vincent de Paul stressed? Is there room in these places to teach a gospel of liberation, as well as to talk about experiences of the Holy One and together to name the presence of God in the lives of the people gathered? Is it not essential for those who have experienced oppression and marginalization to draw on scripture and our faith tradition as a source of empowerment? Not only do we have the richness of our tradition but we also have a responsibility to share this tradition, to help one another to live the gospel and to be disciples of Christ.

Religious education is a discipline that focuses on sharing scripture and tradition. At its best, the teachings of religious education nourish, encourage growth and freedom, and kindle a desire to service and discipleship. This is a faith that is life giving. Religious educator Marcel Dumestre¹²² identifies an integral component of religious education as empowering. He states:

Adult-learning theorists understand the goal of adult learning as self-direction and empowerment. If we view literacy and education as empowering, then so much more so should religious education lead to self-direction and empowerment in our spiritual life. This approach to Christian religious education gives an alternative to a fundamentalist worldview by providing the resources of Christian tradition to address the concerns of everyday living from the standpoint of adult spirituality.¹²³

Education honours the wisdom of the other and at the same time it invites us to a deeper knowing. Both as an educator and someone who desires to live my faith life, I want to

¹²² Marcel Dumestre, "Postfundamentalism and the Learning Community," *Religious Education* 90, no. 2, (Spring, 1995).

¹²³ Ibid.,

offer to women an opportunity to develop ways to live their faith in their daily lives that will help them to flourish.

With these premises in mind, I began my search for a place to minister. I began by exploring Roman Catholic parishes in the inner core of the city where many of the poor reside and are served. In each parish I visited I expressed my desire to invite women to a gathering where they could pray, learn and share their lives with one another. I felt that such a gathering could provide a resource for women as well as enrich the parish community as a whole. In support of the idea of gathering women together Marjory Procter-Smith¹²⁴ notes the importance of women's gatherings and their unique role in the community:

The process of world building is a collective endeavor, and requires the participation of all women. Forming groups of women for support, study, and mutual empowerment not only can be nourishing but also can be a powerful political act.¹²⁵

There has been, from my experience, one constant element when women gather with other women. They are empowered by sharing and learning from each other. Although a women's gathering can enrich the parish or the community, it can also be seen as subversive or disruptive and can become political. Sharing among women is often the beginning of women's articulation of and resistance to injustices.

Although it was not explicitly expressed to me, I felt that there was some resistance to women gathering in the parishes I visited. The possibility of women gathering in the parish in a way that was not connected to traditional women's groups

¹²⁴ Marjory Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite, Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

like the Catholic Woman's League,¹²⁶ was suspect. While in some cases there was acknowledgment and recognition of what I wanted to do, there was also resistance. These reservations were expressed in several ways. Some believed that no one would want such a group and others did not see a need. It was suggested that women in these parish communities already had enough on their plate just in terms of feeding and clothing their families. It was also maintained that many of the women lived in situations of violence either in their homes or on the street and it was unlikely they would be interested in religious education or prayer. I was even told that that the poor were not interested in education. I was saddened by what seemed to be a predetermined judgment of these women's desires and needs. Such a response spoke of an arrogance that is often expressed in churches when they believe they know what is good for "their" people. Subsequently, I was not given the chance to ask the women of these parishes, nor were they given the chance to respond.

These experiences were reality checks for me. Although I knew that women would not be breaking down the doors to come to such a gathering, I had not expected the resistance I received from the pastors of the parishes. In some ways, I felt in solidarity with the marginalized. Like all new beginnings, I felt this one needed a starting place and it did not matter how many attended. I was not counting. It is too easy to be caught in a numbers game as a way of proving something to be worthwhile and I was determined not to do this. I believe that for some women in these parishes religious education could have been of value. Time and availability because of other mediating circumstances in their lives might have caused problems. I also recognize that the lack of a desire to learn

¹²⁶ The Catholic Woman's League is an international organization of women in the Roman Catholic Church. This group which has a strong prayer and spiritual life component is often associated with caring

can be intricately connected to poor self-esteem. When the need for support is overruled by the need to simply survive, women are caught in an untenable position.

My own search for ministry continued in shelters for homeless women and in drop-in centres. The concept of women gatherings based on Christian teaching was met with reservation for very good reasons. Often people have been hurt by religious institutions or have experienced exclusion. Thus, some of the staff in the shelters were hesitant to offer women anything with religious connections. In some shelters, it was policy to avoid religious programs or religious agendas. I began to realize in this search that I would have to find ministry in a setting that held Christian values publicly and would welcome someone to work in the context of religious education. That was when I was invited to visit *Our Place, Community of Hope*.¹²⁷ Here, I was welcomed to do my ministry.

2. Ministry base

My place of ministry is *Our Place*. *Our Place* was founded in the late 1960s by Father Joseph MacDonald, OFM, Cap. Father Joseph had originally intended the centre to be a place of Christian hospitality for the city's inner core. He was soon to discover that *Our Place* served a unique need. With the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric centres by the Ontario Government, the drop-in centre soon became a gathering place for discharged psychiatric patients. Father Joseph therefore decided to focus the drop-in on the needs of the psychiatric community.

for the needs of the parish community by fundraising through bazaars and food services.

¹²⁷ Hereafter *Our Place, Community of Hope* will be referred to as *Our Place*.

Today, *Our Place* continues to provide a supportive environment for the psychiatric community with the funding of Catholic Charities.¹²⁸ The brochure for the drop-in centre states its purpose clearly:

Our Place stresses the experiences of community by being in relationship with others. We wish to provide a peaceful, supportive and welcoming community to enable people to involve themselves with others and to find meaning and personal growth in all areas of their lives by sharing in our community experience.¹²⁹

The community experience of *Our Place* accommodates the diverse needs of its members. The variety of its programs is meant to call forth the uniqueness and giftedness of each person and to strengthen her or his sense of self-worth. Staff and volunteers are committed to the importance of relationships and community building. By offering a supportive, welcoming atmosphere, modeling social skills and facilitating relationship building among members, *Our Place* enables mutual relationships and social networking. On any given day, you will witness the staff and volunteers chatting with a member over coffee, playing a game of cards, shooting a game of pool or simply sharing a quiet moment.

An integral component of the ministry of *Our Place* is service of its membership as a faith community. By listening to some members express their experiences of feeling left out of institutional churches, *Our Place* has come to recognize the need of these people to express and to celebrate their faith in community. An opportunity for an outward expression and celebration of faith is important for people who have been marginalized and oppressed by society at large as well as the church. One of the unique features of *Our Place* is its outward expression of faith. It is the only public facility in

¹²⁸ Catholic Charities is an organization of the Roman Catholic Church, which raises money in the Archdiocese of Toronto to help the neediest in our communities such as the hungry and the homeless.

the mental health system that offers such support. From its very beginning with Father Joseph, today with the support of Catholic Charities, *Our Place* continues to be a faith community. One of the ways you see this lived out is in the community's prayers and celebrations:

From the beginning, *Our Place* had demonstrated work rooted in prayer, has followed the liturgical year with corresponding liturgical celebrations, reflections and signs and symbols witnessing to the centrality of relationship and engagement with God.¹³⁰

The liturgical year with its celebration of religious events provides a basis for continuity and anticipation. A clear emphasis of staff and volunteers is to give faithful witness to Christian values and community. The chapel which is located beside the main community room offers a peaceful and reflective area for both staff and members to spend time in prayer and quiet.

Most of the members of *Our Place* are under the care of a psychiatrist or a family doctor. Many require medication. For the most part, their medical problems are well controlled by medication. A significant role of the staff and volunteers is to be aware when someone is not taking their medication and to encourage them to do so, especially with the unpleasant side effects of some medication. In addition, members can speak freely to staff or volunteers about the quality of care they receive from the mental health system. At times members express concern about a lack of care from their doctors or from mental health worker and ask for help. Support also occurs in other ways such as helping with housing needs, or making referrals to community support systems. Although some members are homeless, most live in subsidized housing.

¹²⁹ Our Place brochure printed in 1998.

¹³⁰ Inge C.M. Barthlomeiczik, "Prophetic Voices From the Margins: Mental Health Ministry At Our Place Community of Hope Centre" (Unpublished Field Education Report, Regis College, 1998), 18.

Our Place serves an adult community. The age of the members ranges from eighteen to sixty years and over. The gender ratio favours males slightly. Although the majority of the members come from Euro-Canadian and Christian backgrounds, a number of other ethnic groups and religious traditions are also represented. *Our Place* offers a range of activities from a coffeehouse setting to community dances, art workshops, drama club, art and craft groups, social skills development programmes, movies, creative expression workshops, poetry readings, and community outings. During the last few years the members of the community have reached out to others. Members have volunteered their services to the Out of the Cold Program in a local Church. Monthly members' meetings also enable members to participate in the overall programming of *Our Place*. For most of the members, *Our Place* serves as a place to meet others and to form friendships that alleviate loneliness and alienation.¹³¹

3. Getting to know you: a beginning

It is extremely important when ministering in a setting like *Our Place* to begin by getting to know one another. Without this, ministry would be impossible. Time is needed to just 'hang about' with the community. Thus began my ministry of presence. It was not long before I began to hear the stories and struggles of the members. I quickly began to discover the complexities and implications of living with mental illness. It became evident to me as I listened to peoples' stories that living with mental illness often meant living in poverty. For some, it also meant living in isolation. The social stigma experienced by those with mental illness contributes greatly to an experience of isolation. The lack of financial means contributes to an experience of powerlessness and

¹³¹ Ibid.

oppression. Social Assistance may provide for medical costs but barely meets the necessities of food, clothing and shelter as well as other equally important needs taken for granted by most people, such as money for transportation or leisure activities. From its beginning, *Our Place* has sought to recognize and affirm what to many are the less obvious needs of its members, not the least of which is a spiritual need.

As noted earlier, it has been the tradition from the beginning at *Our Place* to offer community prayer and rituals during the year. When *Our Place* was founded, Father Joseph regularly presided at a Roman Catholic Eucharist on the premises. After his leaving, the practice of Roman Catholic Eucharist became less frequent and the staff began to prepare and facilitate regular communal prayer for themselves as well as ritual gatherings for the whole community. The celebrations for the whole community included significant moments in the liturgical year such as Thanksgiving, All Souls Day, Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter. During Advent and Lent, there are weekly rituals open to the whole community. These rituals serve as an important opportunity for the members to celebrate their faith together.

As part of my ministry, I was asked to prepare and facilitate the communal celebrations and rituals. This was a good opportunity for me to meet people as well as to involve the members in these celebrations. An important aspect of communal prayer is the ability to participate. Although I extended a general invitation to the membership I found that because people were afraid or shy, I needed to invite individuals personally. The rituals provided an opportunity to build community as well as to facilitate the members' participation including an opportunity for them to take a leadership role in the community celebrations.

As I met more and more people and became familiar with the routine of *Our Place*, I began to plan for and invite people to a “spirituality gathering.”¹³² These gatherings were intended to provide an opportunity for community, for learning and for prayer. The first spirituality gathering began during Lent, and I invited both men and women to it. Although my intention was eventually to work with women, I thought this would be a good starting place. Not only did I sense a need for prayer among the men but I wanted to model inclusivity. In my preparations for this spirituality gathering, I identified seven important criteria:

- that the program be accessible to all
- that it be participatory
- that participation be invitational
- that the reflection be meaningful and connected to life experience
- that people feel safe in the reflection
- that the reflection be simple and prayerful
- that there be an opportunity to learn and to use different learning processes

With these criteria in mind, I prepared simple prayers and songs to gather the group. I began the reflection with introductions and each week I would invite people to participate as much or as little as they wished. Each person received copies of the prayers, songs and readings. This helped them to participate and to allay some fears of the unknown. The setting was equally important and was chosen to make it easier for them to participate. We sat in a circle and for a centre focus I used a candle and an object either from nature or that symbolized nature.¹³³ There were crayons, pencils and paper

¹³² I chose to use the term spirituality gathering because I felt that spirituality was term that is more inclusive as well as being an area of great interest. I wanted people to feel welcome no matter what their religious affiliation or background. The spirituality gatherings were offered on a weekly base following the community meal. In this way they were associated with the community meal.

¹³³ I felt it was important to have something of nature such as water, fire, soil, seed, or a plant as a way of grounding the experience. I also found that often people would want to share of experiences of nature.

available. These materials offered participants an alternative way of expression and of sharing in the gathering.

The process I used was a very simple modification of a theological reflection model. The model has three parts: experience of the participants, teaching, and experience of participants. Each spirituality gathering had a theme that had been chosen at the previous gathering. These included themes such as forgiveness, hope, love, family, relational difficulties or the struggles encountered living with mental health problems. We began with a gathering prayer and song. For the first sharing, I invited people to share on the theme from their life experience. I would then share thoughts I had prepared from scripture or tradition about the theme. In this way, religious education was part of the gathering. Religious education was also evident in the way I chose to pray, in the choice of readings and in the care taken with regard to language and theological concepts. We would then move to on a second round of sharing where I would invite people to share their responses to others sharing and the teaching. This second sharing would sometimes lead to action. The actions taken were a result of insights gained. When possible, the participants identified implications for life as a result of what they had learned.

I was surprised at the participation and the amount of sharing that took place, as well as the ease with which people entered the reflection. They participated without reservation by singing and reading and through artistic expression and sharing. Many placed their drawings in the centre of the circle and shared what they had drawn. Along with sharing stories, people expressed their concerns, questions and hopes. During Lent we followed the life of Jesus in Mark's gospel. To my joy, many of the participants

began to engage the scripture passage from within their life experience. I truly felt I was able to connect with peoples' everyday living from this gathering.

I continued, however, to be challenged to explore methods of sharing the teachings of Christianity and ways of inviting people to break open scripture from the perspective of their life experience. I explored the philosophy and skills of adult religious education to help me to share Christian teachings. Adult religious educators have developed and continue to develop powerful and effective models of education for circles of learning. A significant learning from my research was that sharing needs to begin with experience hence I needed to understand experiences as much as possible. Once I understood the experience, I would be able to use to its best advantage the expertise I bring from my lived faith experience as well as my knowledge of scripture, theology, spirituality and religious education. It would be by listening well that I would be able to learn from those who shared, and then together with them find and name the presence of God in our life experiences.

4. Women's spirituality gathering

The spirituality gatherings included both men and women, but it was not long before women began to ask for a women's spirituality gathering. Some women wanted to come to the spirituality gathering but did not feel safe to share with men present. Other women who came to the gathering expressed similar concerns. Some felt that their concerns went unheard and that the focus was on the concerns of the men. The men for the most part were more vocal and confident. Some women stopped coming. I was happy to hear the women express a need and a desire for a gathering of women. It only confirmed my belief that women need to have a safe place to speak and to have the

support of one another. The needs expressed by these women reinforced my justification for a women's spirituality gathering.

Some female participants at *Our Place* were interested in their faith and wanted to learn more. Others had no experience of a faith community but felt they wanted one. There were those who had painful experiences of the institutional church but still wanted a place to pray and to share their faith. Some women wanted the support of other women and felt that the women's spirituality gathering would be a place in which such support would be available for one another. These were more than enough reasons to justify a women's spirituality gathering. I continued with the mixed spirituality gathering and added a weekly gathering for women. For the women, I began with the same process of theological reflection but for the theological and scriptural foundations, I used the work of Christian feminist liberation theologians and Christian feminist biblical scholars.

I wanted women at *Our Place* to have an opportunity to learn from scripture and tradition that the teachings of Christianity are essentially about liberation for all creation, including themselves. The teachings and insights from Christian feminist liberation theologians and educators have influenced my life profoundly. So have the lives of many women who struggle to find their place in our society and churches. These women nurture my hope in numerous ways as they remind me of women's place of equality in church and society. They constantly give me courage to continue the struggle to take my place as a woman in my own church and in society. I feel that the women to whom I minister at *Our Place* would also benefit from the work of Christian feminist liberation theologians and biblical scholars. For this reason, I used the teachings and insights from these scholars as my underlying theology in the women's spirituality gathering. As a

religious educator, I recognize that it is both important and necessary for me to have a clear understanding and articulation of the theology that underlies my pedagogy.¹³⁴

Although the structure for the women's spirituality gathering was similar to the mixed gathering, I needed to be more explicit about how the women's spirituality-gatherings were the groundwork for religious education. Harris' development of a curriculum for the church gave me a model with which to speak of the women's spirituality gathering as a faith community that educates. In developing a curriculum for education in the church, Harris understands education as "the work of giving form and as an artistic work of formgiving." She writes, "Education like all other artistic endeavours, is a work of giving form. More specifically, it is a work especially concerned with the creation, re-creation, fashioning, and refashioning of form."¹³⁵ The church's educational ministry is embodied in the five classical forms of ecclesial activity first described in the book of Acts: kerygma (proclaiming), didache (teaching), leiturgia (prayer), koinonia (community) and diakonia (service).¹³⁶

Education is not simply attending to each form individually. Rather, it is an interaction that educates both in and through the forms. As Harris demonstrates:

...to koinonia (community and communion) by engaging in the forms of community and communion; to leiturgia (worship and prayer) by engaging in the forms of prayer and worship and spirituality; to kerygma (proclaiming the word of God) by attention to practicing and incarnating the kerygma, "Jesus is risen," in the speech of our own lives, especially the speech of advocacy; to diakonia (service and outreach) by

¹³⁴ Miller notes the importance of recognizing of the theology that underlies the work of the religious educator. Although the theologies might differ from educator to educator, each religious educator must have a theology. Randolph Crump Miller, "Theology in the Background," in *Religious Education and Theology*, ed. Norma H. Thompson (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1982), 23. Chapter Three contains a more detailed description of the theology and religious education techniques underlying my educating activities at *Our Place*.

¹³⁵ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People, Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster: John Knox Press, 1989), 44.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

attention to our own service and reaching out to others, personally and communally, locally and globally; to didache (teaching and learning) by attention to the most appropriate forms of teaching and learning (including schooling) in our own communities.¹³⁷

Each of these forms functions in the educating activity of the faith community. The faith community gives shape to and embodies each form in its activity of teaching.¹³⁸

According to Harris, the whole community educates and although a community may delegate someone for the specific role of educator, all of the community participates in the forms of education. Education is not only a shared endeavour within the community but also in the workplace, in the school, and in the family. Education is ongoing and involves daily living. It is not simply a matter of passing on information, but, more accurately, education empowers the community to continuous growth in its ability to live the gospel. Education includes people learning to recognize their gifts and talents as gifts from God to be used in building the reign of God:

For genuine education in the church is toward creating and living more and more adequately as religious beings in the world. Education is toward the continuing remaking, re-creating, reconstructing, and reorganizing of our human experience, giving that experience meaning and helping us to decide where to go and what to do next.¹³⁹

New faith communities with their often fragile beginnings face challenges and risks in their growth into community and into becoming an educating community. The community of women at *Our Place* is a new faith community. As a new community, it needs a starting place. There is a sequence of church curricula as Harris and Gabriel Moran¹⁴⁰ write:

¹³⁷ Ibid., 43 – 44.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 50 – 51.

¹⁴⁰ Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education, Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

It begins with the [one] gathered community or koinonia. That community gathers for two main purposes: to worship God through liturgical prayer, and to engage in works that serve justice – the traditions of leiturgia and diakonia. These three constitute the embodiment of the “teaching of the apostles” that is lived before it is discussed or presented. Only when the first three are in place do the curricular acts of preaching the word and gathering for instruction and catechesis—both of which are largely verbal—make sense.¹⁴¹

As a community of women at *Our Place*, we needed to begin by gathering as a community and then, as a community to engage in prayer and service.

Harris¹⁴² defines the steps of community building. Initially, the community needs to be intentional. Motivated by a desire to belong, communities usually form around a common heritage, belief or way of life. Deep in the human psyche is the need to share and to be in communion. This human need is part of a larger desire for all of humanity to be a new heaven and a new earth. This desire, which is ultimately the underscoring of every joining, is rooted in love. Finally, communities are people rooted in love and the ministry of community is communion. As a people rooted in love and working for communion and the wholeness of each person, the community needs to be a healing place for division and brokenness.¹⁴³ Harris’ description of community speaks accurately to the needs and desires of the women at *Our Place*.

Although the women who come to the spirituality gathering at *Our Place* come for a variety of reasons, they all share the human desire to belong. As a community, we began by focusing on this desire. I developed a process that helped us to be intentional about being community. It also provided a focus for prayer and service that arose from within the community. The four elements of the process were:

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴² Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People, Curriculum in the Church*.

¹⁴³ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People, Curriculum in the Church*, 75 – 77.

1. Sharing experiences. We begin each gathering by sharing our experiences. Initially when we came together, it was important for us to share our experiences of community; why we had come, our hopes and our expectations;¹⁴⁴
2. Sharing stories from our Christian heritage. I began by sharing stories of community informed by the research of feminist theologians and biblical scholars. These stories and teachings included women such as Ruth and Naomi, Mary and Elizabeth;
3. Reviewing learning/insights: I invited participants to share what they had learned thus far and what if anything it meant to them, and
4. Exploring praxis/service. We explored ways in which we could act on what we had learned. Our response or action sometimes evolved from a hope that surfaced as a result of shared experiences.

The curriculum that Harris proposes provides a model for religious education in our women's spirituality gathering at *Our Place*. With this model to give shape to our community, prayer and service, I invited the women to learn about God's desire for our liberation. This model helped us to deepen our questioning of life experience and faith. Approaching scripture and tradition from a liberation and feminist theological perspective contributed to ongoing education about the gospel message as liberation. The curriculum invited a process of learning and hope for wholeness and liberation that took concrete form, first in community building, then in prayer and service, and eventually in education and proclamation.

5. The challenges of Christian fundamentalism

One of the major challenges for the spirituality gatherings was fundamentalism. A number of people at *Our Place* approach and understand their faith from a Christian fundamentalist¹⁴⁵ perspective. One way in which fundamentalism was evident was the

¹⁴⁴ There were also themes for each gathering that were chosen by the women.

¹⁴⁵ Fundamentalism in Christianity is noted for a closed and dogmatic understanding and interpretation of scripture and tradition. William Dinges, "Fundamentalism," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 411 – 413. For further reading see James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977).

constant focus on personal sinfulness. Rather than learning of the essence of God's law as justice, mercy and faith,¹⁴⁶ some members had been told of their sinfulness. These men and women at *Our Place* are victims who had heavy burdens laid upon their already too heavy burdens. Another manifestation of the fundamentalist perspective was the belief that because all authority comes from God, there was no recognition of personal inner authority.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, their fundamentalist understanding does not encourage a mature spirituality, nor does it allow people to develop into their full human potential. In fact, much of fundamentalism denies our humanity. To develop our full human potential, we need to be able to develop our cognitive, psychological and spiritual selves. Often churches and doctrines do not allow or encourage spiritual maturity but keep their community in a childish faith:

Too many churches today treat their adult members as spiritual children. A childish spirituality is not appropriate for adults, and they know it. Yet, paradoxically a childish spirituality keeps many adults tied to their churches. For most people, those ties retard adult growth through fear of death and uncertainty after life. It is sad but true that the more complex life's problems are the more we seek simple answers. Religion can give simple, direct answers, but sometimes the answers are simplistic – the mark of childish spirituality.¹⁴⁸

The people with whom I am ministering often have a fear of authority. Many have experienced abuse by those in such positions. They also fear the authority of God, and God's judgement.

The people I ministered with at *Our Place* have suffered much and the constant focus on their personal sinfulness has added to their suffering. This fact was made very

¹⁴⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals, A Critical Feminist Ecclesiology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 51. In this section on Christian fundamentalism, I speak of experiences in both spirituality gatherings.

¹⁴⁷ People can also give the authority to ordained ministers.

¹⁴⁸ Dumestre, "Postfundamentalism and the Learning Community," 203.

poignant for me by one of the women. When I first met Rose,¹⁴⁹ she had just returned from a local Roman Catholic Church where she had met with the parish priest. Rose is a Roman Catholic, although she would not consider herself a 'good' Catholic. She sometimes attends services but mostly she goes into the church to pray because she likes the feeling of being inside the church. On this particular day, she was not feeling well and had wanted to speak with the priest. Her encounter with the priest had made her feel even worse. She asked me whether churches served any good at all and began to tell her story. Rose is an alcoholic. She finds it very hard, sometimes even impossible, to stay away from alcohol. Her temptation to drink is at its worst when she is at home so she spends most of her days walking the streets or shopping malls. If she has money, she will go to a coffee shop or sometimes to a movie. These activities help her to abstain from alcohol.

Rose is a regular member of *Our Place*. She finds some consolation there. She finds the staff and volunteers caring and feels at home. In addition to living with the disease of alcoholism, she lives with depression. She is also constantly tormented by voices in her head. She says that when she drinks the voices go away. These voices she says are like those of the priest. They tell her that she is no good. Rose grew up in Mexico and lived in extreme poverty. Her mother was unable to care for her and left her to fend for herself. These early years of abandonment and poverty have left permanent scars. When Rose married and moved to Canada with her Canadian husband she felt she was given a chance for a new life. As she spoke about her early days in Canada and the birth of her two sons, her voice picked up and she talked of her love and pride for her

¹⁴⁹ All names are pseudonyms.

children. Rose did not tell me about the break-up of her marriage but spoke of the guilt she felt about leaving her children.

Her experience with the priest had only heightened her feelings of guilt. In the first place, she felt he did not want to listen to her. He told her that she needed to pray more and trust in God. If she prayed more she would not want to drink. He even indicated that God was punishing her for the 'sinful' life she was living. This only affirmed what Rose already believed. She also believed that she was not a very good Roman Catholic. Her poor attendance at church was an example of her sinfulness. She felt angry with the priest for his attitude toward her, and her anger only increased her sense of guilt. The priest was an authority figure and represented God for her. It was evident that Rose had not been encouraged in her life to take an active role in her faith. Rather, she had been taught to blindly follow the rules and laws that the church or any authority figure, such as the priest, set before her.

The people with whom I worked at *Our Place* are some of the most vulnerable in our society. Not only do they often experience isolation from and by others because of their mental health problems, but they also struggle to make sense out of life and to find meaning in the midst of their problems. Their search for meaning can be even more difficult in the confusion and chaos caused by their mental health problems. It is therefore understandable that these people are susceptible to religious fundamentalism. As Thomas O'Meara¹⁵⁰ points out, "Churches, which provide the miraculous event and the easy answers, grow strong in times of uncertain social change. Ministers who find easy scapegoats are popular with people who are threatened by life."¹⁵¹ Life can be

¹⁵⁰ Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

threatening for people living with mental illness and that is probably why significant numbers of people at *Our Place* have been attracted in the past to fundamentalism which gives “simple answers.” The truth is, however, that there are no simple answers. Questions of life are complex because they are about God, ourselves and others. Rose was searching for help as well as meaning and understanding. The response she experienced reminded her of her sinfulness. It also reinforced a belief that God could heal her but chose not to do so because of her sinfulness. To emphasize personal sin with people who already believe they are no good and sinful will only contribute to poor self-esteem and does not permit spiritual maturity.

The Christian fundamentalist perspective that ‘to be born again,’ is the only way to be Christian can be especially divisive. This can result in some irreconcilable differences. O’Meara speaks of divisiveness as one of the most significant pastoral problems that has surfaced as a result of fundamentalism.¹⁵² It was difficult to facilitate sharing and to work through feelings of alienation when there was condemnation of those who were not born again Christians.

I encountered this attitude in the spirituality gathering and found it divisive. George was a fundamentalist. He liked to come to the spirituality gathering. I knew from earlier conversations with George that he felt strongly about being a born again Christian. I did not want to exclude him from the gathering and hoped he would not be judgmental of others in the group who did not believe as he did. Some of the people in the gathering were exploring whether or not they even wanted to believe in God and I wanted everyone to be able to explore their faith in their own way. However, George

¹⁵² Ibid., 6. This divisiveness is not only experienced in religious circles but also in families between spouses and siblings.

became quite belligerent and intractable about who was and who was not Christian. He would recite endless scripture passages that said you had to repent and make Jesus your personal saviour and Lord. George's outbursts disrupted and alienated some of the people. I tried to talk with him about this several times but I had to eventually ask him not to come because his criticism of others was so destructive.

I wanted the spirituality gathering to be a place where each person's potential could be explored and cherished. Fundamentalism in the spirituality gathering separated us from a very important potential that the incarnation has given us. It did not allow us to recognize the divine within us. O'Meara writes:

Christianity patterned after the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus inquires further, looking at how both the human and the divine have their roles in Jesus, in the church and in us.¹⁵³

Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart speaks of the significance of the incarnation in our lives when he writes, "This is why scripture was written, why the world was created, why angels and people exist; that God might be born in us. and that we might be born in God."¹⁵⁴ God invites us to participate fully in our lives, learning not only from each other but also from our own experience of life and reflections on our life. We are invited to know the presence of God not only around us but also within us. I felt it important to constantly remind people in the spirituality gathering that we were all participants with God in history.

Initially these negative experiences of Christian fundamentalism affirmed my own bias against it. I believe fundamentalism limits rather than enables human potential. My

¹⁵³Ibid., 14.

¹⁵⁴ Meister Eckhart as cited by Thomas F. O'Meara, O.P., *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective*, 97. O'Meara does not give a reference for the quote of Meister Eckhart.

own experiences of fundamentalism created personal blocks against a fundamentalist perspective, which made it difficult for me to minister with people who come from that perspective. With the help of theological reflection and my ministry base group,¹⁵⁵ I became able to learn ways of ministering with people with a fundamentalist faith perspective. This enabled me to include these people in the spirituality gathering as well as to find ways in which to invite them to a new understanding of their faith.

6. Ministry base group

During the first eighteen months of my ministry at *Our Place*, I met monthly with my ministry base group. For the ministry base group, I chose people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, people that would challenge me and help me shape my work. The group included a person with knowledge in adult education and religious education, two community members of *Our Place* (one male, one female), a past director at *Our Place*, a director of a women's shelter in downtown Toronto, a Sister of Charity of Halifax, a theology student, a professor of liberation theology who is also a city of Toronto council person, and an ordained Anglican woman minister who served among the poor in East York. It was very helpful to meet with these men and women who accompanied me on this ministerial journey from the beginning and helped me to focus on my research. The honesty and knowledge of this group were significant in shaping my ministry and research.

At each meeting I shared my learning experiences and also the challenges I faced. There were three particularly significant things I learned from the ministry base meetings. The first was the depth of my desire to minister with the poor and to struggle with what it

¹⁵⁵ I speak more to this in Ministry Base Group.

meant to bring the good news to the poor. I found I needed to clarify that my desire to bring the teachings of the Gospel to the poor in no way meant that they did not already have knowledge of scripture or experiences of God. It was very clear that I would learn from the poor. We discussed an article by Joan Driscoll, who wrote about her ministry in Brazil among the poor:

In the Church of the poor I discovered a richness I had not imagined, a faith that called me to listen to the Gospel in a whole new way after more than 30 years in religious life and multiple opportunities for study and reflection.¹⁵⁶

This reflection and our conversations reminded me that I would have much to learn from the women with whom I was working. In fact, they would teach me how to share the Gospel with them.

Second, my desire for deeper religious education, as a method of teaching was often the focus of the ministry base group. We explored my interest in adult religious education as well as how to bring together the concept of teaching with the desire to help people to live their faith. I was challenged about the kind of material that I would use as well as my method for approaching topics. An article by Parker J. Palmer¹⁵⁷ helped us to discuss the appropriateness of education. It was a good reminder for me that the material had to be something that would be helpful or at least thought-provoking for the members of the group. This affirmed again the need for me to learn from the women. I could bring some expertise to the spirituality gathering but I would also need to learn how to draw out from the women their knowing and their experience of God.

¹⁵⁶ Joan Driscoll, csj, A description on ministry in Brazil. (unpublished).

¹⁵⁷ Parker J. Palmer, "The Violence of Our Knowledge, Toward a Spirituality of Higher Education," 93 – 113.

Third, as stated earlier, I shared a theological reflection on my experience of Christian fundamentalism. The theological reflection was instrumental in enabling me to continue to minister with people whose religious expression is from a fundamentalist perspective. It helped me to realize the importance of listening to others and to allow them to voice their experience and beliefs even if I disagreed with them. It helped me to deepen my desire to listen carefully to what the other person was saying and to listen for the presence of God in his or her experience. I came to recognize that a person's deep desire and longing for God was really what was most important.

Essentially, I wanted to learn how to share and to learn from the people with whom I ministered. The many discussions, challenges and affirmations have helped me to do so.

7. Assumptions operative in the study

I have identified the following assumptions that influence my research:

- Hope is central to Christian faith and to living life fully.
- Hope is nurtured and deepened when we reflect on our life experience in the context of a community of faith.
- The gospel message is life-giving.
- God calls us to live the gospel message in a particular way. Each person comes to know this not only through the Christian story but also through reflection and self-knowledge.
- God calls all people to know God. This call creates a yearning within us to search for God.
- People want to learn about God.
- All people have a need to be heard and I value the experiences of all people whether or not they are able to articulate their experiences.
- Adult religious education includes the integration of learning, i.e., living faith in our everyday life.
- Adult religious education includes learning from experience, scripture, tradition, theology, spirituality, prayer and the lives of people.
- Each person who hears the Christian message will have his or her own way of reflecting on it and integrating it.

- The journey of faith is a process and although there are some similarities with others, it will ultimately be different for each person.
- Whenever people gather together to pray or to learn about the Christian message we are creating a healing space that is not just self-contained in the particular group, but flows out into the world.
- Christianity has the potential to change the world and to bring about a just and peaceful world, i.e., the reign of God.
- Christian faith gives life, liberates and transforms our lives.
- Acquiring knowledge of scripture, tradition and prayer, helps us to live more fully our everyday life.
- Opportunities for learning about Christianity are less readily available for people of low income, e.g., the homeless, those with serious mental health problems.
- It is both possible and worthwhile to make opportunities for religious education in places outside of a church structure.

Conclusion

My greatest desire for the women who participated in the women's spirituality gathering was that they would develop a deepened sense of hope¹⁵⁸ as they shared their own life experience with other women from *Our Place* and learned from Christian feminist liberation theologians and biblical scholars. Hope gives us a personal power and, with hope, we can overcome even the most difficult situations. I also wanted these women to know God as the Holy One who loves them unconditionally. I wanted them to recognize the shared experiences of hope of other women and I wanted to determine whether hope had been nurtured in them by their attendance at the spirituality gatherings. I explored this using the following question: **How does adult religious education nurture hope among women at *Our Place*?**

¹⁵⁸ I have chosen to define hope broadly because I think that any experience of hope has a potential to empower and to lead to deeper experiences: "As one of the 'theological virtues,' and the 'three things that last' (1 Cor 13:13), hope has traditionally been understood together with faith and love as the modalities which describe Christian existence." "Christian hope is a learned hope but it is also fundamentally a human construct, it is a will to live that presupposes life to be worthwhile." "Theologians have come to understand Christian hope as a receptivity to God 'who has come and who will come'." "Hope opens us to a future to be filled by the praxis of liberation which is the creation of provisional anticipations of that

CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical and Theological Framework:

Christian Feminist Liberation Theologies and Religious Education of Adults

Introduction

This chapter explores the theological study and reflection in which I engaged in preparation for my action in ministry. The work of Christian feminist theologians of liberation arises from their concrete life experiences of violence and multiple oppressions. Here I recognize similarities to the experiences of women at *Our Place* in Toronto. The work of these theologians also brought to my attention the strong resilience and abiding hope that often lies deep within Third World¹⁵⁹ women. This, too, I have experienced in the women at *Our Place*. I believe this inner strength, this capacity for hope, when nourished, can only grow stronger. The work of the Christian feminist theologians of liberation is a contribution to the nurturing of hope in the world.

I used the knowledge I gained from religious educators and the work of Third World Christian feminist liberation theologians in planning the educational activities I engaged in with the women's spirituality gathering at *Our Place*. These Christian feminist liberation theologians are actively involved in justice making and in the emancipation of women, and they affirm my work and augment my understanding of liberation theology. I have been able to share with women at *Our Place* Third World

ultimate realm of freedom which is the Kingdom of God." See Michael J. Scanlon, OSA, "Hope," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 492 – 498 passim.

¹⁵⁹ Third World Christian feminist liberation theologians will be my primary source of theology because the starting place of their theology is with the experience of the poor. When I speak of feminist theologians I will be speaking of Christian feminist liberation theologians.

Christian feminist liberation theologian's affirmation of women as created in the image of God. Their use of inclusive language also makes theology accessible, as does their use of poetry and music that speaks to the heart and deepest human longings. Knowing themselves as life givers, birthing, feeding and caring for all of creation, they affirm an interconnectedness that is central to women's knowing. Such realizations facilitate the dream and hope of a new reality.¹⁶⁰

This chapter is divided into two sections: the religious education of adults and the theologies of Christian feminist liberation. The religious education of adults includes: 1) a description of faith community and its challenges, 2) the foundations of religious education of adults, scripture and tradition, 3) feminist theological perspectives, 4) feminist approaches to the religious education of adults, and 5) a liberation theology approach to religious education. In the second section, Christian feminist liberation theology, I explore the contributions of Third World Christian theologies of liberation in spirituality, oppression and violence, the bible as a source of empowerment, and theology from a Third World feminist perspective and its contributions to feminist theology.

A. Religious Education of Adults

1. Faith community

A faith community is a microcosm of a larger community, the church. It can be broadly defined as a creative gathering of people who come together to share, learn, and

¹⁶⁰ See Ivone Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 47 – 59. See Aruna Gnanadason, "Towards a Feminist Eco-Theology for India," in *Women Healing the Earth: Third World Women On Ecology, Feminist and Religion (Ecology and Justice)*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 74 – 81. Both of these women point out how the methodology of Christian feminist liberation theology makes material available and relevant to women.

explore their Christian faith. Faith communities can take the shape of house churches, base communities, gay groups or women's church. Harris speaks of faith communities as the context for religious education as well as educating through the everyday activity of its life.¹⁶¹ She states, "Our Education into it [church] is ongoing and ought to become increasingly richer and more complex as we develop through adulthood."¹⁶² Harris notes specifically the role of religious education in the church:

For genuine education in the church is toward creating and living more and more adequately as religious beings in the world. Education is toward the continuing remaking, re-creating, reconstructing, and reorganizing of our human experience, giving that experience meaning and helping decide where to go and what to do next.¹⁶³

The main purpose of religious education with the faith community of women at *Our Place* is to create a process whereby women may enter into dialogue and reflection that can lead them to a greater understanding of their faith and of God's activity in their lives.

For religious education in the church Harris introduces a new way of understanding curriculum. Craig Dyskstra, in writing the "Forward" of *Fashion Me a People, A Curriculum in the Church*, gives helpful characteristics to distinguish this curriculum from traditional understanding. Curriculum is an activity or a practice of a people and not merely the familiar realm of materials used in school or Sunday school. For further clarity, he names four important characteristics of this practice: 1) it is "socially acceptable," and is proven sustainable; 2) it is a "cooperative human activity," that needs to be done in the context of community; 3) it offers "goods internal to that form of activity" that is, the outcome of good moral and spiritual practices, and 4) it has

¹⁶¹ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People, Curriculum in the Church*, 38. Harris defines religious education as a life long learning that includes schooling as only one aspect of education.

¹⁶² Ibid., 38.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 50.

“standards of excellence,” that are held within the educating process that are “taught and passed on from generation to generation.”¹⁶⁴ This curriculum includes the whole context of a person’s life and invites ongoing learning.

Ongoing learning is fuelled and precipitated by change in either understanding or behaviour, or both. A curriculum for a faith community must enable change and be able to fashion a people into living their life as people of God. Harris notes:

We are called to care for ourselves, for one another, for the earth, which is our home. We are called to take seriously our relation to God and to all God’s creatures, both within and beyond the church. We are called to end our isolation from others by living each day of our lives rooted in love, rooted in the Christ. And we are called to believe that in doing so, we fulfill our destiny as people of God.¹⁶⁵

Education in the faith community is a formative activity, which invites and challenges people to live their faith. As Christians, the incarnation is central to our lives and God is made flesh in us.¹⁶⁶ It is our responsibility to live God’s word in our life, and the faith community is an expression of God’s saving work lived out in our world.

There are two tensions worth noting in faith communities of which I needed to be aware in my work at *Our Place*. First, there is a tension between the personal and the communal. Personal growth and encounter with God are the first and primary focus but faith cannot remain in the personal realm. Although it is in the personal arena that we discover God’s love for us, this love needs further expression in the context of community and relationships. In discovering God’s love for us, we recognize God’s love for all creation and, as in the gospel, love draws our attention to those in need. We

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 23.

begin to see the needs of the marginalized, of the poor, especially women and of people of colour, who are the most poor.¹⁶⁷

A second tension is that between the local and the larger community. It is important that we recognize in our small faith communities that we are part of a larger community, that is, the entire church. The intimacy of a small community is important; however, the emphasis should be on its being in the midst of the world.¹⁶⁸ The only boundary to living as a faith community is the planet, and not the particular group. All of the community of earth belongs to God and is an experience of the divine.¹⁶⁹

2. Foundations: scripture and tradition

The foundations that root us in our faith are equally important for the education and formation of a faith community. Being rooted in faith is critical to forming community, and for women at *Our Place* it can serve as a stabilizing source. However, at the same time, these foundations are dynamic. They need to be able to change and reform as they encounter the experiences and insights of the community. This is what Harris describes as a refashioning or reforming of forms.¹⁷⁰ The foundations are the materials from which we discover and continually rediscover the forms that give meaning to our experience.¹⁷¹ A faith community discovers the particular shape or form for that

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 28 – 30.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 31 – 32.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 40-41. Form is the shape of the content. "The work of education is giving flesh to and embodying form....Education in the church means taking those forms which ecclesial life presents to us, places in our hands, as clay to be molded. Education is the work of lifting up and lifting out those forms through which we might refashion ourselves into a pastoral people." (41) For further reading on form giving see Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination, An Essay in the Theology of Teaching* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 34-36, 46-59, 167-172. Also see Gabriel Moran, *Education Toward Adulthood: Religion and Lifelong Learning* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) and idem, *Religious Education Development* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1983).

¹⁷¹ Harris, *Fashion Me a People, Curriculum in the Church*, 41.

community through a constant dialogue between lived experience and foundational material.

The bible is a primary foundation for teaching and learning Christian life. Christian scripture hands on images, teachings, ideas and historical expressions of religion. Communities take their form and shape from Christian scripture, which teaches a way of life through story and law. These stories are our ancestral stories; they are our roots. Walter Brueggemann's description of the role of education in Israel is helpful.¹⁷² He speaks of the Torah as life and as a way of life for the Hebrew people. The role of education is to nurture passion to live the Torah and to embrace it as the narrative for their life. This way of instruction in the Torah leads to freedom of interpretation.¹⁷³ Learning the Torah is to learn a way of life that is different from the dominant culture. The teachings serve to create a balance between gratitude and repentance, which keep Israel's life with God alive and open.¹⁷⁴

Brueggemann explains that the Israelites lived passionately, freely expressing both joy and pain. They were not excessively submissive to God and raged against God when God seemed indifferent or unfaithful. At the same time, they lived in the hope of God's promises because they knew God's care and compassion.¹⁷⁵ Along with realism, they knew the cunning of wisdom, the playfulness of the Torah and the stories of the

¹⁷² Walter Brueggemann, "Passion and Perspective: Two dimensions of education in the bible," in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation, a reader on theology and Christian education*, ed. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder (Grand Rapids: W. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 71.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 72.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 73

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 73.

impossible. This served to challenge their way of life.¹⁷⁶ Brueggemann notes the formative power of such education:

Israel's alternative education insists that life in this world requires glad obedience to the coming kingdom in which the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised and the poor have good news preached to them. (Luke 7:22) Without this education in passionate impossibility, the blind, lame, lepers, dead and poor go unnoticed, and all the others are fated then to live in anxiety and despair until we destroy each other. Without this perspective on the possible, there will be no concrete context for the impossible.¹⁷⁷

Such learning equipped the people of Israel with wisdom and skills to live their faith in a pluralistic society and also created the passion necessary to live the Torah. Nurturing such passion in people can be a powerful tool for developing confidence in their tradition and facilitate transformation.

E. A. Judge¹⁷⁸ also gives a helpful description of education as he sees it practised in the life of Paul. He believes Paul educated through his proclamation and life.¹⁷⁹ Judge understood that Paul brought about a new way of adult education. He brought people from infancy in their understanding of God to adult life in God.¹⁸⁰ Unlike educators of the time, which admired strength in social power and public prestige, Paul boasted that his strength was in his weakness and humility.¹⁸¹ He insisted that God's power prevailed over all and the test of Wisdom or truth was in relationships: "...his test for truth is that it comes from God and is demonstrated in positive human relationships."¹⁸² Paul's main

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 77 – 78.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 79.

¹⁷⁸ E. A. Judge, "The reaction against classical education in the New Testament," in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation, A reader on theology and Christian education*, ed. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder (Grand Rapids: W. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 80 – 87.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 80 – 87.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 83.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸² Ibid., 84.

concern in helping people to live as followers of Christ in the world was to create a new pattern of life and human relationships.

Church tradition is the second foundation for education in the faith that has similarities with biblical foundations. Stanley Hauerwas¹⁸³ explains that the life and teachings of the church are intricately related because everything that the church does is education. For him, formation in religious education is not a series of principles or policies but integration into the Christian story. By learning the story, we become members and a part of the Christian community. The community discovers God's will by locating their lives within the story of God, which then becomes part of their story. In the process, Hauerwas sees individuals grow in self-knowledge and begin to recognize their part in the life of God. It calls them to participate in the activities of God's people creating a new world.¹⁸⁴

For Hauerwas, the task of a faith community is to initiate others into the story. Religious education teaches the story by both intellectual activities and example. There is a cost, however, to discipleship. Hauerwas notes, "Indeed, we can only come to understand through faithfulness as the story, and the corresponding community, which forms our life asks nothing less from us than our life."¹⁸⁵ Being faithful to the story, however, leads to freedom. As we learn to desire good there begins to be a gradual transformation of attitudes and way of life. Our desire to live holy lives assures us that God's reign is continually realized in our midst. Both individually and as a faith

¹⁸³ Stanley Hauerwas, "The Gesture of a Truthful Story," in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation, A reader on theology and Christian education*, ed. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996). 97 – 105.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 103.

community, we participate in God's reign by being critical of injustices, caring for those in need, living as a people forgiven, and embodying the habits of peace.¹⁸⁶ Such formation into a way of life demands of us a social ethic in that we also have, "...the time to care in an unjust world for those who do not promise to make the world better, nor just, or direct the course of history."¹⁸⁷ Belonging to this community asks that we care not only for those we love but also for our enemies.

3. Christian feminist theological perspective

The Christian feminist theological perspective with regard to the foundations for religious education offers crucial and primary information for both tradition and scripture. For one thing, it scrutinizes anything that excludes or oppresses women. Consequently, many women are beginning to realize that scripture also belongs to them, is their heritage and source of power. Through a critical rereading of scripture and tradition Schüssler Fiorenza assists women to gain their place within our traditions:

The critical rereading of the Bible in a feminist key and from a women's perspective is in the process of uncovering lost traditions and correcting mistranslation, of peeling away layers of androcentric scholarship and rediscovering new dimensions of biblical symbols and theological meanings.¹⁸⁸

Research from the various dimensions of feminist studies and biblical perspectives is expanding knowledge about women and their contributions through history. The wall of silence for women is being lifted.

In an exploration of the bible as a book for Women-Church, Schüssler Fiorenza

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 103.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 105.

¹⁸⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women-Church: The Hermeneutical Centre of Feminist Biblical Interpretation," in *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 1.

emphasizes that all dimensions of the text and its traditions must be resources for the struggle of liberation. This feminist critique begins with women's experience and their struggle for liberation. It creates a paradigm shift in biblical interpretation. "...from understanding the Bible as a archetypal myth to understanding it as historical prototype."¹⁸⁹ This interpretation allows women to make connections with and to read scripture from the perspective of their own lives. Women can and are reading scripture from their place of poverty and oppression rather than from the received patriarchal understanding and interpretation.

4. Christian Feminist Approaches to Religious Education

A crucial and central critique that feminists in religious education bring to the fore is the identification of dualism, a major contributor to oppression. Mary Elizabeth Moore¹⁹⁰ describes how dualism between the sacred, which is in the sphere of the private and of women, and that of the public, which is in the realm of men, not only places women at a disadvantage but also keeps religious education, primarily the work of women, in the sacred or private realm. Consequently, both women and religious educators, who need to challenge the status quo, are left silent and with little or no influence in the public arena.¹⁹¹ Moore sees this dualism between the public sphere and the sacred sphere as the root of oppression for women. Moore believes it is feminist women and men who need to break down public/sacred dualism and contribute to its unity. She states, "Religious education theory about the sacred and the public needs to be

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹⁰ Mary Elizabeth Moore, "The Unity of the Sacred and the Public Possibilities From Feminist Theology," in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation, A reader on theology and Christian education*, ed. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 1996), 201 – 215.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 202.

re-envisioned by feminist women and men, and religious education practice needs to bring forth-new contributions from women.”¹⁹² In contributing to the breakdown of dualism, these women and men open the door to awareness of the many other dualities that create differences and make one more valuable than the other. Recognizing dualities and their power is an essential component of working toward freeing women from hierarchical systems. Moore sees the marginalization and devaluation of women to the sacred/private as dehumanizing.¹⁹³

Women, who are the most profoundly affected by dualistic thinking, are also the ones who contribute most to unity. Moore identifies woman such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who, through her work and research, is reconstructing the place of women in the early church and in scripture. Here women participate equally in the work of discipleship.¹⁹⁴ The need for women to work toward mutuality and equality is of the utmost importance. The work that feminist scholars have begun is seen by Moore as contributing to the wholeness of humanity:

...an analysis of the human and the ecological destruction caused by the dualisms (signs of disaster), and awareness of strands of tradition that subvert the reigning dualism's (signs of hope), and interpretation of some of the obstacles to unity (signs of warning), and an alternative view of the world and church praxis in which the sacred and the public are held together in unity (signs of possibility). Fundamental to this feminist view are the ideas that all reality is sacred and that everything sacred has public dimensions.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Ibid., 203.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 210.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 207. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals, A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 212.

An awareness of these contributions and new perspectives significantly fosters the faith community of women as a sign of God's reign. Their lives offer concrete witness to the sacredness of all reality.

Mary C. Grey¹⁹⁶ claims that the feminist praxis of education has reclaimed education as a process and an activity that spans our whole life cycle, and offers new images of redemption. Women throughout their lives are not only the primary caregivers for their families but also the primary educators of their children.¹⁹⁷ Grey notes how Christian feminists are also reclaiming the aim of education, as "...spiritual vision of wholeness of the human person for which the education process aims."¹⁹⁸ She sees redemptive activity of the education process as three-fold. The first values and reinforces self-affirmation in places of learning.¹⁹⁹ The second activity, which is closely linked to the spiritual, is the deepening of self-knowledge and learning to value and speak from inner ways of knowing.²⁰⁰ Inner knowing or connected knowing Grey sees as the ability to "embrace the self in some ultimate sense of the whole."²⁰¹ Thus the religious teacher acts as a midwife, helping others to a birth of consciousness that is only possible when both teacher and student are equally involved in the creative process.²⁰² The third activity is mutual empowerment. Mutuality as noted by Grey is, "a vital part of the

¹⁹⁶ Mary C. Grey, "Feminist Images of Redemption in Education," in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation, A reader on theology and Christian education*, ed. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder (Grand Rapids: W.B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 216 – 126.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 218.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 218.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 219.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 221.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 222.

²⁰² Ibid., 222.

educational process...empowers through the basic fact of connectedness.”²⁰³ At all levels of education, interconnectedness is primary to the learning process.²⁰⁴

Grey recognizes that learning happens primarily at “epiphanies of connections.”²⁰⁵ The mutual empowerment that happens in these moments of connection and of hearing each other into speech is redemption. Grey writes:

For it focuses on the total well being and becoming of the human person in the many layers of connectedness with the environment and the global scene. Redemption as mutuality challenges even when brokenness and finitude prevail, and calls for just relation to be established as part of an ongoing process.²⁰⁶

Education, Grey believes, is a relational endeavour and is a process of ongoing deepening of the levels of interconnectedness.

5. Theological approaches: liberation

Liberation theology belongs to a family of theologies that approach theology from a critical practice of liberation. More precisely:

Theologies of liberation understand theology as a form of critical reflection upon the practice of liberation – making the liberation of a specific group from social, economic, racial, or sexual marginalisation theologically fundamental.²⁰⁷

Although most liberation theologies originated in Third World countries, particularly in South America, I believe the understanding and critique they offer is crucial. The women with whom I am ministering experience both oppression and marginalization because of

²⁰³ Ibid., 224.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 224.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 224.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 225.

²⁰⁷ Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder, ed. “Theological Approaches: Liberation Theology,” in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation, A reader on theology and Christian education* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1996), 167.

their mental illness, poverty, and/or gender. It is for this reason that liberation theology is the basis I use for the educational programme at *Our Place*.

As I have stated previously, liberation theology views the Christian story from the perspective of people's lives, especially those who are most oppressed. For Paulo Freire, liberation theologians claim scripture as primarily a theology of liberation for all creation.²⁰⁸ Scripture invites Christians to the ultimate liberation, the resurrection.

Scripture challenges people as well as empowering them to live Easter. Freire explains:

This Easter, which results in the changing of consciousness, must be existentially experienced. The real Easter is not commemorative rhetoric. It is praxis: it is historical involvement. The old Easter of rhetoric is dead, with no hope of resurrection. It is only in the authenticity of historical praxis that Easter becomes the death which makes life possible.²⁰⁹

As Easter people, we are able to live into a hope-filled future through concrete changes in our thinking and actions. The Easter experience is truly one of new life and freedom.

A simple change of heart is not enough when structures that make the heart sick remain intact. Rather, transformation requires what Freire names conscientisation. For Freire it includes participation in the action of liberation by choosing to act out of the experience of oppression and to struggle for liberation.²¹⁰ It is a development of critical consciousness that includes both action and reflection.²¹¹ Conscientisation for Freire includes participating in the action of liberation by choosing to act out of the experience of oppression and to struggle for liberation.²¹² Liberation is only realized when society is

²⁰⁸ Paulo Freire, "Education, liberation and the church," in *Theological Perspectives in Christian Formation, A reader on theology and Christian education*, ed. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis and Colin Crowder (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 135 – 186. In this article Freire gives a helpful overview of Latin American liberation theology.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 170.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 172.

²¹¹ Ibid., 171. For a more detailed understanding of conscientisation see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury), 1970.

²¹² Ibid., 172.

changed. The voiceless and the oppressed become the utopia and voices of hope in our world, as they make concrete the need for a new future in which we can no longer be mere spectators. Rather we are called to become what Freire calls the prophetic church, which invites all of creation to a new Exodus.²¹³ The prophetic church, like him (Christ), must move forward constantly, forever dying and forever being reborn. In order to be, it must always be in a state of becoming.²¹⁴ The prophetic church is a community that announces in word and action a “theology of liberation, a prophetic, utopian theology, full of hope.”²¹⁵ At the root of liberation theology is both action and reflection that enfleshes the reign of God here in our world.

B. Third World Christian Feminist Liberation Theologies

Introduction

Third World Christian feminist liberation theologies seek emancipation for all peoples and women in particular. The faithfulness of these women and their commitment to equality and justice for women are extraordinary. The following statement expresses their profound life-giving work:

Women... no longer silent,
No longer silenced.
Women speaking out from the depth of our pain,
Challenging traditional understandings of society,
of the church, of community, of our faith...

Women demanding a just world.
A world without war and conflict,
A violence-free world.
A world without racism/casteism, and no xenophobia,
With no discrimination, no alienation,

²¹³ Ibid., 174.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 184.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 184.

No exclusion, no homophobia.
 A world of playfulness, of laughter,
 of safety for all children,
 A world where all will have enough
 and no one will have too much,
 A world where people and creation
 will live in harmony,
 A world where caring, nurturing
 and loving become the norm,
 A world where each has the space
 For their own creativity, their own choices,
 Finding their selfhood, their dignity in community.

Women in dialogue:
 Women – shifting paradigms, moving into new realms.
 Women – transforming, reconstructing, recreating.
 Women – forging strong links of solidarity,
 Affirming our diversity,
 Discovering commonalities,
 Hoping... dreaming... visioning,
 re-imagining... longing
 And... struggling...
 For a new society, a new church, a new world.²¹⁶

The work of these feminist liberation theologians have nourished my hope as well as inspired my work with women at *Our Place*. What follows is a sampling of the work of these women that has influenced and assisted me in my work.

1. Spirituality

Spirituality can be understood as both an academic discipline and a lived experience. For the purpose of this work, I have focused primarily on spirituality as a lived experience. It is from this perspective that I see feminist spirituality influencing and shaping the lives of women. Joann Wolski Conn defines Christian spirituality thus: “For Christians, it means one’s entire life as understood, felt, imagined, and decided upon in

²¹⁶ Ofelia Ortega, Aruna Gnanadason, Musimbi Kanyoro, Nyambura Njorege, Irja Askola and Beate Stierle, “Introduction,” in *Women’s Visions, Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action*, ed. Ofelia Ortega (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), vii – viii.

relationship to God, in Christ Jesus, empowered by the Spirit.”²¹⁷ The diversity of the experiences and cultures of Christian feminists nuance this broad understanding of Christian spirituality.

Feminist spiritualities share some commonalities. Cynthia Eller identifies four characteristic themes of Christian feminist spirituality. First, women are empowered by spiritual practices that have a positive impact on their sense of self. Such practices empower them to act in their own best interests and the interests of other women.²¹⁸ These spiritual practices fills women with the sense of the divine within: “...they typically walk away from the experience not with a sense of their puniness in relation to its grandeur but with a sense of shared power and renewed ability to confront a resistant world.”²¹⁹

Second, Christian feminist spirituality contains an understanding of the goodness and sacredness of creation, which is also closely linked to the body and sexuality. Many women believe that there is a strong connection, “between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women.”²²⁰ Women, it is felt are more in tune with the rhythms of nature and its well being. “Women’s spontaneous spiritual experiences are often reported to be connected to nature; for example, to a sunset or the wind in a forest or the rising of the full moon.”²²¹ Third, there is an emphasis on the use of feminine images for the divine.²²² Fourth, there is a reliance on a revisionary history of western or world civilization and religion. There is a desire to return to the ways of the earlier goddess

²¹⁷ Joann Wolski Conn, “Spirituality,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 972.

²¹⁸ Cynthia Eller, “Spirituality, Women’s” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty Russell, J. Shannon Clarkson (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1996, 276.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 276.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 276.

²²² *Ibid.*, 276.

cultures.²²³ Women are developing their own particular ways of living Christian spirituality.

Women in the Third World live a spirituality based on hope. There is evidence of hope as women take responsibility for their well being and growth even in the midst of poverty, oppression and violence. Luz Beatriz Arellano speaks of women in Nicaragua, whose prayer and worship is a practice of simple religious piety, yet they also actively work against injustice and toward building a better world. These women have found God in their own suffering and poverty. They are confident that God is on the side of the poor and works with them for justice. Today, these women are joining in the revolution, and are making their faith come alive in their everyday life.²²⁴ Understandably some women find these revolutionary activities challenging and they are unable to participate in this way. Those who do involve themselves in the revolution are able to do so because they recognize that the God who acts in history also acts in them to create a more just world. Recognizing the action of God for justice impels these women to participate in building a new society where there is justice and peace.²²⁵

Many women who have appropriated the feminine aspects of God into their spirituality easily relate to God as mother, life giver, nurturer and sustainer. The scriptural images of God as a defender of life affirm their lives as life givers.²²⁶ These women are involved in a struggle against death and are nurtured by an underlying hope that resurrection and new life will be the result of their work.²²⁷ Maria Clara Bingemer

²²³ Ibid., 277.

²²⁴ Luz Beatriz Arellano, "Women's Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 319 – 320.

²²⁵ Ibid., 320.

²²⁶ Ibid., 321.

²²⁷ Ibid., 333.

sees women in Brazil embracing theology in a bodily way. From scripture and theology they are discovering images and meanings connected to their love for life, images which are life producing and life sustaining.²²⁸ As Bingemer powerfully notes:

Entering into the domain of theological reflection with their specific and different bodiliness, open to ever-new and innovative messages, available for invasion and creative fecundation, destined to be host and protector of life, women are revolutionizing the rigor and system of theological method.²²⁹

The ability to enter the world of spirituality and theology in new ways has allowed these women greater freedom in thought and expression. Powerful insights of the womb of God, birthing and pouring forth compassion are liberating. "God's compassion, as flowing from female and maternal organs, takes on itself the hurts and wounds of all the oppressed."²³⁰ For women from Nicaragua and Brazil the struggle for liberation and a just society is nurtured from the very roots of their lives; it is the desire for solidarity and the commitment to life.

Universally women participate in ritual and praise with an ease and naturalness that is an important aspect of women's spirituality. Ritual can be a way to express commitment. As such it can be a potent source of empowerment. In her definition of women's spirituality, Eller identifies commonalities in the ways women of different faith traditions worship and use ritual. Most women like to worship in circles. Many use feminine images or feminine deities in prayer. Also common are materials that appeal to the senses of touch, smell and taste. Rituals often include movement or dance, physical

²²⁸ Maria Clara Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 310.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 310.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 316.

contact, the use of incense and candles and sharing food.²³¹ When women can gather together to pray in a setting of mutuality and full participation it is evident that there is a natural connection and ease with the divine and holy.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye provides a powerful example of women who participate fully in community worship in the African Instituted Church(AIC).²³² These women are active participants in communal prayer, ritual and healing. She finds African women less reserved and more expressive than men when it comes to worship and religious beliefs. Women more easily confess their dependence on the Spirit. Oduyoye explains, "In direct appeal to spiritual powers and praise of God, women are first to be moved by the Spirit."²³³ The worship experience in the AIC is of primary importance. This is evident in their commitment to the preparation of their rituals. The community leader, a woman, is charismatic in word and ritual, and her primary ministry is to create and dream up ways of speaking of God. Because they believe that language releases power into the community and cosmos, great attention is given to prayers that are resplendent with potent language of God and Jesus.²³⁴ Their prayers are filled with praise and the expectation that God will enter their human experience, giving them courage and strength to live their faith.²³⁵ Rooted in their belief in one and the same God, the AIC women are able to recognize their primal religions. Hence, their rituals and prayers ground them deeply in their ancestral roots.²³⁶

²³¹ Eller, "Spirituality, Women's in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 277.

²³² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Empowering Spirit of Religion," *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 361. African Instituted Churches (AIC) are "churches in the charismatic tradition in western Africa." (361) From hereinafter is referred to as AIC.

²³³ Ibid., 363.

²³⁴ Ibid., 375.

²³⁵ Ibid., 371.

²³⁶ Ibid., 375.

Chung Hyun Kyung²³⁷ notes that the connection with their ancestors is important for women in Asia. Many Korean women are reconnecting with ancestral roots and goddess religions, which they experience as affirming, empowering them to take their place as community spiritual leaders and healers.²³⁸ Chung Hyun Kyung describes the Korean goddess Kwan Yin, the goddess of compassion and wisdom, who stays with her people in their suffering until all are healed. She walks, together with her people, leading the way to Nirvana where all “live collectively in eternal wisdom and compassion.”²³⁹ Kwan Yin waits patiently for all to be healed, “She waits and waits until the whole universe, people, trees, birds, mountains, air, water become enlightened.”²⁴⁰

As noted by Eller, women naturally connect with the earth and intuitively have a sense of interconnectedness and interdependence, which is especially true in their experience of nature. In most countries women prepare food for their families and in many countries they are also producers of food. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz²⁴¹ describes how indigenous women of the Philippines are rediscovering their ancestral roots. Their ancestors connected nature with the spiritual, believing the earth to be a living, spirit-filled organism. They lived close to the earth and created rituals to appease the spirit as well as to celebrate the cycles of nature, planting and harvesting, birth and death.²⁴² Today the indigenous women are partnering with the earth by making efforts to see that

²³⁷ Chung Hyun Kyung, “Come, Holy Spirit—Break Down the Walls with Wisdom and Compassion,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 392 – 394.

²³⁸ Ibid., 392 – 394.

²³⁹ Ibid., 394.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 394.

²⁴¹ Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, “Reclaiming Earth-based Spirituality: Indigenous Women in the Cordillera” in *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 99 – 106.

²⁴² Ibid., 100 – 101.

the earth from which they receive food is also cared for and nourished.²⁴³ The influence of colonization and industrialization has dichotomized nature and spirit. Consequently, many indigenous women in the Philippines are returning to their villages for rituals that celebrate a spirit-filled earth.²⁴⁴ Tauli-Corpuz states clearly:

The effort of oppressed and marginalized peoples to sustain their struggles to transform an increasingly dehumanized society is pushing us to reclaim this earth-based spirituality. The global environmental crisis is also a factor in the effort to recapture what is good in indigenous religions and practices.²⁴⁵

The importance and the urgency of this spirituality for our world today cannot be underestimated.

In Mary Judith Ress²⁴⁶ research of Latin American indigenous people she explored the Mapuches and the Aymaras. She found that the underlying premise of the religious beliefs of both groups was the interconnectedness of all of creation.²⁴⁷ Among the Mapuche people women are often chosen as the spiritual leaders because of their close connection to the earth, which is central to their spirituality.²⁴⁸ Ress notes, "There is a deep awareness [among the Mapuche] of being part of the universe and of the interconnectedness of everything, of being a vibration that forms part of the great rhythm of life."²⁴⁹ The Anmara people hold similar beliefs. They understood the earth as not only a physical but also a spiritual reality. Their religious beliefs were also premised by

²⁴³ Ibid., 106.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 105.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 106.

²⁴⁶ Judith Mary Ress, "After Five Centuries of Mixings, Who are We?: Walking with Our Dark Grandmother's Feet," in *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 51 – 60.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 54.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 54.

the interconnectedness of all creation.²⁵⁰ The ancestral beliefs and ritual practices are beginning to attract the attention of South American women. Their desire to know and connect with the holy is fraught with dissatisfaction in Christian churches. In Santiago, for example, women are coming together to pray and to hold their rituals out of doors, desiring to connect with the rhythms of the earth and their bodies.²⁵¹ Many of these women, longing to connect with the wisdom of their ancestors, are reconnecting with their grandmothers to be their guides.²⁵²

Julia Esquivel identifies what is most significant about women's connectedness to the earth and the cosmos.²⁵³ It is the recognition of human beings as creatures of earth, beating as one heart. This recognition can free humanity from its alienation from earth and begin the reconnection of humanity to earth.²⁵⁴ Julia Esquivel describes this as a conversion to our roots where we recognize ourselves as creatures of God's creation.²⁵⁵ According to Esquivel, when we are able to live our lives with a sense of gratitude we will be healers of earth and the cosmos rather than destroyers. For her, gratitude is the only possible response to our awareness of God's gift of life. Gratitude will move us toward communion with all of creation. Esquivel summarizes succinctly the essence of this spirituality:

Gratitude makes us members of a great fellowship in which we become consciously responsible for our own inner development and a revolution in

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 57.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 58.

²⁵² Ibid., 59.

²⁵³ Julia Esquivel, "Spirituality of the Earth" in *The Power of Naming, A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 331.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 334.

our relations with the earth, all creatures, all things, nourished like us by our mother."²⁵⁶

2. Oppression and violence

The magnitude of oppression and violence in the lives of women is shocking, and these take on many different appearances. It ranges from the Malaysian girl child who is not given an opportunity for self-development to women and girl children who are sold into the sex trade by family, friends or government. Governments, churches and families have all participated in the domination and subordination of women. On many occasions, sacred scriptures has been used to keep women subject to their fathers, husbands or brothers. Unbelievable as it may seem, many women tolerate and even participate in upholding unjust situations out of a sense of duty or internalized religious belief.²⁵⁷

The violation to their persons that women experience throughout the world is truly outrageous. For example, during World War II, over 100,000 of Asian/Pacific women were forced to serve as prostitutes, commonly known as "comfort women," for Japanese army personnel.²⁵⁸ Such exploitation continues today. Women are still sold under the guise of foreign brides or into the sex trade. Often these women are confined and raped, even murdered. In Thailand the sex tourism trade is a rising source of income for the country and proceeds are used to pay back World Bank loans. Such exploitation

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 335.

²⁵⁷ This introduction to violence and oppression against women has been gathered from the following articles: Case Studies, "Patriarchy in Operation, Case Studies," *In God's Image* 16, no. 3 (1997), 3 – 10. Amin Adibah, "The Wounded Spirit of the Girl Child," *In God's Image* 17, no. 2 (1998), 11 – 12. Bette Ekeya, "Women, For How Long Not?" in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 139 – 149. Alice Gill, "Status of Marwari Women in Pakistan," *In God's Image* 15, no. 4 (1996), 9 – 10. Esther Inayat, "Attitude of the Church Towards Women in Pakistan- in the Past and at Present," *In God's Image* 15, no. 4 (1996), 6 – 8.

²⁵⁸ Yun Alice Chai, "Violence Against Asian/Pacific Women: History and Current Reality," *In God's Image* 15, no. 2 (1996), 76.

of women is not new; it is a historical reality. This powerful system of violence against women and children continues today.²⁵⁹

Domestic violence is another situation in which many women experience abuse. The male still rules in many households, whether it be father, spouse or brother. Jessie Tellis-Nayak calls this the result of “the age old oppressive ideology of patriarchy.”²⁶⁰ In countries where a hierarchical arrangement of marriage is operative, women often experience physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Miriam Frances tells a powerful story of arranging the marriage of her niece Gul. She describes her niece as having been a bright and independent young woman, who entered into an abusive marriage where she stayed partly because she believed it was her duty but also because the cultural situation made it next to impossible for her to survive on her own. Unable to bear the constant abuse, Gul took her life.²⁶¹

The consequences of patriarchy are also evident in the oppression women experience within their churches. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Riona Fa'atauva'a share their concern for women in Ghana and Samoa.²⁶² Oduyoye is committed to working for

²⁵⁹ This is a very brief overview of sexual violence experienced by many women in Third World countries. The following articles have been sources for this information: Yun Alice Chai, “Violence Against Asian/Pacific Women: History and Current Reality,” *In God's Image* 15, no. 2 (1996), 79 – 85. Hyun Kyung Chung, “Your Comfort Vs. My Death: A Korean Woman's Reflection on Military Sexual Slavery by Japan,” *In God's Image* 15, no. 2 (1996), 8 – 21. Julia Esquivel, “Conquered and Violated Women,” in *The Power of Naming, A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 105 – 114. Marianne Katoppo “The Church and Prostitution in Asia,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 114 – 123. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, “The Good Women of Bangkok,” *In God's Image* 15, no. 1 (1996), 25 – 32. Yayori Matsui, “Violence Against Women in Development, Militarism, and Culture” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 124 – 134. Jeanne O'Hearne, “Cry of the Raped, A Story to be Told,” *In God's Image* 15, no. 2 (1996), 30 – 34. Martha Pushparani, “How Family, Religion and Caste Reinforce the Girl Child's Low Status,” *In God's Image* 17, no. 2 (1998), 5 – 8.

²⁶⁰ Case Studies, “Patriarchy in Operation, Case Studies,” *In God's Image* 16, no. 3 (1997), 3.

²⁶¹ Miriam Francis, “In the Name of Dignity,” *In God's Image* 15, no. 4 (1996), 25 – 29.

²⁶² Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Riona Fa'atauva'a, “The Struggle About Women's Theological Education,” in *Feminist Theology From the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994, 170 – 176.

the visibility of women in church, society and academy in Ghana.²⁶³ Her objective is an education that is contextual, relevant and a means for deepening the meaning of life as well as allowing the possibility for change.²⁶⁴ For Oduyoye, feminist liberation theologies are needed because they challenge injustice and envision change.²⁶⁵ In general, good education for women in Ghana requires a struggle, but theological education is even more difficult because men control theology and leadership in the church. Fa'atauva'a identifies a similar struggle in her country of Samoa. There is no support by the church or the culture for women to study theology. Despite this, women have gone to great lengths to do so; very few succeed.²⁶⁶

The patriarchy in the church of Kenya also oppressed women. Ketty Ekeya explains that European missionaries hid the good news of Jesus from the women.²⁶⁷ Scripture was interpreted in such a way that it was used against them. Traditionally women in Kenya had no rights in public; they were valued only in their homes. With the arrival of the missionaries, women were seen as sinful creatures, responsible for polygamous marriages. As a result, many women were abandoned and left to raise their children on their own. Even when they adhered to a Christian way of life, women suffered from an interpretation of scripture that left them subservient to their husbands.²⁶⁸ The situation has improved little in today's Kenya. As Ekeya states:

For the majority of African women the Good News that is the person of Jesus Christ is still inaccessible. Unless church structures change radically

²⁶³ Ibid., 171.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 171.

²⁶⁵ Ibid. 172.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 173 – 174.

²⁶⁷ Bette Ekeya, "Women, For How Long Not?: in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed., Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994).

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 141 – 143.

and allow women to receive liberty that the Son of God died to make available, there can be no real transformation of people's lives.²⁶⁹

Leadership in the churches remains predominantly male and the contributions of women are ignored. Women who are exploring their historical roots and their role as healers are viewed by these churches as demonic.²⁷⁰

Women are pursuing their role of healing through story. Their stories of suffering and violence become stories of healing as they dream new ways of being. In turn, they empower one another and become healers for others. By valuing mutuality and equality, women are able to work together to help each other articulate their stories and ask for their needs. By sharing their experiences of violence, they commit themselves to truth, justice and love.²⁷¹ A good example of this are the Dalit women of India, who Devi Dwarnalatha describes as the poorest of the poor. These women, strongly grounded in their faith, are committed to raising consciousness of the abuse and violence experienced by their people. By doing so, they have been instrumental in helping to change the living situations of their people.²⁷²

The courage of women to acknowledge their violence and oppression is often

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 148.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 146.

²⁷¹ See the following articles for further description of how women are owning their power by breaking the silence of oppression and violence: Association of Women in Theology (AWIT), "Of Secrets and Violence, Breaking the Silence," *In God's Image* 17, no. 2 (1998), 33 – 36. Hyun Kyung Chung, "Your Comfort Vs. My Death: A Korean Woman's Reflection on Military Sexual Slavery by Japan," *In God's Image* 15, no. 2 (1996) pp. 8 – 21. Dwarnalatha Devi, "The Struggle of Dalit Christian Women in India," *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 135 – 137. Julia Esquivel "Conquered and Violated Women," in *The Power of Naming, A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 105 – 114. Polly Ho, "Body and Dignity, Concern for the Victims of Sexual Assault," *In God's Image* 16, no. 2 (1997), 32 – 33. Ranjini Rerbera, "Challenging Patriarchy," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 105 – 113. Chezuko Ueno, "Against the Patriarchal Crime: In Search for Feminist Solidarity Beyond Nation Borders," *In God's Image* 15, no. 2 (1996), 64 – 66.

²⁷² Dwarnalatha Devi, "The Struggle of Dalit Christian Women in India," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 135 – 137.

awakened when they encounter a theology that advocates justice. Roxanne Jordaan and Thoko Mpumlwana write about women in South Africa who are learning black feminist theology and are challenging traditional theology.²⁷³ They are working to have a voice in their churches and to help work toward liberation. Knowledge has allowed them to raise awareness of racism, sexism, and poverty.²⁷⁴ Being grounded in their faith, has allowed them to believe the good news of healing and liberation are for all.

Recognizing oneself as a victim is the beginning of the difficult process of the path to healing. Ivona Gebara describes three essential components of this journey in the process of healing.²⁷⁵ Healing begins with women choosing to opt for themselves; that is, to learn to love themselves. It means valuing themselves as women and rejecting false images of themselves. Women need to learn to celebrate their whole person, body, mind and soul with a sense of wonder and delight. According to Gebara, this initial step toward the rebirth of self, can be very painful and slow.²⁷⁶

The second step toward healing is to opt for others, to love others as oneself. To love oneself includes reaching out to our suffering neighbour. By embracing their place in society, women also recognize the need to work collectively for a rebirth of the whole human group.²⁷⁷ Gebara recognizes a need for a collective resistance against oppression as well as a collective affirmation of women's own power and creativity to work for

²⁷³ Roxanne Jordaan and Thoko Mpumlwana, "Two Voices on Women's Oppression and Struggle in South Africa" in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 150 – 169.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 153 – 156.

²⁷⁵ Ivona Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for Poor Women," in *The Power of Naming, A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 142 – 143.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 143 – 144.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

change.²⁷⁸ Also important is affirmation of their relationship with God who nourishes and empowers them.²⁷⁹

The third component is to opt “for a new future of justice and love.”²⁸⁰ For Gebara, the task to dream of a New World of justice in the midst of overwhelming poverty is a central aspect of being human; an unquenchable thirst for a hope-filled future.²⁸¹ Women dreaming new possibilities and witnessing signs of justice nourish these desires which in turn enable them in the midst of suffering and oppression to carry on, to dream, and to hope.

3. The bible as a source of empowerment

As women in the Third World begin to reread the bible and take ownership of the good news, they are experiencing revitalization. With the help of feminist biblical scholars, many women are revisiting scripture texts that excluded them or have been used against them. In reading scripture and tradition from a feminist perspective, these women are using the tools of a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion.²⁸² Using this process, women are discovering new understanding of themselves, their faith and their relationship with God.

Elsa Tamez tells the story of Mexican women beginning to recognize the need for a feminist interpretation of scripture.²⁸³ By reading scripture from the point of view of

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 146.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 147.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 148.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 148 – 149.

²⁸² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenze who recognized inconsistencies in biblical and theological texts concerning women introduced a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion. Fiorenza “...set forth both theoretical and practical means of redressing oppressive, reductive, and/or inaccurate histories and theologies.” Amy-Jill Levine, “Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 140.

²⁸³ Elsa Tamez, “Women’s Rereading of the Bible,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994).

liberation and from the perspective of the poor, especially poor women, they recognize places in which they are marginalized and/or segregated.²⁸⁴ Tamez describes the method used: first, they distance themselves from all the interpretations they have held or were taught; second, they draw close to the text and read and interpret it from their own experiences.²⁸⁵ They are breaking through texts used against women and that legitimated their marginalization.²⁸⁶ Consequently, these women are able to take a fresh look at what scripture is saying to them. They are discovering that “God is a God of life who has preferential option for the poor and oppressed....”²⁸⁷

By reading scripture through the lens of their experiences, women are both affirmed and conscientized. For example, women have identified the experiences of violence and oppression in the lives of biblical women such as Hagar. The story of Hagar helps women express their own story and need. It helps women speak out against violence in their own lives and to work for change.²⁸⁸ In re-telling their stories, women often feel a sense of power that enables them to own the wrong that has been done to them as well as recognize their own participation in oppression. Their new-found power helps them make changes in themselves and their society.²⁸⁹

Feminist biblical scholar Kwok Pui-Lan gives women hope for change.²⁹⁰ She shares a powerful retelling of the Canaanite woman. Despite her low status, the Canaanite

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 190.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 197.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 193.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 192.

²⁸⁸ Lung Ngan Ling, “The Cries of Hagar,” *In God’s Image* 16, no. 2 (1997), 34–35. Ngan Ling pours out her anguish over Hagar’s experience of violence in a prayer for healing for all women who experience violence and oppression.

²⁸⁹ Navamani Peter, “Violence and Exploitation, Judges 11: 34–40, 19: 22–30, *In God’s Image* 15, no. 1 (1996), 7.

²⁹⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, “Worshipping with Asian Women: A Homily on Jesus Healing the Daughter of a Canaanite Woman,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 236–242.

woman had the courage and insight to ask for her daughter's healing. Today Pui-Lan sees the Caananite woman lived in the lives of many women:

- She is the woman down on the dirty road of Calcutta;
- She is the mother of a political prisoner in Seoul;
- She is the old garment factory worker in Hong Kong;
- She is the mother whose daughter is a prostitute in Jakarta, Taipei, or Chiang Mai.²⁹¹

This powerful retelling of the story reminds women wherever they may be of their courage and ability to stand against oppression and violence.

Christian scripture is also a source for challenging traditional roles designated to women, especially those related to sexuality and birth experiences. Jesus often broke traditional gender roles in his relationship with women by treating women as equal partners. He also overturned taboos about women and menstruation as demonstrated in the reflection of Nelun Gunasekera, Pauline Hensman, Chandra Piyadasa and Audrey Rebera on Jesus' raising Jairus' daughter.²⁹² They read this passage from the perspective of the girl child in Sri Lanka who is denied access to developing her full potential. Jesus' healing Jairus' daughter and the woman with the haemorrhage topples cultural and religious beliefs that regarded women's bodies as dirty and shameful. By healing the woman with the haemorrhage, Jesus brings attention to the situation of women and the taboos around menstruation. Her healing opens the way to full participation of women in the reign of God and restores the place of women in society because they are no longer defiled. The subsequent healing of the child, restores the place of children, who were also considered less than human, in society.²⁹³ Jesus' encounter with the woman accused

²⁹¹ Ibid., 237.

²⁹² See Nelun Gunasekera, Pauline Hensman, Chandra Piyadasa and Audrey Rebera, "The Raising of Jairus' Daughter," *In God's Image* 17, no. 2 (1998).

²⁹³ Ibid., 41 – 46.

of adultery also breaks boundaries for women. He does not condemn her; rather he invites her to develop sexual codes that will stand against all odds. His response teaches us that it is the transformation of a human being that matters, not blind obedience to orders and laws.²⁹⁴

Christian scripture also identifies abuses of power that are used over and against women, the poor, the earth and the vulnerable. In an exegesis on the forbidden tree,²⁹⁵ Slun Ai Lee-Park, identifies issues of power.²⁹⁶ She observes two trees, the tree of life, offering freedom, and the tree in the Garden of Eden, which sets boundaries, with God as the ultimate boundary. Lee-Park sets before us humanity's ongoing conflict between freedom and restriction. Boundaries are violated each time domination occurs. Lee-Park sees evidence of this in the world today:

In modern terms we can refer to relations between men and women, managers and workers, rulers and people, powerful nations and small nations, races and others. In all these relations we see the pattern of domination and subjugation. Domination is present because the forbidden trees were trespassed and the situation of sinfulness was created.²⁹⁷

This teaching challenges all relationships of inequality and accentuates God's vision and desire for wholeness of all creation.

Embracing scripture as a source of wholeness and liberation has been a difficult process for black women in Africa. Itumeleng Mosala recognizes how the use of the bible as an ideology for apartheid, contradicted their supposed inclusion into a biblical, based

²⁹⁴ Park Kyung Mi, "Jesus and the Adulteress, John 7:53 – 8:11," *In God's Image* 17, no. 1 (1998), 28 –32.

²⁹⁵ Gen. 2: 15–17.

²⁹⁶ Slun Ai Lee-Park, "The Forbidden Tree and the Year of the Lord," in *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 107 – 116.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

love of God.²⁹⁸ A critical interpretation of the bible must include the critique of “the history, the devices, the culture, the ideologies and agendas of both the text and itself.”²⁹⁹ A theology of liberation needs to be able to appropriate scripture in a setting and must serve the needs of transformation and liberation.³⁰⁰ Mosala is convinced of the need for liberation of scripture through the process of critical interpretation. She writes, “...that oppressed communities must liberate the bible so that the bible can liberate them.”³⁰¹

Visions of liberation are abundant in the writings of Hebrew scripture prophets. These prophets have dared to write of a new creation filled with peace and based on truth and justice. Women take these stories of hope seriously. Monica Melanchthon sees the prophet’s visions and broad sketches of hope stimulating faith, envisioning new social order and bringing nearer the possibility of God’s renewing love.³⁰² She speaks boldly of God’s call to women as co-creators in the process of creating a New World order.³⁰³ Rigoberta Menchu also stresses the bible as a source of empowerment for women. When women recognize the reality they are living and the reality God calls them to, they are no longer satisfied with teachings of God’s love for the poor and God preparing a place for them in another world. Rather they see God wanting them to have new life now, in this world.³⁰⁴ These women are realizing that suffering and exploitation is not fate, rather it

²⁹⁸ Itumeleng J. Mosala, “The Implications of the Test of Esther for African Women’s Struggle for Liberation in South Africa,” *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis/SPCK, 1995/1991), 170.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁰² Monica Melanchthon, “Women in the New Creation, A Biblical Theological Reflection,” *Text: Is. 65: 17 – 25*, *In God’s Image 17*, no. 1 (1998), 19 – 24.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁰⁴ Rigoberta Menchu “The Bible and Self-defence: The Examples of Judith, Moses, and David” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 183.

is the result of oppression. Thus, many women are seeking to create a church of the poor so that religion can spring from the people and not be a weapon of the rich.³⁰⁵

The faith of women is affirmed all through scripture. Patricia Boyle retells a powerful story of a woman's faith. In telling the story of the widow with the two coins, she highlights the widow's outstanding trust in God which allows the widow to give all that she has. Her relationship with God has given her hope. It has freed her to live for each day with no need to store goods for tomorrow.³⁰⁶ The feminine image of wisdom also mediates hope and power for women. Wisdom, Wong Wai Ching explains, is characterized as mediator, counsellor, teacher, procreator and embracer of universalism. Wisdom places women's activities close to activities associated with the divine. Ching recognizes in Proverbs 8 that wisdom partners with God in divine creation.³⁰⁷ Such images as partnering or co-creating with God help women recognize and use their gifts of creativity in creating a new way of living as God desires.

4. Theology from Third World Christian feminist's perspective

The starting place of doing theology for Third World Christian feminist theologies of liberation is their life experience. This practical way of doing theology comes naturally to many women as they readily engage themselves in the lives and struggle of their people, especially the poor, and in particular, poor women.³⁰⁸ Gebara recognizes that in South America, theology is being shaped by the practical influence of women gathering together to share their experiences and their struggles in an attempt to

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 185 – 186.

³⁰⁶ Patricia Boyle, "Prayer of the Widow with Two Coins, Mark 12: 41 – 44, *In God's Image* 15, no. 1 (1996), 17.

³⁰⁷ Wong Wai Ching, "The Wisdom Women in Creation, a Reflection on Proverbs 8," *In God's Image* 17, no. 1 (1998), 25 – 27.

³⁰⁸ Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 49.

help one another to change their life situations.³⁰⁹ Theology that begins with experience constantly meets the need for change. Often its task is to recreate tradition drawing from present reality, not merely reason.³¹⁰ Gebara notes:

...we're discovering, very powerfully and starting from our own situation, the mystery of the incarnation of the divine in the human and not just because 'we have been told' but because we experience it in the confines of our lives as women.³¹¹

As women recognize God within themselves and others, they are more confident about living their experience of God. Such a response confirms the importance and significance of women doing theology.

This way of theologizing by women in South America is an important part of the theological debate. Angela Wong speaks of it in Hong Kong as well.³¹² She identifies this theology as liberation theology for three reasons: it is inspired and hope-filled; it empowers the marginalized; and it helps facilitate change.³¹³ Another important aspect Wong identifies is holistic spirituality, an affirmation of mutuality and connectedness that feminist theology fosters. She believes it is holistic because it, "...not only means to break down dichotomous religious categories, but also to dissolve the alienation between men and women, the powerful and the powerless, and the centre and the periphery."³¹⁴ This rather large agenda, as expressed by Wong, requires a constant desire and openness to dialogue with these differing factors.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 49.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 51. See also Hope S. Antone, "Finding Ties, Making Links, An Asian Woman's Gleanings from Womminist Theology," *In God's Image* 17, no. 1 (1998).

³¹¹ Ibid., 52.

³¹² Angela Wong, "Theological Education from the Perspective of Feminist Theology," *In God's Image* 16, no. 2 (1997).

³¹³ Ibid., 18.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

The women in the Indian Theological Association are choosing to remain in the dialogue by articulating their feminist perspective to a theology that is male dominated.³¹⁵ By identifying their distinctive contributions to theological discourse, they determine how women can best participate. These women in India are contributing to theological discourse by articulating what they see is needed for a more just society. They have identified ways of affirming and encouraging women to find their voice in both church and society. Each person's uniqueness is considered a valued contribution to feminist discourse. They are also broadening the feminist discourse in a process of conscientization in their homes, schools and churches.³¹⁶

Christian feminist theological discourse has brought an awareness of the complexity and multiple layers of oppression experienced by women. Many women, whether in their home, workplace, church or society, experience "double and triple" oppressions from racism, classism and sexism. This often goes unrecognized.³¹⁷ Feminist theologians acknowledge the oppression of sexism and challenge the assumption that the experience of the male is normative and universal. This became evident in the work of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians³¹⁸ as women began to challenge sexism among its members. Oduyoye writes the story of the "irruption" in New Delhi,³¹⁹ and identifies the underlying issues that precipitated it:

³¹⁵ Indian Theological Association "Theologizing in India – A Feminine Perspective," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 60.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 61. Similar movements are happening in Asia. See Hope S. Antone, "Finding Ties, Making Links, An Asian woman's Gleaning from womanist Theology," *In God's Image*, 17, no. 1 (1998), 43 – 52. Also see Ann Gray and Marie MacDonell, "A Dialogue with Elizabeth Schüsseler Fiorenza," *In God's Image* 16, no. 2 (1997), 45 – 46.

³¹⁷ Pui-lan Kwok, "The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 65.

³¹⁸ Hereafter Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians will be called EATWOT.

³¹⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Reflections from a Third World Women's Perspective" in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994).

The outburst came not because women were being treated as mere spectators at the meeting, but because the language of the meeting ignored our presence and therefore alienated some of the women present. But language was not the only issue; it was an index of other deep-seated criteria for assigning roles. Even the periods of relaxation were painful at least to me, as I listened to African misogynist fables being enjoyed by all and sundry.³²⁰

Among the members of EATWOT it was thought that sexism was not an issue for Third World women. The women, recognizing their oppression, disagreed. They noted clearly, “The fact is that sexism is part of the intricate web of oppression in which most of us live, and that having attuned ourselves to it does not make it any less a factor of oppression.”³²¹ Although women may recognize the effects of sexism in their lives, the task of changing structures and mindsets that keep sexism alive can seem utterly impossible. Actions such as the women speaking out at EATWOT are signs of hope.

Maria Jose F. Rosado speaks of a similar situation voiced by women doing theology in Latin America:

Their work thus differs to that of male theologians, who deal with “the poor” without reference to the distinctions that the fact of being men or women – as that of race – imposes on the way poverty affects their social categories and the way they experience poverty.³²²

The oppression of sexism is much more invasive and damaging than a first glance may reveal. For some women in theology the acknowledgement of sexism means recognizing in their own history participation in the oppression of other women.

The multiplicity of oppressions that women experience calls not only for change in the structure of things but for a change in the order of things. It means speaking first

³²⁰ Ibid., 26.

³²¹ Ibid., 27.

³²² Maria Jose F. Rosado Nunes, “Women’s Voices in Latin American Theology,” in *The Power of Naming, A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 16.

from the side of the poor and of women, the most marginalized. Feminist theologians affirm the right of women and of all people, as created in the image of God, to participate in God's reign. The EATWOT gathering in Mexico noted this poignantly: "Being created in God's image demands a total rupture with the prevailing patriarchal system in order to build an egalitarian society."³²³ Women are working at building a new culture through prayer and struggle. "As women we articulate our theology in prayer and worship, in our relationships with our neighbour in whom God lives, and in our ongoing struggle as one with the poor and the oppressed."³²⁴ Christian feminist liberation theologians use language that is inclusive of women to make theology accessible to them. By using the language of poetry and music, they speak to their hearts and to deepest human longings.³²⁵ In this way, they are actively involved in justice and the emancipation of women.

Christian feminist theologians of liberation are creating a new way of doing theology that is rooted in culture, in community and in women's experience. Rose Wu speaks of the challenge for feminist theology in Asia where women are claiming their rights in the church and society. These women are supporting, affirming and contributing to the liberation movement of women as well as challenging the church to take responsibility in what many are calling a major revolutionary event. By siding with the outcasts and the poor, women are naming the dominating exclusionary structures that contribute to the destruction of both humanity and creation. By critiquing culture,

³²³ Mexico Conference, "Final Document on doing Theology from Third World Women's Perspective," *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 37.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

³²⁵ See Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 56. Also Aruna Gnanadason, "Towards a Feminist Eco-Theology for India," in *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 74 – 81.

religion and economics, by shifting and disturbing traditional authorities, women are working toward claiming their place and their authority in what was once the sole domain of men.³²⁶ Wu challenges Asian women to occupy this space in theology that demands the courage to walk into the unknown. She challenges, "...but that is where Asian women writing our own theology based on our own Asian experiences must be prepared to go."³²⁷

A major challenge for women is the institutional church. Betty Govinden speaks of the experience of Southern African women.³²⁸ She recognizes their longing for a place in the church where they are accepted and loved and where they can continue to deepen their spirituality. By its very definition, the church should be a place of inclusion and healing, but it is, in fact, filled with contradictions, women often find themselves excluded and without a voice. Despite the threat to church structures and church authority, Govinden refuses to be discouraged. She believes it is time for the good news of the gospel to be proclaimed and women participate in the process of doing theology in community.³²⁹ According to Govinden, "What Feminist liberation theologians are demanding is, in a sense, not new, as the rebirth of images is central to Christianity, and entirely consonant with the spirit of dynamic, creative and exploratory faith."³³⁰ Christian feminist liberation theology is a theology that works for the liberation of all people and all creation.³³¹ For Govinden this means that our churches include and recognize the voices of all people, including those who have had abortions, prostitutes,

³²⁶ Rose Wu, "Asian Women as the Subject of God's Vision," *In God's Image* 16, no. 2 (1997), 31.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

³²⁸ Betty Govinden, "No Time for Silence, Women, Church and Liberation in Southern Africa," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 283 – 302.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 294 – 295.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

the disabled and the old. There is a need to create a space for all to worship together as well as a forum in which to talk and share concerns. Those who have been marginalized need to become equal partners in the church.³³²

Another major contribution of Christian feminist liberation theology is in the area of ecology. The environmental and ecological destruction has been of primary concern for Christian feminist theologians and eco-feminists. Many of these women identify a connection between social justice and the environment, between the abuse of women and the abuse of the environment. They recognize that domination over creation is a main factor in the ecological crisis as well as in the loss of balance in relationships.³³³ In South Africa, Denise Ackermann, a Christian woman, and Joynar Tahier, a Muslim woman, identify the underlying values in their respective traditions that recognize care and reverence for nature as integral to their theology. They note the inconsistencies, which they see as directly related to the religious patterns of male domination of women and the destruction of the environment.³³⁴ Joynar writes, "...the planet is groaning under the strain of anthropocentric attitudes which seriously devalue women and nature."³³⁵

Ackermann speaks of the work undertaken by Christian eco-feminists in response to the ecological crisis looming over South Africa. She states, "Earth-healing praxis is

³³² Rose Wu, "Liberating Theology to Liberate Women: The Hong Kong Women Christian Council Experience," *In God's Image* 17, no. 1 (1998), 33 – 37.

³³³ See Denise Ackermann and Tahira Joyner, "Earth-Healing in South Africa: Challenges to the Church and Mosque," ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women in Ecology, Feminism and Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 121 - 122. See also Mercedes Canas. "In Us Life Grows: An Ecofeminist Point of View. An Ecofeminist Approach," in *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 24 – 28.

³³³ Mercedes Canas, "In Us Life Grows: An Ecofeminist Point of View. An Ecofeminist Approach," in *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 24 – 28.

³³⁴ Ackermann and Joyner, "Earth-Healing in South Africa: Challenges to the Church and Mosque," 121 – 134.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

directed at restoring relationships between all and us created life, and is infused by a spirituality, which reverences the sacredness of all of creation.”³³⁶ Many of these same women invite, and some even challenge, the church to be partners in healing the earth. This involves re-visioning church documents and teachings to ensure that they speak for the environment. By raising consciousness of ecological destruction and affirming the sacredness of creation in their liturgical prayers, songs and biblical stories women participate in “earth-healing praxis.”³³⁷ These women recognize the challenge of working together toward healing the earth and truly believe “The earth can be healed when we celebrate our diversity and understand our total interdependency with one another and every aspect of creation.”³³⁸

The ecological crisis chiefly affects the lives of the poor, especially poor women and children. Gabriele Deitrich identifies how some women in Asia are affected by the destruction of the environment. It means that the availability of water, food, and firewood or fuel is drastically reduced. In urban areas women often have to walk for hours to fetch water and to purchase food for their families.³³⁹ Deitrich witnesses these women in the midst of hardship, able to continue their commitment for life. These women are finding in scripture their power and connectedness to all of creation. This power gives birth and sustains life, “by the labour of their wombs and *the work of their hands*.”³⁴⁰

³³⁶ Ibid., 125.

³³⁷ Ibid., 125.

³³⁸ Ibid., 134.

³³⁹ Gabriele Dietrich, “The World as the Body of God: Feminist Perspectives on Ecology and Social Justice,” in *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion* ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 89.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 92. (Italics mine) Dietrich uses Sally McFague’s metaphor of the earth as the body of God to develop her ideas of the relatedness of women and earth.

Gladys Parentelli observes Latin America women who, though they live in poverty, make ethical decisions daily in feeding their families and caring for creation. She writes:

They are largely responsible for the production of their country's wealth in that they both bear and raise children, their country's future; furthermore, they protect and preserve the local environment and its resources.³⁴¹

Great care is taken by these women to prepare what food they have without waste. This way of living on the earth comes from a deep sense of the value of life and knowing intuitively how to preserve it and to treasure the gifts of the earth.³⁴²

Christian feminist theologians cultivate images of Christ that are liberating for women. In Africa, Teresa Hinga helps women look to the bible for images of Christ that speak to them.³⁴³ She identifies three images of Christ as liberator that have been particularly popular with these women. First, Christ as a friend; someone who is always with them.³⁴⁴ Second, Christ is the "embodiment of the spirit"³⁴⁵ and is working on the side of the poor. Third, Christ is an "iconoclastic prophet,"³⁴⁶ actively involved and concerned for those who experience violence and injustice. At the same time, they are critical and would "...reject, like others before them, any Christology that smacks of sexism, or functions to entrench lopsided gender relations."³⁴⁷

Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer affirm in their work the activity of God in the lives of poor women. As women become more aware of the biases of some writers

³⁴¹ Gladys Parentelli, "Latin America's Poor Women: Inherent Guardians of Life," in *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 31.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁴³ Teresa M. Hinga, "Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 266.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 268.

and notice the exclusion of women by what is said of them, they also notice what is not said.³⁴⁸ For example, they make note of what has not been said about Mary.³⁴⁹ In recovering Mary's story, they discover the real mystery of God who, through Mary, a poor and insignificant woman, is chosen by God to announce God's plan for humanity and to glorify God. God uses someone whom society claims to be insignificant to be the mother of God and announce God's reign.³⁵⁰ Using a feminist interpretation of the mystery of the incarnation, Gebara and Bingemer see the potential given Mary extended to all women.³⁵¹ They state, "Marian dogmas, which exalt Mary, immaculately conceived, assumed into heaven, virgin and mother must reflect knowledge that in exalting her they exalt precisely her poverty, her dispossession, and her simplicity."³⁵² This truly is both good news for women and an affirmation of God's continuous activity in the lives of women, especially poor women.

Christian feminist liberation theologians in Asia are working for the recognition of women as created in the image of God by re-visiting scripture to draw out feminine images.³⁵³ In Asia, the influence of other religions, such as Hinduism, has made it inconceivable and even ridiculous to dichotomize God who is both male and female.³⁵⁴ Also, Asian women's understanding of God is connected to their life experience. Kyung identifies five ways of speaking about God: "God as both female and male;" "God as community;" "God as creator in nature and in history;" "God as life-giving spirit" and;

³⁴⁸ Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, "Mary-Mother of God, Mother of the Poor," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 276.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 280.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 280.

³⁵³ Marianne Katoppo, "The Concept of God and the Spirit from the Feminist Perspective" in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 244.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 246.

“God as mother and woman.”³⁵⁵ These ways of speaking of God open up numerous possibilities for women to relate to God in all aspects of their lives. Most importantly, women recognize themselves as created in the image of God and are thus “...full and equal participants in the community with men.”³⁵⁶

In challenging such dogmas as the Trinity, Gebara reconstructs not only the way to do theology, but also challenges the way we have been taught to think, daring us to think differently and to question.³⁵⁷ For example, she challenges us to consider our understanding of the Trinity. She challenges us to think of possibilities of understanding God in new ways, such as God as acting from within creation.³⁵⁸ Gebara’s Trinitarian theology is filled with hope and a theology that points to what she calls a “Trinitarian balance” in which communion is seen as a way of life for all creation.³⁵⁹ She sees the spirituality that flows from this theology as a slow, ongoing process that will burst religious boundaries, changing understanding and behaviour. This spirituality, which is the energy underlying our lives, will give our lives meaning and awaken us to care for each other.³⁶⁰ She invites us to this spiritual life:

The important thing is to renew our lives daily, with tenderness, responsibility, keenness, and great passion, to experience daily our struggle to defend the extraordinary Life that is within us, in the unity of the multiplicity of all things.³⁶¹

³⁵⁵ Chung Hyun Kyung, “To Be Human Is to be Created in God’s Image,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 252 - 253.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

³⁵⁷ Ivone Gebara, “The Trinity and Human Experience: An Ecofeminist Approach,” in *Women Healing Earth, Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 13.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, see pages 14 – 22 for Gebara’s development of an eco-feminist theology of the Trinity.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

Conclusion

The religious education of adults and the work and contributions of Third World Christian feminist theologians of liberation are, for me, intricately related. The feminist theologians contribute to possibilities of gospel living, as women become full and equal partners in the work of God's reign. Their work contributes to a spirituality that refuses to say "no" to love and life, and is formed and shaped by God's love and desire for us. These theologians identify an ongoing journey of possibility for women, which at its very core includes liberation for all creation. In preparing programmes of education in faith for the women at *Our Place*, the perspectives offered by Third World Christian feminist theologians of liberation provide a theology of praxis that enables the educator to connect with the participants' lived experience and deepen their inner longings.

The work of these scholars continues to be an invitation and a challenge for me. It is a journey of the heart to which God invites all people. Chittister summarizes this beautifully:

I will give you a new way of feeling, a new way of thinking, a new way of being. I will give you another chance to live life in concert with life that ennoble you and does not diminish the other. I will take the pyramid of patriarchy and turn it into a circle where, eye for eye and shoulder for shoulder, you may become a creation full of life, full of God-ness.³⁶²

The journey offers opportunities and possibilities for life. It is this journey that I explore in the spiritual gathering with the women at *Our Place*.

³⁶² Joan Chittister, *Heart of Flesh, A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1998), 175.

CHAPTER FOUR

Research Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I outline the qualitative research methodology used in this research action in ministry by: 1) defining qualitative research and my reasons for using this methodology; 2) describing my action in ministry, including the use of interviews to gather the data; 3) explaining how I recorded and analyzed the data; 4) outlining the criteria used for validating the data and analysis; 5) describing the synthesis process used for interpretation of the data; and describing the commentary undertaken and my recommendations for ministry.

1. Qualitative research

Qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning behind the experience of the person/persons involved in the research. In my case the experiences of the women who participated in this study are central to the research. Qualitative research seeks to understand and to find meaning within the participant's experience. I also chose the qualitative research method because I am interested in comprehending the meaning of my ministry by understanding the meaning of the experience of hope in those with whom I minister. Researchers, Larry VandeCreek, Hillary Bender and Merle Jordan identify the rationale of qualitative research: "The mission of the qualitative researcher is to discover the experience of another person and understand the meaning which that person accords

to that experience.”³⁶³ Qualitative research looks for meaning from human behavior that arises from the subject’s experience and place of reference. I was specifically interested in understanding how religious education nurtures hope among women at *Our Place*. From this research I will have a better sense of how a faith community such as the women’s spirituality gathering at *Our Place* can nurture hope.

2. The action in ministry

The main purpose of this research was to answer the question: how does adult religious education nurture hope among the women at *Our Place* who participated in the women’s spirituality gathering. In order to determine this, it was necessary for me to understand how the women experienced hope in their lives and what hope meant to them. Taped interviews with five women who were members of *Our Place* and who had participated in the women’s spirituality gathering were the basis of the data collection.

I invited participants I felt would be able to communicate their story and enter into dialogue about their experience of hope. In making the choice I spoke to each individual personally. My main criteria for choosing interviewees was that they be members of *Our Place* women’s spirituality gathering, which meant that they have lived with some type of mental illness. I wanted to have as large a pool of possible participants as possible.

As I noted in Chapter 2, the size and shape of the spirituality gathering differed each week. Some women were regular participants whereas others came sporadically; some only once. Consequently, the experience the participants had of the women’s spirituality gathering varied considerably. I also thought there would be women who

³⁶³ Larry VandeCreek, Hilary Bender, and Merle R. Jordan, *Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling*,

would not want to be interviewed. I found this true, as some of the women I asked declined.

The time required for each interview process proved to be much longer than projected in my timeline. On several occasions, the person I had arranged to interview did not show up. Other interviews had to be rescheduled because the participant was not feeling well. There were times when I was concerned that I would not be able to obtain the interviews I required for this study. As it turned out, I eventually was able to interview the five women I had asked.

The questions I prepared for the interview were open-ended in order to facilitate dialogue and reflection. Each participant received a copy of the questions one-week prior to the interview.³⁶⁴ I did this in order to give the participants time to read over the questions and to ask for any necessary clarification. When I distributed the questions, I also reminded participants of the reason I was doing this study and why I had asked them to be involved. I also explained that if they wished they could use art as a medium through which to express their experience of hope.

The interviews began with a “catching up” time, which gave the participant a chance to enter in the interview process slowly. Before I began taping the interview, we spent time reviewing the purpose of the research, the questions for the interview and the consent form.³⁶⁵ I then described the interview process, explaining that they were free to speak as much or as little as they wanted on each question. I also indicated that they were free to refuse to answer a question and that they could stop the interview at any

Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches (Journal of Pastoral Care Publishing, Inc. 1994), 99.

³⁶⁴ See Appendix C for the questions.

³⁶⁵ See Appendix A for the Consent Form.

time. I explained that I might ask further questions for clarification and better understanding of their response. They were free to ask questions at any point in the interview. None of the participants chose the use of art as a way of expressing their experience of hope.

As noted earlier, I chose this method of data collection in which I could interact with the participants because I wanted to understand their experience of hope from within their story. In this way, we were co-researchers. The participant's story is the medium from which data are gathered. Daniel Levinson³⁶⁶ describes how the interviewee and interviewer work together:

A biographical interview combines aspects of a research interview, a clinical interview and a conversation between friends. It is like a structured research interview in that certain topics must be covered, and the main purpose is research. As a clinical interview, the interviewer is sensitive to the feelings expressed, and follows the threads of meaning as they lead through diverse topics. Finally, as in a conversation between friends, the relationship is equal and the interviewer is free to respond in terms of his own experience. Yet each party has a defined role in a sustained work task, which imposes its own constraints.

This was true in my interviews with the five women from *Our Place*.³⁶⁷

Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna note the importance of voices from the margins:

"Research from the margins requires intersubjectivity: an authentic dialogue between all participants in the research process in which all are respected as equally known subjects."³⁶⁸ As indicated earlier, the subjects of these interviews are, in many ways, women at the margins of our society.

³⁶⁶ Levinson's description of a biographical research interview is relevant for my research. Daniel J. Levinson, *Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 15.

³⁶⁷ It was possible for the interviews to proceed in this manner because of the experiences and the knowledge I have in gained facilitating small groups, active listening and spiritual direction.

³⁶⁸ Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna, *Experience, Research, Social Change, Methods from the Margins* (Toronto, ON: Garamond Press, 1989), 129.

The interviewer's role is to listen attentively and invite further questions for reflection, to obtain a deeper understanding of the women's experience. Although I offered questions and/or comments to help the participant give a more coherent or fuller account of her story, the interview was conversational; a dialogue with the participant. I also consciously affirmed the value of what she was saying. Dialogue is essential for women who often have not been valued and whose stories have not been validated by others. Recognizing that some women would have difficulty articulating their experience, I was particularly careful to allow an adequate amount of time for each interview. We also had conversations between questions that were sometime unrelated to the topic but which helped the women to relax and to speak spontaneously.³⁶⁹

All but one of the interviews took place on the premises of *Our Place*. Because of illness of one of the participants we agreed to hold the interview at her home. Each interview, of approximately sixty to ninety minutes in length was audio taped. At the end of each interview I explained that there would be the possibility of an optional follow-up interview if I felt I needed more information.

3. Analysing the data

The specific steps used in analysing the data are:

- Immediately following each interview I wrote a description of what had happened in the interview, including my own feelings and thoughts.
- I transcribed and read all recorded interviews in their entirety.
- I extracted significant statements about hope from each participant, paying attention to phrases and words of despair, pain and suffering

³⁶⁹ Nelle Morton speaks of an ability to articulate which is the result of being listened to. She talks about a person being heard into speech: "A hearing engaged in by the whole body that evokes speech—a new speech—a new creation. The woman had been heard to her own speech." Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 128.

which could be possible indicators of the need for hope or descriptions of hope.

- I formulated these statements into meanings, which were clustered into themes or meaning units for each interviewee.
- I also included those statements that are different from the common themes and gave them recognition and value.
- I integrated the individual narratives into an overall narrative description of the interview context in which I reflected on the diversity of perspectives in the interview as well as areas of dissonance and contrast.
- In the narrative I described what happened in the interview in terms of the person's description of her experience and included verbatim examples of these experiences.
- The narrative included to some degree my reflections on the experience and interpretation of the material.

In the analysis, I construct an overall description of the meaning and the essence of the experience of hope as I heard it expressed by the participants.³⁷⁰ The data is presented in terms of the themes identified, beginning with the themes held in common by the participants. Later I present themes that arise from their dreams. In the analysis I use the participants own words as much as possible.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ The methodology employed here is phenomenology. Creswell describes the specific steps of analysis as follows:

1. The researcher first reads all descriptions in their entirety.
2. The author then extracts significant statements from each description.
3. These statements are formulated into meanings, and these meanings are clustered into themes.
4. The researcher integrates these themes into a narrative description.

John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, Choosing Among Five Traditions* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 32.

³⁷¹ VandeCreek, Hilary Bender and Merle R. Jordan, *Research in Pastoral Care and Counselling, Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*, 115. See also Kirby and McKenna, *Experience, Research, Social Change, Methods from the Margins*. Kirby and McKenna talk about the voices from the margins as being central: "When managing and analyzing the data, this means that priority will be given to the voices from the margins." p. 129.

4. Validating the data

As a measure by which to validate my work I drew from the criteria as outlined by D. E. Polkinghorne.³⁷² He developed the following questions to examine the validity of a phenomenological study. I have used them to examine and validate my data:

1. Did I influence the contents of the subjects' descriptions in such a way that the descriptions do not truly reflect the subjects' actual experience?
2. Is the transcription accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation in the interview?
3. In the analysis of the transcriptions, were there conclusions other than those offered by the researcher that could have been derived? Have I identified these alternatives?
4. Is it possible to go from the general structural description to the transcriptions and to account for the specific contents and connections in the original examples of the experience?
5. Is the structural description situation specific, or does it hold in general for the experience in other situations?³⁷³

In the process of validating this research I responded to each of these questions as follows:

1. In my analysis it is evident that many of the women have been influenced by the content and process of the women's spirituality gathering. It is also apparent that they look to me as a mentor, a spiritual companion and someone formally related to the institutional church and to whom they can turn. Nevertheless both in the Spirituality gathering and in the interviews, in particular, the women were free to speak honestly and openly and say it like it was.
2. I transcribed each interview myself. This helped to assure the accuracy as well as give me the opportunity to "hear" their oral presentation.
3. My focus for these interviews was on hope and in the interpretation I stayed close to the questions I posed to the women. I did not utilize the extraneous material from the extended conversations in which we sometimes engaged during the interview.

³⁷² Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, Choosing Among Five Traditions*, 208. Creswell draws on the works of Polkinghorne who finds validity in how well the study is grounded and supported. A question Polkinghorne asks is, "Does the general structural description provide an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that are manifest in the examples collected?"

³⁷³ Ibid., 208.

4. Yes, as the analysis is supported by direct quotations from the participants.
5. My ministry at *Our Place* took place over the last three years. The interviews are a window on this experience. Further study would need to be done to see whether or not my findings could be generalized to another situation without such intentional ministry over a longer period of time.

Using these criteria for validation, I found my data to be accurate.

5. Major findings

In this section I reflect on the interview content and recorded experiences of the participants. Using the themes identified in the analysis I bring them into dialogue with my research on Christian feminist liberation theologies and religious education with adults. It became clear to me that a programme of adult religious education based on the insights of Christian feminist liberation theologians will foster experiences of community, relationship with God and other supportive relationships. These are essential factors in nurturing hope for women at *Our Place*.

6. Commentary

In the commentary I revisited Harris' model of faith community and shared the insights and wisdom I gleaned from this research. I also identified ways in which the community could better nurture hope in others. Finally, I revisit the material to look at the implications of this research for others engaged in similar practices of ministry.

CHAPTER FIVE

Writing the Stories of Hope

Introduction

This chapter contains the analysis of the interviews with the five women who participated in this research. I will begin with a description of the interview setting, followed by an overview of the participants. The analysis section begins with five common themes: 1) hope is concrete and hope is realized in life; 2) hope is something you work at; 3) hope is connected with faith and God; 4) hope grows and is nourished by the support of others; and 5) to hope is to share your hope and to help others to hope. The common themes are followed by: 6) minor themes; and 7) images of God. All of the themes identified are presented from the perspective of the participants.

1. Interview setting

All but one of the five interviews took place in the chapel on the premises of *Our Place*. As mentioned earlier, the other interview was conducted at her request in the home of the participant because of health issues. I chose *Our Place* as a setting for the interviews because it was a neutral environment and one with which the participants were familiar. The chapel is one of the few private places in which to meet at *Our Place*. As it is close to the main public meeting area the chapel is often noisy. Sometimes we were interrupted during the interview. Although a more private space would have been ideal, there was not one available. Because I was aware of the possibility that the noise might be distracting or that we might be interrupted, I advised the interviewees beforehand of

these facts and encouraged them to take their time. I do not think that the noisy environment compromised any of the interviews.

2. The participants

It would seem appropriate at this point to write biographical sketches of the women who participated in this research. I have reflected over this fact in light of what I know of the women and their stories. I concluded that to write a biographical sketch of these women on an individual basis would jeopardize the anonymity that I promised them. As I heard each story, sometimes in bits and pieces. I could see that its retelling was usually painful for the interviewee, I was aware of the need to honour their privacy. Therefore, the names I use are fictional. In the analysis, snippets of each story are included in the context of the themes I have identified. This gives the reader some information about the participant yet respects the privacy of each woman.

I begin with an overview of what I see these women sharing in common. I have come to know the women I interviewed, as well as other women at *Our Place*, from what I have gleaned from the experiences they have shared with me personally or shared during the women's spirituality gathering.³⁷⁴ The most significant reality they have in common is their struggle to live with mental health issues.

The side-effects of medication that some people have to take can have a significant impact on their lives and how they handle daily life tasks. Difficulties and complications with medication seem to be a constant battle. Another seemingly constant conflict is with the mental health system and the availability or lack of availability of therapy and therapists. How each person experiences therapy, and whether or not she

finds it helpful, is an issue that often comes up. Another frequent concern is the lack of time the therapist or doctor has for them. Some expressed the problems they had with their therapists as relational issues having to do with personalities and expectations. In the women's spirituality gatherings, many women focused on problems of relationships not only with therapists but also with friends, families and other acquaintances. Another frequent conversation has to do with their struggles related to a poor self-image. Almost all of the women were victims of abuse. Each woman lived with a great deal of suffering yet each had a sense of knowing there was something more to life. They had hope.

B. Analysis

Introduction

The initial analysis of the material gathered from the interviews begins with the data as presented by the participants. The analysis was done from the perspective of the participants as they responded to the questions about their experience of hope.³⁷⁴ Five major themes emerged from each woman's experience and understanding of hope. Although other data are available from all participants, I chose selectively those statements I felt spoke most clearly of hope. The strength of each person's participation varied according to her personality and life experience. I have identified the major themes:

- 1) Hope is concrete and hope is realized in life.

³⁷⁴ Although this is the formal name for the women's group I also use the name "women's gathering" or simply "gathering" interchangeably.

³⁷⁵ I have included participants quotes from the interview. These quotes are not edited but inserted as they were recorded.

- 2) Hope is something you work at.
- 3) Hope is connected with faith and God.
- 4) Hope grows and is nourished by the support of others.
- 5) To hope is to share your hope and to help others find hope.

In the following pages, I look at each of the five themes as they are expressed in the interviews. Although the themes may be common, they are experienced differently and even expressed differently by each woman. In writing of these themes, I sought to retain the uniqueness of each woman so that as far as possible the themes are expressed through their life experience. I then noted other experiences and understandings of hope that were unique and not expressed by all the participants. Finally, I identified the images of God that were expressed in the interviews because they are important in understanding the person's articulation of God and their interpretation of their experience of God.

1. Hope is concrete and hope is realized in life.

For these women, hope was often expressed as something experienced in their life in a concrete way; something which they recognized. This meant that hope was not just some fuzzy concept or idea. Hope was real. It would seem that hope as a concrete experience in the lives of these women is a fundamental way of knowing for them. Eve expresses what hope means to her:

My hope is knowing that always knowing now no matter what, I have something to do. No matter how miserable I might feel and if I get depressed or anything like that I know that tomorrow that there is stuff there and there is something for me and there is something for me to do that is important and it is going to be good and not just for me but it is going to be helping someone else. I concentrate on the fact that I am not here just for me but that I am here for other people.

For Eve hope meant knowing that she would be better, that her times of suffering would not last. Knowing she would be better was enough to help her get through the difficult times. Despite wanting to die during difficult bouts of depression, Eve remembered just how powerful it was for her to know that things would be better. It was also clear that her hope had to do with having a purpose in life. The hope that she expresses to others and the hope that others have expressed to her, give her a sense that she is not alone and that she has something to live for.

Betty has a similar understanding of hope, “Like in your life that there is hope. No matter what there is always that hope that you can grasp on to...” When Betty spoke of hope in this way, she was talking of her struggles with depression. For her hope meant that there was new medication for her depression from which she would have few or no side effects. Sometimes it meant that the depression had passed. Betty speaks passionately of a time in her life when her depression was relieved by medication and she experienced a sense of new life. She remembers:

It was just as if I had been asleep, and they gave me a new medication and I was just I came alive. It was like I was asleep for years and I had no opinions, like I began to express myself and I am still coming together after this major medication change.

The new medication and the feeling that life had been returned to her were significant moments in her life. Betty did not see them as simply something that happens in life. For her, there was now something more, an experience of hope.

In speaking about her experience of hope, Betty also spoke about painful and broken relationships. She remembers one in particular where there was a reconciliation and the friendship was regained. For Betty, this too was an experience of hope. There were other times when, though the relationships were not resolved, Betty was able to

understand why there was no reconciliation. She spoke about the learning that took place for her in these broken relationships. These experiences were reminders for Betty that there is a possibility for something new to be born. Believing that there was something beyond the difficulties of the moment that she could count on, and remembering these experiences, help Betty to be hopeful.

Anne and Carol also spoke about their concrete experience of hope. When Anne spoke of hope, she remembered hope in terms of the times she had a problem solved or a difficult situation resolved. When I interviewed Anne, she was going through a difficult and painful time with her son. By talking about hope and remembering her experiences of hope, Anne felt more confident that this situation with her son might also be resolved. Carol too experiences hope in concrete ways. She spoke of hope in the present circumstances of her life. Carol lives with a depression that can be debilitating. There are days when she finds it utterly impossible to get out of bed. The temptation to stay home is great but she also knows it is unhealthy for her to stay in bed or to isolate herself at home. When she is with other people she is better able to cope with the depression. She would often tell us in the women's spirituality gathering that she knew she had hope because she was able to get out of bed.

2. Hope is something you work at.

As the women spoke about their experiences of hope, they also talked about their need to work at hope. They worked at making things happen in their lives and at making hope possible. Carol talked about the importance of thinking in terms of helping herself:

...to work on myself to and to try and stay positive in what I do and just to have an understanding of myself what I am going through with depression and its hard to change, to change, to think positively. And, to just think

positively in my life. That is a struggle in itself to think positively about myself or to think positive thoughts. It is a great struggle because I tend to think negatively all the time and get to feel down all the time.

As difficult as it is, positive thinking has been helpful for Carol. It is constantly reinforced for her in therapy groups and by her doctor. Although the activity of positive thinking is helpful to Carol, she has also taken responsibility for doing things that will help her: "I have activities every night. I go out to just to keep myself busy and to keep myself going and not to be alone and not to be too depressed. Sometimes I have to force myself to go out and to be with people." Carol speaks of her activities and busyness as signs of hope. They reinforce her sense of hope.

Eve also talked about her experience of making an effort to do something when she is feeling low. She finds it much easier and tempting to stay depressed than to do something about it. It takes courage for Eve to hope and to do something about her feelings. She describes how she works at feeling good in the midst of depression:

I have a box I keep. I put all the cards that are positive in that people send me. I put one up on the wall. Cards like that has sayings that are encouraging, inspirational, that people have written and when I am feeling really yucky and I feel I have lost hope and there is nothing to live for and there is nothing I am here for I have to open that box and just start reading and looking for hope, looking at the front of the cards and looking at what they are saying, and it is not easy because I don't want to. I use every ounce of my badness or negativity to push it away but the more I keep it out and the more I keep looking at it the more I absorb it and it breaks the barrier because I think as human beings we are a funny lot because we can really, it is easier to feel depressed than to feel happy for some reason. I don't know why that it is. It is easier when you are down in the dumps and you are really down there. It is easier in the throws of depression. It is much easier to hang on to that to not go anywhere to think bad, negative, thoughts. It is so much work to actually have to feel hope to get yourself up and to say there is another tomorrow.

Making a choice to move beyond her depression was difficult for Eve because it meant change. She says, "I had to try and I could not say goodbye to pain and sorrow, it meant I had to embrace everything and get on with it. That is really hard to do and I did not really want to." This is only one of the strategies Eve uses to deal with depression and to work at hope. She also experiences hope as learning opportunities. She declares, "I think our hope is our smarts. Where we can sort of each time learn from our lessons and get a little smarter each time we use it."

Donna, who also struggles with feeling good about her self and feeling positive, also works at changing her thinking. Changing the way she thinks is her way of coping with depression as well as creating hope. Hope for Donna was not out of her reach. It was not just something that happened to her. Hope is something she actually does. She finds hope when she does something about her feelings or thinking. One way Donna sees herself as participating in creating hope is the growth work she does with her therapist. Donna expresses what this means for her, "Being able to write something down and keeping track and she [Donna's therapist] helps me get centered where I am at today because it is so easy to just give up." Strategies such as this are common among the women I interviewed. The choice to work on hope is sometimes a choice between life and death for these women.

3. Hope is connected with faith and God.

For most of the women, God was their source of hope. There was a common belief that the ability to know that things will be better has to do with believing in God. Ultimately God is the one who makes things better. To have hope means that you have faith, that you believe in God and that you know God will get you through.

This was true for Anne who understood hope as having faith, and this meant you could count on God. Anne learned from a very young age that hope came from God. She talked about praying to God for help during a time when she was abused. She believed that if she prayed to God, God would help her. She remembers,

And when I was growing up, when I prayed to God I prayed that the pains of being physical and sexually abused would go away someday. It would stop and want him(God), a side of me said give up and the other side no keep hope, keep praying to God that maybe one day it would end and I would be released, released from all this pain and suffering and yes praying to God for to be released one day helped and I am so grateful for that.³⁷⁶

Anne spoke of the importance of prayer, because prayer gave her some comfort. Although Anne still experiences pain from the abuse, she also has times where she feels release and strength, which she believes comes from God. In speaking of her present difficulty with her son she talks about the need to pray and to have faith that God will help her. Her faith strengthens her.

Eve can remember a time when she felt her hope began and where she first learned of God. It began when she was a young child. During an illness that confined her to her bed. Eve remembers sitting by her window and gazing out at a church. For some reason she felt attracted to the church and was very happy when her mother gave her permission to go to church. It was at the Sunday services that she remembers being introduced to God. She speaks fondly of these experiences:

That is where I first got my first introduction into God and where my hope first started and my real faith began. I would think about going to church and singing my songs and that was my hope and I got better. That was the beginning of where I learned hope. Singing and the attraction was the stories of Jesus and the songs, singing the words, they were my prayers and I understood them as such. I understood and I wanted, I was so

³⁷⁶ Bracketed information is my addition.

curious, and I wanted to know more and more about God and Jesus and the stories.

Eve's early experiences of God continue to stay with her today. Her love and desire for learning about God also continues to be very important. These earlier experiences of church are where her inner craving for God was awakened.

Eve understands this experience of her childhood as a natural sense, which children have about God. She states:

I think little children have a natural sense of, a natural strength from within them that God has given them before other things get in the way. I think I was a very damaged little girl when I first started out because I was so hurt by being given away, given up.

The experiences of abuse, abandonment and neglect got in the way of her childlike natural sense of God. She felt it important to be able to move beyond those experiences in order to regain a childhood innocence in regard to her relationship with God. Her relationship with God was important and she often spoke of the relationship as:

"...having a relationship with God and talking to God."

This desire for a relationship with God echoes in the lives of the other women. Betty spoke of feeling close to God. She said, "...just given those touches and glimpses of God, well, not touches, but just feeling him and wanting more, that there is hope for us all, for anyone." She felt Jesus was close to her and she could sometimes feel his presence. This sense of closeness was often a source of comfort for her, especially on the days when she felt bad. Sometimes Betty would use the story of Job as a way of expressing her understanding of God and God's working in her life. She spoke of Job's dilemma:

Well I know myself and God and our relationship. I am beginning to know it. I read part of Job, I forgot what I read, but God sent everything

his way or Satan is allowed to do things to Job and God allowed it but Job never gave up.

Like Job, Betty does not give up and she is determined to do what she believes God wants her to do. Understanding herself and her relationship with God in this way has not always been easy for Betty. She sometimes speaks of God as being demanding and distant.³⁷⁷ Mostly, however, Betty speaks about God as being active in her life and her constant companion.

For Donna, God was an important part of growing up and is still a central part of her family. She speaks of her family as being ‘good Roman Catholics,’ a reputation that she cannot live up to. She often feels guilty about this. Her childhood experiences of church were important to her faith, however, and she tries to remember these early days as a source of strength. When Donna speaks about God she speaks of God and her faith in ways that are probably a carry-over from her youth and catechism classes. She says such things as, “Jesus is my hope in times of my troubles and tribulations.” She also speaks longingly of wanting to be a prayerful person and to have a close relationship with God. When I asked her about the role God plays in her hope she says:

I rely on Jesus and cannot rely on myself. The scriptures too help me feel hope. Jesus is hope and works in our lives. ...to have some kind of faith; to have my faith strengthened to be hopeful. ...to live a life of prayer and being close to God. ...doing his will rather than my own will.

When Donna speaks of God and hope she also speaks of the relationship she sees others having with God. Her father’s faith was particularly important to her. At the same time such memories also awaken a sense of guilt.

³⁷⁷ At different times, Betty talks about God in this way. I look at images of God later in this chapter.

Carol also spoke of relying on God as her source of hope and remembers praying as a child and being close to Jesus. When I asked her what the relationship meant for her today, she says:

God is there for me. I always believed in God ever since I was a little kid and like I guess, so hope is Jesus helping me and then I do not feel helpless or hopeless.

Carol keeps faithful to a practice of faith that she finds supportive but also necessary for her mental health. She is faithful to attending the women's spirituality gathering and she also participates in many activities in her local parish. Besides the weekly Sunday service, Carol participates in a church bible study group and a charismatic group.

Eve talks about God as her teacher. God not only companions her in life, but she also sees her life as a school where she learns from God. She says:

I invented this, it is one of the hardest things to remember when you are feeling miserable to look for your gold star in God, I always find you wanted a gold star from your teacher. Well I look for a gold star from God because he is my teacher. I am not in school. Rather I am in school every day of my life and so I try to find one thing, whether its H. (Eve's cat) made a funny pose or whether the sun shone and made a rainbow. Yesterday my gold star from God is; I saw a enormous sunflower. Its brown part was bigger then my head and the yellow flower and it was strong on the stem. The stem was taller then me and the stem was so strong that even the largeness of the flowers head did not make it drop. So for me yesterday that was my star from God. Because I feel miserable at times and my hope is low and I need that star and that helps my hope each day but I have to look for it. I have to consciously be aware. It just doesn't pop into my head. I think I would be a saint if it did.

Eve often uses her imagination and creativity as a way of seeing God present in her everyday life. These are important activities for Eve for she often feels depressed. The activity of finding a gold star in God helps her to get through a bad day. It also reminds her that God is taking care of her.

Eve talked about God placing others in her life to help her, especially when she felt powerless or hopeless. She speaks of God intervening: “I felt that God had such a big part in my life because no matter how bad I get or how badly I behave, I feel he has intervened so much.” The experience of God sending people to help her is a central theme in Eve’s story. She notes this clearly:

But he [God] could give me that human being. But I always felt that God spoke through the people and gives them the knowledge to be able to help people in those moments. ...I can’t always, because I can’t see God. I think that is what I felt like at times. Where it was really bad I couldn’t see God. I couldn’t touch him. I knew he was there. I needed people to help me to feel hope. I needed people to be there to do that work, not just God.

Eve shared many stories of nurses, doctors, friends as well as strangers who helped her through difficult times and who gave her hope.

4. Hope is nurtured by others

Betty has found the support of other people crucial and a source of nurture for her hope. When I asked Betty what had nurtured her hope she spoke readily:

I guess my whole life. I have been lucky to meet—good people. When I was a little kid there was a lot of seniors in the area where I grew up. That was good for my self esteem. I learned from them. What I couldn’t learn from my family. There were people along the way. Psychiatric nurses and doctors, social workers and there was a woman I met, M. who challenged me about my suicide. She gave me love, she loved me. M. she loved us and it was so neat. And I was so glad to have her in my life. She was my hope, like she, I would go see her and talk about my problems, she would listen and talk to me. I shared some stuff with her and she was always there for me and I never knew anyone like her.

The relationship Betty had with M. has been very significant for her and has helped her to strive for wellness. A particularly important moment for Betty was shortly after she had attempted suicide. She visited M. who had just undergone extensive surgery for cancer.

Betty remembers that M. challenged her about taking her life while M. fought to save her own life. This was a turning point in Betty's life. She also remembers the many times M. lifted her spirits, gave her courage and helped her to go beyond her fears.

There were others as well who nurtured hope for Betty by the way they lived their faith. A Roman Catholic priest was particularly important for Betty. She says, "Father B. was there for me. He always came around when I needed help, you know. And even sometimes I would ask him different questions. Like, you know, he was there." Father B. would listen to her struggles and her questions. She talked appreciatively of Father B. acknowledging her faithfulness to daily mass when she was going through a long period of depression. This was important to Betty and she felt respected by Father B. who would often ask for her prayers. With people like Father B. and M., Betty felt accepted; they made no pretences, and neither did she feel she had to be anything but herself.

Eve also identified people in her life who were instrumental in nurturing her hope and helping her grow in self-confidence. She tells of one particular person:

I have a very special friend. Someone who has taught me a lot about hope. I think she is asking a similar question at some point because she is like you. She is very much into spirituality and she studied. She went to school like you. She was a lovely teacher, Miss B. and she was especially kind to me and always concerned about my health. And that gave me the love and the hope that I was still cared for. Someone was still looking out for me, caring for me, watching over me.

Eve appreciated the importance of Miss B's presence as a listener and someone who talked about the important things in life. She is a confidante for Eve. Sharing this experience during the interview brought to mind many good memories for Eve of people who have helped her. Eve's treasury of cards that cheer her up on bad days is another example of how important the support of others is for her.

Both Eve and Betty talked about an important aspect of their experience of support that is worth noting. They both identified the fact that they felt loved by these people. Betty spoke at length about the love she experienced:

M. challenged me about my suicide she gave me love, she loved me. ...M. was more like a mature women and she knew what she was doing, and she was giving her love. She showed me was her love. And her nurturing of me, she knew what she was doing, she knew I needed it and she gave it to me. Although my mother was generous to me too. But my mother, when I was a kid showed love by giving us cakes and chocolate bunnies and stuff like that, fattening food. But love is, it is something about love.

It was because Betty felt loved by M. that she was able to work on her own growth. M. was particularly significant during some of her worst times of depression. Betty recognized M.'s love and she learned to accept it. In turn, she started to be more conscious of working on herself. The unconditional love that she received from M. has helped Betty to ponder God's unconditional love for her.³⁷⁸

Eve's experience of support from others was also validated by the love she felt. Her experience was deepened by Miss B. who not only nurtured her hope but who loved her. Miss B. asked Eve where she had learned to love. This was a significant moment for Eve and she remembers well:

...where did you learn love? She said with all you went through in your life; I was molested by my brother, my adopted brother, and in an abusive family. I survived that but she said where through all this, having survived three more instances of rape since then. and she said with all that how can you still love and experience hope with all that having happened to you. Someone must have loved you so much at some point to teach you how to do it. And I have tried to think, to think, who was there in my life, who taught me about love and about hope.

³⁷⁸ In the spirituality gathering, I emphasized God's unconditional love for us. Several times I have heard Betty refer to my teachings and I try to affirm an understanding of God's love as unconditional for her. I will write more of this when I look at the images of God that surfaced in the interviews.

After much reflection, Eve was able to finally identify a childhood friend. What she remembers of this relationship besides the times they played together was that for some reason she knew that he loved her. Miss B. in helping Eve to remember her experience of love, helped Eve to acknowledge her own ability to love. She realized from her experience of feeling loved that she was able to give and receive love despite all she had been through in her life.

All of the women who participated in the study spoke of the importance of another person's support in nurturing hope. Anne, who had recently experienced a death in her family, spoke of the support of her family and of the people at *Our Place* who helped her through many difficult days. They were there to listen to her and to support her when she needed it most. Consequently, this helped her to hope and to believe that healing was possible. In the women's spirituality gathering Anne also experienced support. She was able to talk about her experiences of abuse and to receive support from the other women there. Anne experienced acceptance from the women and felt she was listened to, "they heard my pain." She recognized that these opportunities to share were important to her in the healing process.

The women's spirituality gathering served to nurture hope. The women stressed the importance of having a safe place to share things about their lives and to talk openly about things that were important to them. For Donna, the support of other women was important and helped her to focus in the midst of her chaotic life: "...having your group and other Catholic groups, get support from other people and try to live in somewhat chaos with my life, and things coming up from my past." The recent death in her immediate family contributed to her sense of total chaos. The times when she could find

quiet and peace were critical for her. Sometimes she found this in the women's spirituality gathering.

Carol talked about the importance of the women's spirituality gathering to her well being and felt she needed this space. Her experience was also somewhat mixed. The women's spirituality gathering is one of the activities that she has committed herself to as a motivation to leave her apartment. In the gathering, she has felt the support and care of others and at the same time often struggled to entrust her experience to the group. She said:

Yes it is helpful to share. That would be helpful, but I don't like to get anyone else feeling depressed. I feel like I am intruding on someone else's feeling. Like most of the time I keep my feelings to myself and it is not good to not express my feelings. I do this a lot and I do not express my feeling. Hope is a feeling and I guess it is a feeling I need to express more. I don't think about it too often but maybe it is a good idea that I do. It would give me encouragement. You help each other with your experiences. you talk about your experiences and what has helped you overcome your depression. I think sharing is a big part of encouragement, to encourage each other is a big part of giving you hope because someone may suggest something and you never thought of it before and it might help you.

It was difficult for Carol to share for she did not want to make others feel depressed with her problems. At the same time, she recognized the importance of sharing her experience both for herself and for others. When Carol spoke in the group, she would often encourage others and she frequently spoke of the significance of God in her life.

Carol's struggles with the gathering were not only related to a reluctance to share but at times she found it difficult to hear another person's struggles. Carol recalled these times:

Sometimes it is hard to listen to people because sometimes I feel so down I can only hear myself thinking. My thoughts are so overwhelming. I get

caught in my thoughts and its hard to sit still sometimes, I get restless and I make an effort to come out each week to be part of the group to be here.

Carol's struggles, however, did not stop her from coming. When she found the conversations too difficult, she would leave the room but she would always come back.

Betty also found that the support of the women in the spirituality gathering nurtured her hope. Although Betty mostly liked to listen and did not always share during the gathering, she would often speak to me personally about the experience, sharing her reflection that she continued after the gathering. If she was dealing with a personal difficulty, she would talk about how the other women helped or challenged her. At the same time Betty found an important space where she could sometimes risk sharing. She states:

I collect what we have on Tuesdays and I put it away and I wrote on it Sister Gertie's spiritual group of hope. And that was hope to me, the group, hope that I could share with people and learn more. I guess it is being with women who are looking for something too, looking for answers, looking for their hope.

The need to share with other women and with like-minded people was important for Betty. So were the opportunities to pray together and to share faith together.

For Eve a safe space to share with others was also important. Eve not only appreciated the time to be together but she also saw this as significant support for her faith life and her mental health. She had to make an effort to leave her apartment and to be with people. She spoke fondly of what the women's spirituality gathering meant for her:

...to know that we had this spiritual group happening there, that in itself gave me hope. ... I liked the songs that we sang and listening to the others and finding out their feelings and to hear someone else's struggle gave me a lot of hope. To know I have come as far as I have come and that I could say something else to them to give them some kind of help as

well and that was really nice. I really enjoyed that. I found people had a different look on their face, just by being in there and for myself I had something new when I went. Something that would help me get through another day, another moment and there is hope in that. I think that happens when you go to church as well.

The experience of the women's gathering for Eve was similar to what she sometimes experienced in her church congregation. Over the years, Eve has not always been able to find a congregation where she felt welcome and at home. In the women's spirituality gathering she had felt accepted and welcome.

Faith sharing in the gathering was another means of nurturing hope. It met their desire to pray with others and recognized their need for prayer. For Carol, it was meaningful to hear from others about their relationship with God or how they understood God. She said, "...can hear from someone else about God and how they feel." Donna spoke of praying with the women as a way by which she experienced hope. She was able to take these positive feelings away with her. She also found the time together helped her to be centred. She states:

The feedback from other women, the commonality and likeness and just for life. I am able to take something with me and keep and hold on to that. And try and get a focus on the inner self. As opposed to the external as if everything is going on out there. And it is good because I actually feel more centred when I do that.

Donna was able to use the group as a time to focus on what was happening in her life. She found this of particular significance as she dealt with the grief of her daughter's death.

For many, the gathering satisfied a basic need to be with others and the need for significant people in their lives. When asked what nurtured her hope, Donna responded

simply, “to have friends.” The importance of people in Eve’s life was particularly poignant when she was not able to help herself. She notes:

You know when I was suicidal and I lost all hope she came into my life and it was like I was always caught. There was always someone else there who spoke to me of hope. She could give me that as a human being she could give me that, a human being.

Eve experienced support and help from people during her rough times. She made an effort at seeking out people to be with because she knew it was important to her health as well as her growth. She found:

I could sit in this apartment day in and day out and my growth would probably not happen. I have to leave here but it is a scary thing at times when you do. And I may not feel like going out or seeing someone else or working on my spirituality and the hope or anything. And yet when I do that it is what happens. And you always have more to say to God when you have more contacts.

Contact with others meant that Eve’s life was more interesting; she needed relationships. This was important enough for Eve that she would reach beyond her fears to meet people. She also felt that being with other people helped her feel more connected with God. People helped her to learn about herself and to learn more about God.

5. Hope needs to be shared with others

In general, there was an overall feeling that hope was not just for oneself but needed to be shared with others. When a person shared her hope with others, she also grew stronger. Eve notes what it means to her to share hope: “Sharing hope could give someone else hope, it’s an opportunity to use your hope, for someone else or for yourself to get stronger.” Eve believes that the purpose of her life is to help others. Her experience with others who have given her hope helps Eve to identify her purpose in life. She states:

By helping someone else I concentrate on the fact that I am not here just for me but that I am here for other people. And I am here to help and I am here to help through my stories that I tell. And through my own experiences I have given other people hope as well. It is to be shared.

Eve helps others to be hopeful through her stories. Sometimes she would use stories of her life to assist another person who was struggling. At other times, she would tell about her gold star from God. She believes that people need to know that they are not alone and that others have similar experiences that they can use to help them deal with their 'stuff.' It was also evident to Eve that sharing her knowledge and hope was helpful to the other women.

The need to share hope was also important for Betty. Much like Eve, Betty also discovered that when she shared her hope or helped others she too grew in hope. She states:

I get hope in helping other people. Like it makes me feel good. So I guess helping someone else either in their job or otherwise. Like I have worked with physically disabled people and that is something I have always wanted to do. I guess helping other people gives me hope.

Betty often spoke of how important it was for her as a Christian to help others. When Betty reaches out to others she believes she was doing what God wants her to do with her life. Betty feels God is calling her and she often questions what this call means. Mostly, she believes God was calling her to help others.

6. Minor themes

In addition to the major themes identified above, there are other experiences and understandings of hope that emerged from the interviews. When I asked the women to dream of what hope would look like I received interesting and varied responses. For Anne, the dream was for healing in significant relationships. Carol also dreamed of

healing for her depression and for the negative thoughts that flooded her mind. For Donna it meant having the opportunity to spend time in nature where she had often known peace and tranquillity. For Eve it meant a safe environment and the security of a home where she could be confident of staying and not have to worry about moving again. She wants to “have a home to call my own.” Eve also dreamed of healing painful memories.

When Betty talked of her dream of hope she looked for a world in which we would be “manna” for each other; that is, we would feed one another with love and support. She also spoke of another dream in which all people were equal. She dreams:

I would like to believe, even though it is a Christian belief, that we are all equal. I believe that now, that we are all equal. No matter if you rich, poor, middle class or whatever, we are all equal. My husband has this arm with polio and I have never looked at him other than see him as a whole person. His right side never bothered me. I never looked at him other than being a whole person and that is the way I look at people. We are all equal. I believe that life in the world would be so much better if were all equal in the whole world. There would be no wars, no poor people. It would be God’s creation. It would be as he wanted it to be, peace in the world. And I think that it would be a wonderful thing if we could.

I have heard this dream of Betty’s at other times. It is important to her because she knows the experience of being marginalized. She has spoken of her experience of marginalization as a woman and a mental health patient. Betty remembers God’s promises of the fullness of life for all people and these promises resonate within her.

When Eve spoke of her experience of hope she often began with an experience of losing hope. During the times when she had lost hope, she felt she was unable to go on and that she had lost her way: “I had lost my way at time where I couldn’t find, I couldn’t find any hope.” It was during those times that she had attempted to take her life. On one occasion, she remembers, she was angry with God and felt God, like her mother, had

deserted her. However, each time that Eve lost her hope, there was always someone there to help her. She believes God is responsible for sending their help. At the same time, she believes that losing hope and regaining hope were learning opportunities. She says:

I think our hope is our smarts. Where we can sort of each time learn from our lessons and get a little smarter each time we use it. And to get out of a particular difficult situation and hopefully to help others get out of there particular situation through. So sharing your hope and that is why it is important to share your hope.

As difficult as these times may have been for Eve, she has learned how to use them in a positive way.

7. Images of God

The images that participants connect with God help me to understand how they relate to God. I often heard Carol speak of God as powerful and demanding. In the interview she spoke of God in this way:

I go to church almost every Friday and I come here to the spiritual group at *Our Place*. I go to a service on Saturday nights too and sometime I have to force myself to be mindful of God, to remember God is all encompassing and that he is the one that is my guide and protector and helping me through the day. ...my higher power as they say in AA, and to surrender to God and to let God be the manager. Instead of me taking control of my life, to let God take control of my life and everything according to God's will.

At the same time she also speaks of God as protector and, sometimes, her source of help. She says: "I really try to rely on God to help me because I don't know any other way." Carol believes that only God will get her through her times of depression. She moves back and forth between a God who demands her submission and a God that can heal her. At times, Carol feels that because she is unable to let God control her life, she is to blame when God does not help her.

Donna's image of God echoes back to her early childhood and her Roman Catholic upbringing. During the interview she often spoke of working at being close to God. She feels guilty for the times when she felt she ignored God in her life. Donna also spoke of being afraid of God, "I was very scared of God." Her fear of God is gradually changing. She is learning in the woman's spirituality gathering about God's unconditional love and, in turn, is unlearning the punishing God of her childhood. She describes this struggle:

...God within me and the big white God in the sky, there is a fight between. it is confusing. try to believe that God loves me but the back and forth – so I just stop and breathe and remember – teaching in the group about a God that loves us and does not judge us.

Carol also believes the 'big white God in the sky' is judging and demanding. This image of God and God's demands on her has often resulted in feelings of guilt. This was particularly true when Carol would do things for herself. Taking care of herself translated for Carol into acts of selfishness that were unchristian.

Anne often spoke about God intervening for her when times were difficult. God had the power to change things and could change things. She talked about praying for God's help. When her son injured his arm and there was a possibility of extensive nerve damage, Anne prayed to God for her son's healing. She remembers this time:

I just could not believe he would not be able to use his fingers and uh, and I prayed to God. I pray to God that the bulk of the nerve damage could be healed so he could get the use of those two fingers and I guess they did; he healed. I was so glad, I said to God, oh God thank you that it wasn't, because I thought it was a lot worse than it was, and it was 50% damage to the nerve and tendon. These two fingers were damaged and he got it all back.

She believed God was responsible for his healing. There were other similar experiences in Anne's life that were affirmations for her of God's ability to change things and make them better.

Betty often spoke about her "vocation" and wanting to be attentive to what God wants her to do. During the interview Betty again spoke of God:

God works in everyone's life but differently and he calls, some people are called to do something for him but if he has something for me to do even if it is giving out rosaries or giving out communion. I would like him to show me what he wants me to do and even if he doesn't do that I wouldn't uphold that I would just know part of it then I am satisfied.

For Betty this type of conversation with God is ongoing. God journeys with her. She struggles to know what God is asking of her: "I know God hasn't given up on me but I don't know what he wants me to do and I am going to start praying for my vocation and whatever he wants me to do I will do for him."

Betty also speaks of God as both loving and punishing her. She says, "I believe he loves me and I believe when I sin he is greatly disturbed by it." When I asked her to what she meant by this she spoke of God being unhappy with her because of her unfaithfulness and sinfulness. Betty also desires to learn more about God and God's unconditional love. She spoke of God's unconditional love:

...sometimes I do believe that as much as he loves us unconditionally I still I have that little if I do something wrong, I am trying to get rid of that. [here Betty demonstrates God's thumb crushing her]. Like what I am learning from you is that God does not punish us and he forgives us and wants us to be happy and that he loves us even, he loves us unconditionally, I still have to learn that I am beginning to feel it, feel it bit by bit, not an angry God and he wants the best for us as his children and that is what I am learning from you in our group.

The struggle goes on for Betty to believe that God loves her unconditionally and does not want to punish her. Remembering M.'s love is helping Betty to realize the possibility of God's unconditional love.

Eve's narrative is filled with many images of God. I have chosen only a few of these images. I would describe Eve's primary image of God as relational. Eve often talks about her dialogues with God. She says: "I talked to God a lot as a child" and she continues to speak with God today. She speaks to God with gratitude for what God has done in her life:

I was talking to God telling God what a wonderful thing that had happened to me, I got a family which I wanted and you gave it to me. I wanted a mother and father. I just wanted somewhere I could belong and you gave it to me.

Although gratitude underlies much of Eve's conversations with God, she also talks with God about her pain and struggles. There are times she expresses her anger with God over the loss of her family, "...angry at God for my life being so miserable, not giving me a family or giving and then taking away. Took away one thing I wanted most – a family."

When Eve speaks of losing hope, she sometimes sees her loss of hope as an imperfection: "...not perfect, God wants me to be perfect and if I were perfect I would not lose hope even for a minute, to lose hope is to lose faith." Eve also sees God as her teacher on her journey of life. God uses her life experiences as opportunities to teach. God is also gentle, "I knew there was only one gentle creature and that was God." God is also her teacher. God is not only a constant companion but also a respondent in difficult times. "God had such a big part in my life because no matter how bad I get or how badly I behave, I feel he has intervened so much."

Conclusion

In this analysis, common themes were used as a way of story-ing each woman's experience of hope. I have also included some of the other themes that were not shared by all of the participants. These women's images of God provide yet another important aspect of how hope functions in their lives. There is clear evidence from the sharing of these women that they are women who live with hope. It is also evident that the women's experience of the spirituality gathering has contributed a great deal to nurturing their hope.

CHAPTER SIX

Understanding the Experience of Hope

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented an analysis of the material from the interviews with the participants. In this chapter I bring this material into critical dialogue with the theoretical and theological framework from Christian feminist liberation theology and adult religious education discussed in Chapter 3, incorporating my own experience and knowledge of each theme as they relate to: experience of hope, women's spirituality, faith community, experience of survival, and liberative pedagogy.³⁷⁹ As in the previous chapter, I consider each theme individually. I then identify major findings and the impact for the women's spirituality gathering. I conclude this chapter with the implications of this research for church and society.

A. Synthesis

1. Hope is concrete and hope is realized in life.

As the women shared their experiences of hope as an inner way of knowing and as a reality that they knew concretely in their lives, I wondered if this inner knowing was innate or if hope is something learned. Gebara discusses this when she writes about our innate human quality as having an unquenchable thirst for a hope-filled future.³⁸⁰ The

³⁷⁹ Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation, A Handbook for Community Workers*, Book 1 (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1991). Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation, A Handbook for Community Workers*, Book 2 (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1991). Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation, A Handbook for Community Workers*, Book 3 (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1991). This series of books describe a process of liberation for communities and peoples who live with oppression.

³⁸⁰ Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for Poor Women," 142.

interviewees confidence of their hope being fulfilled supports what Gebara says. I wonder if life is possible without hope? This was certainly a need in the lives of some of the women I interviewed. Eve often wanted to die, yet during the interview she remembered how significant hope had been for her on several occasions. It saved her life. By remembering experiences of hope, she was able to remember that this present pain would pass and that her life was worthwhile. It seemed important to name the experience as hope rather than simply something that happened by chance because it enabled the women to gain strength from the experience. An experience that was mere chance would not have such power. Hope gave them power. We see the power of hope at work, as the women were able to draw strength from the experiences. When Betty named her experience as hope she gained strength because for her it was an affirmation that God was present to her.

A faith community is essential. It serves to concretize the experience of God and of hope for the community. Harris speaks of the faith community as primarily functioning to live out the reality of God's reign in the world.³⁸¹ The community, through its life, teaches its members to live as in the reign of God, that is, the reign of God as realized now, although not completely. The community, through its curriculum, teaches God's reign and enables the changes that are necessary to create the reign of God in the world today. The sole purpose of religious education, in this context, is to teach the reality of God's reign and God's saving work in the world, so as to help people recognize God's presence in the world. When the women talked about their hope, realized in concrete life experiences, they were experiencing God's saving work in the world. Although this was not explicitly articulated, the women intuited from their

experiences of hope that God desired good for them. The work of the faith community is to build on and to deepen this inner knowing.

Just as Third World women give us much to sing and dance about as they take ownership of their spirituality so do the women I interviewed. Their hope is repeatedly expressed and concretized in their ability and desire to choose life even in the midst of death. It is a living hope that has enabled them to take responsibility for their lives. By refusing to be victims they are saying “yes” to things that give them life. This makes their hope real. Both Eve’s and Carol’s experiences of hope arise out of the difficult times in their lives. With hope they have been able to continue living, even in the midst of darkness and suffering. Many of the Third World Christian feminist theologians of liberation have learned from scripture and from the lives of other women that God is truly on their side and wants women’s lives to be fulfilled. The experience of recognizing the presence of God in one’s life affirms for women God’s action in their lives. The stories of Eve and Betty prove this. More important, however, is the fact that the experience of hope for all the women interviewed has helped them to see goodness in the world.

The work of Christian feminist religious educators helps to concretize experiences of God’s love or hope for women. With a pedagogy that builds self-esteem in women and helps women make changes in their lives, they are able to help facilitate the movement from awareness to action.³⁸² Such educational activity is important because it works toward making actual changes through both awareness and practice. These practices build on hope because they help make real the possibility of change toward something good or better. When a person experiences change of this type, as the women

³⁸¹ Harris, *Fashion Me a People, Curriculum in the Church*, 25.

³⁸² Grey, “Feminist Images of Redemption in Education,” 219.

I interviewed did, they begin to believe that change is possible. An example of how this has worked in the women's spirituality gathering is the way the gathering helped Anne to deal with an unhealthy relationship. We began by sharing our experiences of relationships and looking at relationships in scripture. The group helped her articulate what she did and did not want in the relationship. Anne was able to decide that the relationship was unhealthy and that she had to make some changes. Together we helped her to find the words she needed to confront the situation. Through this process, Anne gained enough confidence to be able to take more responsibility for the relationship. As a result she moved from a situation that seemed hopeless and impossible to a place that was new and had possibilities for hope.

The ability of these women to hope awakens the resources of strength that they have within themselves, allowing them not to be controlled by their suffering but rather to move beyond it. This is an important function of hope in that it enables a person to carry on with life. Without hope a person can stay the same and not change. Carol's ability to move beyond her debilitating depression by choosing to get out of bed each day helps her to envision a possibility for the future. This happens in little ways with Anne who believes that healing is possible when she remembers other times that she experienced healing. Brueggemann speaks of the imagination as important in learning so as to not only see the impossible but to live it.³⁸³ Gebara talks of this in terms of theology. She sees the need to revisit and in turn re-envision new ways of thinking about theology and doing theology.³⁸⁴ Both Brueggemann and Gebara help to make hope tangible in everyday life through their use of imagination and visioning.

³⁸³ Brueggemann, "Passion and Perspective: Two dimensions of education in the Bible," 78.

³⁸⁴ Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for Poor Women," 143.

2. Hope is something you work at.

At first glance, it might appear as if God worked miracles in the lives of these women, and I suppose that to some extent this is true. However, each person saw that hope was also a responsibility. To make it a reality takes work. In some ways, this begins by trusting our intuition and believing that there will be a positive outcome; believe that there is hope. Changing the way we think can be another way of taking responsibility for our hope, especially when our way of thinking is unhealthy or false. For women like Carol, Eve and Betty, changing the way they think is crucial to their health and well being. As noted in the analysis it takes a good deal of courage on their part and support from others to do this work. Eve's experience of taking responsibility to work on her "stuff" meant change was possible but still very difficult. She would have much rather have stayed the same.

Working on hope and making changes in our lives can be assisted by education. Adult religious education introduces change and new possibilities for students and teachers alike, because both are learners in the education process. One of the primary purposes of education is to facilitate learning in order to make informed choices. As educators in a faith community, Harris says we are about the work of, "continuing remaking, re-creating, reconstructing, and reorganizing of our human experience...."³⁸⁵ This way of educating affirms the work in process in which the women have engaged through changing the way they think, that is, to think and act positively about themselves. In these ways, the women are changing their human experience. Freire also speaks about such changes as not only a change of heart but also concrete actions toward change,

³⁸⁵ Harris, *Fashion Me a People, Curriculum in the Church*, 1989), 50.

whether it is a change in society or in one's personal living situation.³⁸⁶ A change of heart is often where change begins. External changes come later. For example, Carol's scheduled activities came after the realization that she wanted not only to live but she wanted to be well.

The main purpose of religious education is not only to enable change but also to help people to live as God desires. In this sense, education is a formative activity that both challenges the way people think and live and helps people to live their faith. Grey's pedagogy of feminist religious education focuses on the redemptive activity of education as self affirmation. By deepening self knowledge, affirming an inner way of knowing, and mutual empowerment,³⁸⁷ Grey facilitates the process of living well. Her pedagogy affirms the fact that we can learn to live in ways that are more life giving. This was certainly the case with the women I interviewed. For instance, Eve's commitment to reviewing cards with messages of hope has helped her choose life and do nice things for herself; Eve is learning to live as God desires.³⁸⁸

The women's spirituality gathering has helped to facilitate a process of working at hope. Understanding that the good news of the gospel is liberation for all people was new for the women at *Our Place*. For the majority of Christian feminists, myself included, the gospel is liberation. It is the only meaningful way to approach scripture. If the good news does not lead to liberation or help in the struggle for liberation then it serves no purpose.³⁸⁹ When scripture is approached in this way, it allows the person's own story to become part of scripture. This process facilitates the work of hope. By

³⁸⁶ Freire, "Education. Liberation and the Church." 185.

³⁸⁷ Grey, "Feminist Images of Redemption in Education," 220-221.

³⁸⁸ We often talked about God's unconditional love for us and God's desire that our life be whole and holy.

beginning with the experience of the person, i.e. the experience of living in poverty, the experience of living in an abusive relationship or the experience of oppression, the process enables the participants to recognize God's saving action in their lives and their life situations. Their stories then become part of the gospel story. Luz Beatriz Arellano tells us how the women in Nicaragua have been able to take more responsibility for their lives because they have come to recognize God in their suffering and in their poverty. Consequently, they have realized that God is on their side and is working with and through them for justice.³⁹⁰ My experience in ministry has made me conscious of the need to affirm and reinforce God's love for each individual. Looking at scripture in this way was helpful to these women.

Another way that the women's spirituality gathering participated in the work of hope was in the experience of community both as a place of worship and of storytelling. It helped the women to be active participants in working toward their wholeness. The sharing of each other's struggles and learning from each other were of tremendous value. This was often where one's personal work and struggles were talked about and explored. It was evident by the depth of sharing that the women felt free to enter into dialogue. The women also entered prayer with ease. Oduyoye's observation that women enter prayer and ritual with naturalness has also been true in my experience with many of the women at *Our Place*.³⁹¹ In the context of our faith community and through prayer and story-ing women shared strategies and practices that helped them.

³⁸⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women-Church: The Hermeneutical Center of Feminist Biblical Interpretation," and "The Function of Scripture in the Liberation Struggle, A Critical Feminist Hermeneutics and Liberation Theology," 1 – 22 and 42 – 63. See also Freire, "Education, Liberation and the Church," 174.

³⁹⁰ Arellano, "Women's Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality," 320.

³⁹¹ Oduyoye, "The Empowering Spirit of Religion," 364.

Working at hope can make a great deal of difference in a person's life. Chung Hyun Kyung tells a powerful story of a Korean woman who was taken by the Japanese army as a "comfort women" during World War II. Today she lives as a free woman because she chose to forgive those who raped and abused her. By forgiving her abusers she was freed from the hatred and fear that enslaved her for many years after the war.³⁹² It takes a lot of courage to act as she did. Each of the women I interviewed is, in her own way, using her courage to take action to change her life.

3. Hope is connected with faith and God.

Although I have wondered if it is possible to have hope without belief in God, the interviews did not answer this question. I did discover, however, that God played an important part in the hope of each of these women. God was their hope in that God companioned them in their struggles; because they had faith, they believed God would help them. Anne, for example, is confident that God can make things better. There is, however, a drawback in believing in this way. When God does not respond, it can be interpreted as personal failure or a lack of faith. On the other hand, the significance of God or a higher power in a person's life cannot be underestimated. Whether this is a positive or a negative experience, it can hold an enormous amount of power. In the lives of these women it meant they were not alone in their suffering and that they had someone to call on, a fact which comforted them as well as enabled them to do something for themselves.

Although each of the participants spoke of the importance of God in her ability to hope, how a person thinks of God or her understanding of God is crucial. Adult religious

³⁹² Chung, "Your Comfort Vs. My Death: A Korean Woman's Reflection on Military Sexual Slavery by

education aims at helping people to understand God and God's action in their lives. The importance of knowing God's unconditional love is one of the primary focuses of religious education along with teaching a way to respond to the love of God by loving our neighbour. It can be very challenging to believe in God's love when a person has not experienced love. I found this one of my greatest challenges when I prepared the educational component of our gatherings. I always remembered to speak about love and its expression. How love is expressed is particularly important when the experience of love by these women has been abusive. Learning about God's love needed to be concretely connected with learning about loving action. This did not mean that suffering and the cost of love were underestimated. It meant that to know God's love was also an invitation to be a disciple of Christ.³⁹³ We questioned in the gatherings how our learning could be expressed in service to others in healthy ways.

How a person relates to God is influenced by the way in which she is taught about God. The work of Christian feminists liberation theologians and biblical scholars in revisiting and reclaiming passages in scripture that have been traditionally interpreted to the disadvantage of women, portraying them as inferior to men in their relationship with God, has been exceedingly helpful. The work of erasing old internal tapes that told women they were less than human and recording new internal tapes that speak of their beauty and their significance in the eyes of God is a challenging but necessary process. Gebara's and Bingemer's work in reinterpreting scripture for women in South America was significant for the women I worked with at *Our Place*. They recovered the mystery

Japan," 8 – 21.

³⁹³ Hauerwas, "The Gesture of a Truthful Story," 103.

of God for women; that is, of a God who chose Mary, a woman, poor and insignificant, to be the one to bring forth God's plan into the human family.

The importance of breaking open the Word of God with insights from women like Gebara and Bingemer cannot be underestimated. What we have been taught both in our society and in our churches has been our insignificance in the proclamation to the world of God's reign.³⁹⁴ For many, *Our Place* included, such study provides a chance to see God relating to women in a new way. We also looked at Jesus' relationship with women. From numerous scripture passages, using interpretations from feminist biblical scholars, we discovered a Jesus who companioned, supported and loved women. Jesus did not treat women as inferior beings.³⁹⁵ These discussions helped Betty and Donna to believe that God loves them just as Jesus loved the women in his life. Although they still struggle with the old teachings, and Donna still fights against an image of God as a big, white, bearded man in the sky judging her, the Bible is slowly becoming a book of liberation for her.

Interpreting scripture through the lens of feminist scholarship affirms the significance of woman's place in her relationship with God. This is also true of learning about God as a God of justice, for it is helping women throughout the world to speak about their situations of oppression and violence. A theology that advocates justice in all relationships allows women to speak of the injustices in their lives, the reality of God's presence to them and God's desire for their liberation. This often means that when a woman recognizes herself as a victim in the presence of God and the community, the process of healing begins. In telling their stories, women are able to move toward their

³⁹⁴ Gebara and Bingemer, "Mary-Mother of God, Mother of the Poor," 280.

³⁹⁵ Hinga, "Jesus Christ the Liberation of Women in Africa," 267.

own healing and they in turn help others to begin their own journeys toward wholeness. Such recognition gives the women confidence to speak out and to gain their voice in their churches as well.³⁹⁶ In the conversations in our gatherings about God's desire for our wellness and liberation, I could see them struggle with doubt yet want to believe that God desires our liberation. In some ways Betty learned in her daily life this confidence in God's desire for her wellness as she related to Job's struggles. She is convinced that God will not give up on her. Eve, too, has learned of God's justice. She uses her imagination to see the world as a school in which God desires her wellbeing.

Experiences of prayer and reflection can be helpful. They can enable women to know God's presence within them as opposed to God's being somewhere "out there." Cynthia Eller notes that the realization of God living within us is fundamental to knowing God's love in the depth of our being. For Eller, it also means knowing that we share in the power of God and that our lives can make a difference in the world.³⁹⁷ It is understandable that Donna, who connects much of her faith and understanding of God to something outside of herself, such as the church, childhood catechetics and her father, struggles with guilt rather than being empowered through knowing God's presence within her. For women like Donna, as well as women who have been physically abused and raped, making the connection with God in an internal and bodily way can be a powerful help in reclaiming the sacredness of their bodies. Speaking about God in terms of birthing and nurturing can help women to connect with God in their bodies.³⁹⁸ By

³⁹⁶ Devi, "The Struggle of Dalit Christian Women in India," 135 – 137. See also Jordaan and Mpumlwana, "Two Voices on Women's Oppression and the Struggle in South Africa," 167. See Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for Poor Women," 143.

³⁹⁷ Cynthia Eller, "Spirituality, Women's," 276.

³⁹⁸ Arellano, "Women's Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality," 337. See also Kyung, "To Be Human Is to Be Created in God's Image," 256- 257. See also Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation," 317.

learning to accept their bodies as sacred and created in God's image and likeness, women are more better able to experience God within them. Anne's prayer for healing from the pain of sexual abuse shows the depth of suffering that we can retain in our bodies. Anne also needs physical healing. She needs to accept and love her body.

This serves to reaffirm the perspective of women such as Moore who recognize the significance of dualism concerning women's value in our culture. Her work on women being traditionally situated in the private and silent realm of society as opposed to the male's place in the public realm has helped to break down dualism and allowed women to claim their place and their voice.³⁹⁹ These new interpretations and realizations are interwoven into the process of educating in faith and developing a growing confidence in God's love. Eve's recognition of the abuse, abandonment and neglect that changed her childhood sense of God, is a powerful example of the need for this work of Christian feminist liberation theologians reinterpretation and reclaiming of scriptural images of women.

4. Hope grows and is nourished by support of others.

When the participants spoke of how their hope was nourished by others, they affirmed the significance of the community at *Our Place*. As Christians, we believe community is central to our faith. The importance of gathering together to pray and ritualize as a community is evident from the response of the women in this study. The women's spirituality group was the occasion of these women coming together as a faith community. In the interviews it was obvious that this faith community has been helpful in nurturing the hope of these women. Using Harris' model of a faith community, we

³⁹⁹ Moore, "The Unity of the Scared and the Public Possibilities from Feminist Theology," 204.

gathered as a community, who prayed together, engaged in justice, broke open the word and learned from the tradition and each other.⁴⁰⁰ Each aspect of community was helpful in some way to the women.

Our faith community, like other faith communities, was meant to be integration into the life of Christ, into discipleship and into the work of co-creating with Christ. This work necessitates ongoing conversion and ongoing opportunities for learning that can help facilitate conversion and transformation. Learning the Christian story invites the person into ongoing conversion. Hauerwas sees the community growing into freedom as it becomes more faithful to the Christian story in its life. Transformation comes about as each person changes attitudes and behaviours, as they gradually desire more and more to live holy lives.⁴⁰¹ The desire to live holy lives echoes in the diverse stories of the women at *Our Place*. I would dare to say that the women's gathering has rekindled this desire which was often overshadowed by experiences of abuse, poor self-esteem, or the fight to survive.

For women, the opportunity to be a faith community in which they are not marginalized, is a rare and important experience towards wholeness. In speaking about experiences of church, Eve spoke sadly about her experiences of not feeling welcome in church. The silence of other women in regard to their churches may have been the result of similar experiences. Although the support of individuals is important in nurturing hope it would seem, by the response of the women, that a supportive faith community is equally important. Oduyoye thinks it is crucial that women have a place in which to worship where they are able to participate fully in the liturgy. She believes this is

⁴⁰⁰ See Harris, *Fashion Me A People, Curriculum in the Church*, 25.

⁴⁰¹ Hauerwas, "The Gesture of a Truthful Story," 99.

important in developing and deepening their relationship with God. For some women it can be an affirmation of themselves as being created in the likeness and image of God. We are created for community and are not meant to worship alone but in the context of communities where all are equal.⁴⁰² Unfortunately, few women experience such a community. The places where it does happen have a real impact.

As I noted earlier, the women's gathering facilitated opportunities for sharing stories of abuse and marginalization. The support of others when sharing their stories was critical for the women. Knowing that others accepted them and that they were not alone in their suffering has been one of the treasured memories of the spirituality gathering. In building our faith community I used stories of women in scripture as models for women supporting each other. We spent the most time on the stories of Ruth and Naomi, and Mary and Elizabeth. These stories gave us an opportunity to talk about the experience of supportive relationships as well as relationships that were abusive or not supportive. These conversations inspired story telling and helped to build relationships among the women. It encouraged them to see each other as support. Even Carol, who sometimes had difficulties with the gathering, was able to share at times. As Betty noted, "we talked about the important things of life." The experiences and wisdom shared in the group helped each person to name what was important to them and what is needed in a good relationship.

The support of individuals outside the community has been invaluable. Both Eve and Betty spoke at length of the people who supported them in difficult times. They have found it liberating to share their struggles with someone who truly cares about them because only when they were heard into their story could they begin to tell of their abuse.

⁴⁰² Oduyoye, "The Empowering Spirit of Religion," 375.

In embracing the truth and telling the story, healing can begin.⁴⁰³ Eve and Betty recognized the support they received as places where they experienced healing, where they were nurtured in hope. These were also relationships where they felt loved and accepted for themselves. In turn they were able to risk telling their story and begin their own work at healing.

5. To hope is to share your hope and to help others find hope.

Is the experience of hope similar to an experience of love? Is it, in fact, an experience of love? The participants' desire to share the hope they experienced with another was an act of love or so it seems to me. Their response to hope is similar to what Maria Harris says about the experience of God's love. When people become conscious of God's love for them they in turn recognize God's love for all of creation.⁴⁰⁴ Gebara speaks of a similar response when she talks about the process of healing. Learning to love herself required reaching out to others. She says that when a person loves herself, she makes a choice to "opt for others."⁴⁰⁵ A person feels compassion for those who suffer and wants to help them become free. The desire to help others was especially strong for both Betty and Eve. Both women felt called to share the hope they received with others, especially those in need.

The desire to reach out and help others is foundational to Christianity. There are numerous examples in the scriptures of ways to live as followers of Christ. Judge, writing about Paul's letters, describes Paul as a teacher who desired only to help others to live as Christ lived. He wanted to teach people an alternative way to live; to be servants

⁴⁰³ See Association of Women in Theology (AWIT), "Of Secrets and Violence, Breaking the Silence," 37.

⁴⁰⁴ Harris, *Fashion Me A People, Curriculum in the Church*, 28-30.

⁴⁰⁵ Gebara, "Option for the Poor as an Option for Poor Women," 145.

of Christ and one another.⁴⁰⁶ Eve's willingness to share her story, as a way of helping others, is a powerful example of self-giving. Each time Eve shares her story there is some healing but there is also pain. She is committed to teaching others who are suffering and who are without hope to find God in the midst of their lives. This is Eve's way of serving others.

The desire to help others is a basic value in feminist theology and education. In Moore's work about breaking down the dualism that is destructive for both men and women she is able to identify the need for women and men to change their way of thinking so that women may participate fully in church and society. Women are already taking this difficult and often risky task in hand and working toward greater awareness, change and emancipation.⁴⁰⁷ Arellano has found that when women recognize God as a God of liberation who works within them, they, too, feel empowered to work with God in changing unjust structures or helping others in difficulty. They actively participate in bringing about God's reign. This participation by women in the reign of God is central to their lives and their desire for life.⁴⁰⁸ This desire for life has been fought concretely by some of the participants at *Our Place*. By reaching out to others, they affirm this desire.

6. Minor themes

The dreams of hope were nothing out of the ordinary but mostly the practical and simple expectations of anyone's life. The spoken dreams for a home, good health, healing from abuse, healthy relationships and reconciliation are everyday dreams. The

⁴⁰⁶ Judge, "The Reaction against Classical Education in the New Testament," 83.

⁴⁰⁷ Moore, "The Unity of the Sacred and the Public Possibilities from Feminist Theology," 211. See also Tauli-Corpuz, "Reclaiming Earth-based Spirituality: Indigenous Women in the Cordillera," 106. These women are working toward changing the nature/spirit dualism.

⁴⁰⁸ Arellano, "Women's Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality," 320-321.

dreams of these women were not distant from their desire for life and wellness. Religious educators and feminist theologians work for life, although not always explicitly.

Religious education strives to help people live their lives as best they can in response to God's grace in their lives. Educators not only envision an ideal way of life but try to give practical directions toward achieving it. Brueggemann's description of teaching the Torah as a way of life is an example of educating into life.⁴⁰⁹ Through education in the Torah students are given the tools and skills for life. Christian feminist educators often make their work for life explicit by building self-esteem and confidence in their students. The emerging spirituality of Third World women is a spirituality for life. Empowered by the support of one another and by their religious practices, these women strive for life in its various forms. The hopes of the participants resonate with the desires of women throughout the world.

Donna spoke about the importance of nature for her as a place where she experiences peace and tranquility. Eve also talked about nature and how she saw God in nature. When she described her gold star from God on the day of the interview, she saw the beauty of the sunflower as an expression of God's love. As noted in Chapter Three, nature plays a significant role in feminist spirituality and I pondered why this theme did not surface in more of the interviews. When we talked about nature in the women's spirituality gathering, women remembered childhood experiences in the forest, nature trips from school and some remembered camp weekends with the *Our Place* community. In terms of their experience of God, many spoke of these outings and experiences of nature as spiritual. I cannot help but wonder if there were enough opportunities for these women to be in contact with nature, especially in a forest setting. Although Eve could

⁴⁰⁹ Brueggemann, "Passion and Perspective: Two dimensions of education in the Bible," 72.

find nature in the midst of concrete and pavement I still question if the natural connection that feminist theologians talked about has not been weakened with these women because of the urbanization of their lives and a lack of exposure to nature.

Betty's dream of equality certainly recalls the work of Christian feminist liberation theologians who seek to affirm mutuality and equality.⁴¹⁰ Just as feminist liberation theologies were born out of experiences of oppression, Betty's dream for equality was born out of an experience of marginalization as a woman. It is important to recognize the fact that Betty could dream of equality for all because she had a vision and that vision was God's desire of wholeness for all people. Betty's experience of marginalization made her conscious of the way she treated other people whom she was careful to treat as equal. The role of sexism is not always recognized in the experience of marginalization of women. Oduyoye notes the importance of this awareness of how women experience obvious and insidious alienation because of their gender.⁴¹¹ An awareness of the layers of causation of inequality can take time and emotional energy for which some people are not prepared. Betty's awareness has certainly led her toward deeper awareness.

Eve's experience of losing and then of finding hope has been significant in helping her to be hopeful. In some ways, the work of Christian feminist liberation theologians and scripture scholars in re-visiting and reinterpreting scripture passages with a certitude that the good news of the gospel is liberation, are bringing hope to places where hope has been lost. The stories some African women shared of the good news of scripture being kept from them and in some cases even used against them are perfect

⁴¹⁰ Wong, "Theological Education from the Perspective of Feminist Theology," 18.

examples of how hope is being re-ignited where it had been lost. For Mosala, it means not only a reinterpretation of scripture but also a critique of history, culture and ideologies resulting from interpretations that have both excluded and abused women.⁴¹² In Eve's situation, discovering hope has also led her to reinterpret her life. From these experiences, she has learned that her life is worthwhile, that she is important and that her life has a purpose.

7. Images of God

In both the interviews and the women's spirituality gathering the women spoke of God as judgmental, demanding, punishing, all powerful, all knowing, yet always loving. Often I found their operative images of God were in direct conflict with the image of a loving God. It seemed that God was both punishing and loving at the same time. Many of the images, especially those of God's judgment, were not helpful in seeing God as a liberator. Mosala writes about the importance of scripture in serving the need of liberation theology.⁴¹³ Many of the images of God that these women identified from scripture or from their churches do not facilitate liberation. The women, who were often concerned about not being able to live up to what they believed God was expecting of them, did not feel worthy of liberation. Because they felt unworthy, they were afraid to pray or to go to church. I was always grateful that the image of God as loving, although, often skewed, was unanimously accepted. It gave me some leeway in which to work. I could at least start with the women's understanding of love.

⁴¹¹ Oduyoye, "Reflections from a Third World Women's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies," 26.

⁴¹² Mosala, "The Implications of the Test of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa," 170.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 173.

Eve and Betty were best able to understand how God could love them and had glimpses of God's unconditional love because they had experienced such love from another human being. Donna struggled to believe God loved her and felt that she was learning from my teachings in the women's spirituality gathering to trust God's love. The testimony of the women in the interview confirmed, however, the strength of their belief that God was not loving. Donna talked of her fear of God but says she is trying to believe that God loves her. Carol also moves back and forth between a demanding God and a God who can heal her. She often blames herself for her continued depression because she does not trust God enough. Betty sees God as being disturbed by her sinfulness. She cannot really trust that God will love her. She pictures God waiting to crush her when she sins. Eve, too, feels she cannot live up to God's expectations of perfection. Although Eve will rage against God for her sufferings, she still believes that God has control and is often not pleased with her. These images of God come out of earlier teachings that probably have not emphasized God's love as much as God's wrath. They are probably also connected with their experience and understanding of God as external to rather than God within themselves.⁴¹⁴

In the midst of these negative images of God there were also images that have helped these women to feel close to God and to trust God. They have a strong belief in a God who will come to their aid in times of need. Anne's first response in times when she felt completely powerless was to pray. This very powerful image of God as a rescuer has helped these women through some very difficult times. In fact, I could say that sometimes a life was saved because they knew they could pray to God and God would

⁴¹⁴ Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," 49. Gebara notes the importance of recognizing God within in terms of changing images or understandings of God.

help them. In some ways the experience of women in Nicaragua, which Arellano describes as a recognition that God is on their side, the side of the poor, gave these women confidence and courage.⁴¹⁵ For these women their belief that God will be there for them has also helped them in difficult times. The image of God as a daily companion, someone to talk with, is also a significant help to these women. It has meant knowing that they are not alone even in the midst of despair. Eve remembers when she was strapped into her hospital bed and locked in her room alone. Though overwhelmed with fear she talked to God who supported and comforted her. When Betty converses with God regularly about her vocation, these conversations are important interactions with God.

Although the images God that I have identified have been helpful to these women, at times, they too have proven unhealthy. Without a community to help us to discern God's actions in our lives, our images of God can become distorted. Faith communities teaching the good news in such a way that it creates a community of disciples are important. The community discerns God's presence in their midst and work together with Christ in building the reign of God. In the community setting, new images of God can be named that can help people to deepen their relationship with God. Oduyoye speaks of the importance for her community of finding ways to speak about God. The main function of their community leader is to create and even to dream of new ways to speak of God.⁴¹⁶ It is crucial that we invite people into different images of God so that our understanding of God can be both broadened and deepened.

⁴¹⁵ Arellano, "Women's Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality," 319 – 320.

⁴¹⁶ Oduyoye, "The Empowering Spirit of Religion," 365.

B. Findings

1. Implications for women's spirituality gathering

In identifying the findings of this research, I revisit each of the five curricula for a faith community identified by Harris in *Fashion Me a People, Curriculum in the Church*:⁴¹⁷ koinonia, the curriculum of community; leiturgia, the curriculum of prayer; didache, the curriculum of teaching; kerygma, the curriculum of proclamation; and diakonia, the curriculum of service. In each of these curricula I identify what learning has been gained through this research. First, I identify what has been helpful in the women's spirituality gathering and needs to be affirmed. Second, I identify the insights I have gained and how they might be applied to the women's spirituality gathering to make it a even more effective means of nurturing hope for women. .

The curriculum of community is the umbrella under which the rest of the curricula fall. I was concerned about the possibility of us forming a faith community at *Our Place*, considering the constant change in participants. I recognized from the level of sharing and the response of the women in the interviews that at some point in our gatherings we had built trust within this small widely diverse community. This fact was affirmed when the women I interviewed spoke about the gathering allowing them to talk "about the important things of life." For these women, our faith community provided an opportunity to share the ordinariness as well as the struggles of our everyday lives.

One of the factors that facilitated creating a community was the deliberate consciousness of the value of mutuality and equality. For example, the themes for our gathering were chosen by the participants and, each person had a copy of the prayer,

music and reflection. In this way everyone could fully participate in the gathering. By beginning with the experiences of the participants, each voice was heard which helped to reinforce mutuality and equality. The fact that the day, the time and the basic format for each gathering were the same, meant that the women knew what to expect. This helped to create confidence.

The recognition that many of these women did not experience welcoming in their own faith communities or were afraid to share, as in Carol's case, meant that a greater emphasis could be put on the spirituality gathering as a welcoming community. This aspect could be further facilitated by the participants themselves taking responsibility to welcome and to invite others to the gathering. More leadership on the part of the participants would also facilitate the acceptance of more responsibility by participants for the gathering and thus make it more their own. In a gathering such as *Our Place*, there could be a great deal gained in terms of faith development and building confidence if the facilitator worked together with the participants in helping them to take leadership of the gathering.

The curriculum of prayer. More than anything else, I think prayer focused us as a community. It seemed that when we prayed it was a time to relax and enter a few moments of communing with God and of calling on God to be present with us. Although I prepared some prayers, there were always opportunities for the participants to add their own prayers. This helped each person to participate in her own way. Our prayers also included praying for the needs of one another, the larger community of *Our Place*, family members, friends and the world. It was important to bring others into our prayer for it helps us to stay connected with the larger community. Praying together also reinforced

⁴¹⁷ See Harris, *Fashion Me A People, Curriculum in the Church*.

the need for God in our lives and I think that in some ways it also reaffirmed God's presence in our lives. The prayers served to educate both in terms of images of God, and in terms of the call to discipleship and service.

At the same time, however, what lingers for me and challenges me are the negative images of God that are operative in the lives of these women. Harris talks about the curriculum of prayer as being "educated to prayer, by prayer and in prayer."⁴¹⁸ How can the time of prayer better serve to educate and invite new images of God? To begin with, I think a more conscious attempt to exercise different ways of praying and to talk about how or what we pray might be helpful in identifying our images of God and how our image of God has an impact on our lives. A time of prayer could focus on creating and sharing our different images of God.

The curriculum of teaching. Teaching was by far the most challenging and the most rewarding aspect of the research. As I said earlier, I was always conscious of making God's unconditional love the centre of learning. At the same time, I knew my reflections and teachings also challenged some foundational beliefs. What proved most helpful in building bridges between beliefs and the new interpretations that I was offering, was the breaking open of God's word with the help of Christian feminist biblical scholars and Christian feminist liberation theologies. Their insights and ability to give a scripture passage or traditional teaching a different interpretation to encourage a new understanding were helpful. This process also makes possible a practice of learning to look at scripture from a perspective other than a surface reading, without any recognition of the context of the text.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 100.

Teaching was important in building community. This is where we talked about the important things of life. Teaching also included each other's experiences which were not always directly related to God. However, implicitly, the care and support of one another helped us to relate to the values of God's reign and God's care for us. By caring for one another through listening, responses, and support we were modeling as well as working at co-creating God's reign. We often had to work at making these conversations happen in a constructive way because the diverse experiences and expectations of each person sometimes led to conflict. This was particularly tricky as relationships, which were highly valued, were also very vulnerable. Sometimes conflict served to help build community and made our community real; at times it could be divisive.

I now recognize the inevitability of conflict in these settings and need to learn how to facilitate the conflict as well as to continue to introduce new learning. One of the ways that would be helpful is the use of a greater variety of teaching forms. Primarily, I used words and rituals. It would be helpful to introduce other forms of informal education, such as art or dance to help us to share our learning with one another.⁴¹⁹

The curriculum of service. This curriculum, which was an important aspect of the women's gatherings, was difficult. I wanted to invite the women to think about service as an outcome of our prayer and learning. Most of the time we focused on service as self-awareness and self care as first steps to serving others. This was a learning edge for many because self care often translated into selfishness. This is especially true when this

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 119. Harris includes a repertoire of forms: verbal (poetry, songs, drama, etc), earth forms (molding clay, lighting candles, etc), embodied forms (dancing, kite flying, etc) and discovery (spending time in a strange city, giving flowers to strangers, etc). Creating alternative forms would be helpful in these gatherings.

topic is connected with what it means to be Christian which for many of the women meant to deny the self and give to others.

Although service as caring for oneself is an important aspect of learning that needs constant reinforcement and practice I have recognized from the interviews and particularly from the experiences of Betty and Eve that it would have been helpful to have focused more intentionally on service to others. Although we talked about serving others we did not act on it. Serving others could be better facilitated if we constructed a plan as to who, where, what and how we could serve others. The practice of identifying injustices around us and responding to them would help to facilitate the growth of community and hope.

The curriculum of proclamation. I have placed this curriculum at the end because we did not focus on the curriculum of proclamation. In many ways it was implicit in the women's spirituality gathering. For example, we talked about the significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection for ourselves and for all of creation. When we talked about God's actions in the world and God's love for us we looked at how Jesus expressed love in the world. An insight for me was listening to the women and hearing them repeat in various ways what they have learned of Christianity from our gatherings and their understanding and articulation of their relationship with God. When I hear Donna and Betty talking about how God's works in their lives or of the need to help others who are marginalized and oppressed, I know that they have connected their lives with their faith. In many ways they are making their faith real and concrete in their everyday life. What would be helpful and necessary would be to continue to build on ways to make the word of God more explicit through the use of scripture, theology and

life experience. The more that the word of God is shared and made concrete in these gatherings the greater will be the opportunities to make it concrete in our lives.

2. Implications for church and society

The implications of this study can have far reaching results for both church and society. This research has helped me to realize the significant role that faith plays in a person's life. It has helped me to identify the ways in which these women relied on their faith to help them to live their lives. For some it has helped them to choose life rather than death. So I again ask those questions that I began with in my introduction, questions that need to be asked if we hope to reach out to the marginalized in our society: Is it enough to supply food and shelter to the marginalized, to the poor? My response? No, food and shelter are not always enough. Are there other needs that must be addressed? Are spiritual needs a necessity? My answer is yes. Spiritual needs definitely need to be addressed and are, in fact a necessity.

A support system that is facilitated by faith development has a life-giving impact on people's lives. Is it possible from the findings to assume that someone living with mental illness is more able to cope with their situation if they have such support? Is it possible that someone who is marginalized for whatever reason will find support such as this a means of facilitating personal change and a new outcome for their life? Both questions can be responded to affirmatively by the results of this research. As you can imagine, and as I noted earlier, the impact of faith development and nourishment on a person's life can influence in many positive ways how a person participates in church and society.

The greatest possible implication for this research, and possibly the most challenging as well, is a much needed recognition and acceptance by both society and the church of the importance of providing opportunities for faith development and nourishment such as the women's spirituality gatherings at *Our Place*. If we accept that such programmes have a positive impact on the life of our communities, both societal and church, then how and where can such gatherings be fostered? Initially, I think this challenge lies with our faith communities. My greatest hope would be that my own faith community, the Roman Catholic Church, would recognize the need to help facilitate the faith development of its ecclesial community and thus take steps to see to it that opportunities for such gatherings are realized. Although this research has focused on women living with mental health issues, there are many other marginalized people in our communities who could be served best by our churches in an alternative setting. Of course this would also necessitate training people for this specialized ministry, people who would be able to work as religious educators in places such as shelters for the homeless and food kitchens. Could the preparation for this work not be built into the curriculum for schools of theology or centres for diocesan catechetical preparation?

Conclusion

By bringing the analysis of the interviews into critical dialogue with the theoretical and theological framework from Christian feminist liberation theology and adult religious education as well as my own experience, insights and implications have surfaced. My interpretations have in no way exhausted the learning possibilities from this type of research in ministry. What I have tried to do is recognize and identify some of the more important implications of this research for both church and society.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is based on an action in ministry with women at *Our Place* who participated in the women's spirituality gathering. My reflections on Vincent de Paul's challenge to bring the good news to the poor and my commitment as a member of the Sisters of Charity to stand with the poor triggered questions which now, as a result of this research, have an experiential foundation. As I indicated in Chapter 2, I wanted the educational goal to be primarily one of nurturing hope among the women in the spirituality gathering. Using the question: **How does adult religious education nurture hope among women at *Our Place***, I wanted to know if our gatherings did in fact nurture hope as well as the best educational process by which they could do so. It is clear from the responses of the women involved that nourishing hope, through such an educational process, was indeed successful.

By understanding the experience of hope in the lives of the women I interviewed, I have gained a greater knowledge as to what is helpful in terms of nurturing hope. I have been able to affirm that Maria Harris's⁴²⁰ curriculum for a faith community, a model of religious education, facilitated the nurturing of hope for the women who participated in the spirituality gathering at *Our Place*. By gathering first as a community of faith, we learned of each other's joys and sufferings. This sharing gave us a place to begin to grapple with the experience of God in our lives. Through our prayer we were able to acknowledge our need for God and recognize the presence of God in our lives. Our prayers overflowed with petitions and thanksgiving.

⁴²⁰ See Harris, *Fashion Me A People, Curriculum in the Church*.

The content of the gatherings helped us to acknowledge and deepen our understanding of a God who loves us unconditionally. We talked about praxis as we grappled with questions of justice. Recognizing that much of the suffering and oppression experienced by the women and other marginalized people is primarily the result of injustice helped us to focus on how we could make a difference by the way in which we lived our lives. It also helped us to affirm that God was on our side and that God worked in us and through us to right injustices. We, each one of us, learned how to proclaim God through our lives. The stories of hope from these women are stories that recognize the good things that God has done in our lives. In turn, we have shared the good news with others and have proclaimed God's liberation with our lives.

This experience has deepened my understanding of Vincent de Paul's challenge. These women wanted to talk about their faith. They wanted more than prayer or what attendance at their local churches could provide. They wanted to speak about what their faith meant to them, in positive terms. But even more importantly, they wanted to talk about their struggles and their doubts. By starting with our personal experiences we were learning to talk about God's presence and action in our everyday lives. This dialogue between lived experience and Christian teachings helped to facilitate, on some level, a recognition of the value of each woman's experience and her participation in her faith tradition, or the life of the church. For most women there is no place where they can participate in the unfolding of theology in this way. Each of these woman could participate fully and equally in the prayer and rituals of the gathering; another opportunity to take ownership of their faith lives.

In conclusion, as a result of my ministry with the women at *Our Place*, I can reiterate with confidence the words of Vincent de Paul:

...to make God known to the poor, to announce Jesus Christ to them, to tell them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and that it is for the poor. O how great that is...so sublime is it to preach the gospel to the poor that it is above all the office of the Son of God.⁴²¹

God's liberating love brings life and hope to a "a world wounded by violence and stripped of hope."⁴²² It is to the service of the poor that God has called the Sisters of Charity, through the actions of the spirit in the life of Elizabeth Ann Seton.⁴²³ This research has not only deepened my understanding and commitment to serving the poor but it has also kept before me the continued challenge of serving the poor in our world today.

I recognize that I have come to this research in ministry with a background that is steeped in learning and ample opportunity for ongoing learning. I am not living with a diagnosed mental health issue and I have my physical needs cared for. For these reasons, I cannot share in the lived experience of the women at *Our Place*. However, I do share in their learning experience.

Facilitating the women's spirituality gathering has taught me more than I ever anticipated. As a co-learner, I have experienced God's words of love in action. I have been challenged to trust the power of hope, the power of love, the power of God at work

⁴²¹ Maloney, *The Way of Vincent de Paul, A Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor*, 22.

⁴²² Sisters of Charity of Halifax, St. Vincent de Paul Eighteenth General Chapter, (April, 1996).

⁴²³ Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, *Constitutions and Directives* (Halifax: Mount St. Vincent, [1985]), 3.

in the world. Thus my greatest learning is the understanding that when I recognize oppression, I am experiencing God and when I recognize liberation, I am experiencing God.

APPENDIX A

. CONSENT FORM

My name is Gertie Jocksch and I am a Doctor of Ministry student at the Toronto School of Theology. I would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. As part of my program, I am undertaking research to explore the experiences of hope with women who have participated in the women's spirituality gathering. By exploring your experience of hope, I want to discover if the women's spirituality gathering is a source for nurturing hope.

This study is designed to look at persons' understanding and articulation of hope from their experiences. I will use a series of questions to help you enter a conversation with me about your experiences of hope. The interview questionnaire consists of questions about:

- (1) your experience and understanding of hope;
- (2) what hope has meant to you;
- (3) what has nurtured hope for you;
- (4) what would be helpful in terms of nurturing hope for you, an opportunity to dream a little;
- (5) whether God been a source of hope for you;
- (6) what aspects of your experience of hope have been or have not been nurtured in the spirituality gathering; .

Your anonymity is guaranteed, as I will not record your name or any other identifying personal information on the questionnaire.

The interview will take approximately one hour with a possible follow-up interview.

Your participation in the study is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question(s) which make you feel uncomfortable or which you would prefer not to answer.

In addition, you may stop the interview at any time if you decide you do not want to continue. You are under no obligation to explain your reasons for choosing not to answer a specific question or for stopping the interview before it is complete.

I reserve the right to stop your participation if I have reasonable grounds to believe that you are not eligible to continue.

The information you provide in response to questions in the interview will be kept strictly confidential. The information will only be available to the members of the research team, and not to anybody outside the project.

The data questionnaires will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office of Toronto School of Theology and will be destroyed when the project is completed.

If you have any questions about the project and your involvement, you can contact me.

At the end of the interview, you can let me know if you have any concerns about the interview. If you wish, I will make a copy of our research findings available to you when they are complete.

Date:

Interviewee code:

Interviewer:

APPENDIX B

Thesis Proposal

Religious Education at the Margins: Nurturing Hope Among Women

A Doctor of Ministry Thesis Proposal Submitted to
The Doctor of Ministry Programme Committee,
Toronto School of Theology

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Thesis Committee

Faculty Director: Professor Lorna Bowman

Collaborative Learning Group Representative: Trish Strung

Ministry Base Learning Group Representative: Veronica O'Reilly, csj

Introduction

I am a Sister of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax.⁴²⁴ Continuing in the spirit of the past to live our commitment of ministry with the poor:

We affirm our commitment to a contemplative stance that gives joyful witness to love, stands on the side of the poor, addresses unjust structures. Empowered by the Spirit of God, enriched by the lives of one another we stand in the fire of gospel values and respond to a world wounded by violence and stripped of hope.⁴²⁵

My ministry interests are in the areas of faith development and adult religious education. I am interested in companioning people in their faith journey and in particular the poor, and especially women who are poor and/or marginalized.

The Background and Context of Applied Research Thesis

The context of my ministry is Our Place Community of Hope Centre.⁴²⁶ Our Place was founded in the late 1960's by Father Joseph MacDonald, OFM, Cap. who intended the centre to be a place of Christian hospitality for the inner city community. With the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric centers, the drop-in soon became a place for discharged psychiatric patients. Fr. MacDonald decided to focus the drop-in to the needs of this psychiatric community. Today Our Place continues with the funding of Catholic Charities⁴²⁷ to provide a supportive environment for the psychiatric community who come to Our Place.

Most of the members of Our Place are under the care of a psychiatrist or a family doctor. For the most part, their illnesses are well controlled by medication. Some of the

⁴²⁴ Our Congregation came into being through the action of the Holy Spirit in the heart of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton who found in the rule of Saint Vincent de Paul the expression of its purpose:

The Principle end for which God has called and assembled the Sisters of Charity is to honor Jesus Christ our Lord as the source and model of all charity, by rendering to him every temporal and spiritual service in their power, in the persons of the poor, either sick, children, prisoners or others who through shame would conceal their necessities.

Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, *Constitutions and Directives* (Halifax: Mount St. Vincent, [1985]), 3.

⁴²⁵ Sisters of Charity of Halifax, St. Vincent de Paul Eighteenth General Chapter, (April, 1996).

⁴²⁶ Our Place, Community of Hope Centre is a drop in centre for people with psychological illness. The purpose stated in the 1998 brochure reads: "Our Place stresses the experiences of community by being in relationship with others. We wish to provide a peaceful, supportive and welcoming community to enable people to involve themselves with others and to find meaning and personal growth in all areas of their lives by sharing in our community experience." Will be referred to as Our Place from here on.

⁴²⁷ Monies raised by the Archdiocese of Toronto to help the neediest in our communities such as the hungry and homeless. In response to these needs, Catholic Charities funds programs and agencies to meet these needs.

members are homeless but the majority live in subsidized housing. The age of the members range from 18 years of age to 60 plus. The gender ratio would favor males slightly. For most of the members, Our Place serves as a place to meet others and to form friendships that alleviate loneliness and alienation.⁴²⁸

As a spiritual companion for the members at Our Place my ministry responsibilities vary. This ministry, which originally began with being present and available, now includes preparing rituals for community celebrations and facilitating weekly spirituality gatherings. My ministry of presence gives me visibility as well as availability for the members. The communal celebrations include such feast days as Thanksgiving, All Saints Day, Holy Thursday and weekly rituals before the community meal during Advent and Lent.⁴²⁹ These communal celebrations are prepared and facilitated by Our Place members and myself.

The spirituality gatherings, which originally began with a weekly gathering for all members, now include a women's spirituality gathering. In the spirituality gathering for the larger membership, there is an opportunity to share and pray about themes or concerns which members have chosen. The process I use has three parts, i.e., experience of the participants, teaching, and experience of participants.⁴³⁰ I am continually challenged to explore ways of sharing the teachings of Christianity and ways of inviting the gathering to breaking open scripture from the perspective of their life experience.

As a structure for the women's spirituality gathering and a process of educating in the faith, I am using the work of Maria Harris.⁴³¹ Although Harris' focus is on a church faith community⁴³² and in particular a Roman Catholic Church community, I find the structure helpful for it gives shape as well as assumes education in the faith. The formation of a faith community takes time. Because it is a new faith community, the spirituality gathering of women at Our Place is focusing on three forms. These are, gathering as a

⁴²⁸ Inge C.M. Barthlomeiczik, "Prophetic Voices From the Margins: Mental Health Ministry At Our Place Community of Hope Centre" (Field Education Report, Regis College, 1998).

⁴²⁹ Our Place has celebrated these feasts in different ways since its beginning. In discussion with the staff and management of Our Place, it was decided that we would continue to celebrate these feasts and to invite people to help prepare and facilitate the celebrations.

⁴³⁰ Each spirituality gathering has a theme which has been chosen by the previous gathering. We begin by sharing on the theme from life experience. As a teaching component, I use scripture or other writings that relate to the theme. For the second experience component there is further sharing and insights that have surfaced from the teaching or the sharing of others. This third component has sometimes led to action, such as identifying implications for life from this gathering. During Lent 1999, we followed the life of Jesus in Marks gospel. To my joy, many of the participants began to engage the scripture passage from within their life experience.

⁴³¹ In developing a curriculum for education in the Church, Harris describes the church's educational ministry as embodied in the five classical forms of ecclesial activity which is first described in the book of Acts: kerygma (proclaiming), didache (teaching), leiturgia (prayer), koinonia (community) and diakonia (service). Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People, Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 31.

⁴³² A faith community is a microcosm of the larger community, the church. It can be broadly defined as a creative gathering of people who come together to share, learn, and explore their Christian faith.

community, prayer and service.⁴³³ Thus far, the participants have been sharing experiences of community as well as their hopes and expectations for the women's spirituality gathering.

Women share many of the same struggles of wanting to have good supportive relationships compounded with the constant struggle against poor self-esteem. They know the painful and familiar feelings of exclusion and oppression. As women in the mental health system, they recognize their needs are different from men yet these differences go unacknowledged or unrecognized. I am quickly discovering the complexity and the implications of mental illness for women. They experience oppression because of their illness and their social status. For many, mental illness results in poverty, women also experience oppression because of their gender.

There are many women throughout the world who take seriously their experience of life, and who are sharing major life issues and in the process are finding their voice and their self-confidence. They are working toward their emancipation. As a member of a woman's religious congregation, I am aware of the many advantages that my chosen life style has permitted me. The opportunities for education and religious formation alone have afforded me a place of privilege in our culture. I have also had the privilege for some time of journeying along side women who like me are becoming increasingly aware of the value of their experience as women.

Christian feminist liberation theologians⁴³⁴ have made stalwart contributions to the emancipation of women. The teachings and insights from these theologians have influenced my life profoundly as have the lives of many women who struggle to find their place in our society and church. These women have nurtured my hope in numerous ways and give me courage to continue in the struggle of owning my place in the church and society. I think that the women I minister with at Our Place will also find the work of Christian feminist liberation theologians helpful. For this reason, I use the teachings

⁴³³ The spirituality gathering of women at Our Place are a new community and needs a beginning place: "It begins with the gathered community or koinonia. That community gathers for two main purposes: to worship God through liturgical prayer, and to engage in works that serve justice – the traditions of leiturgia and diakonia. These three constitute the embodiment of the "teaching of the apostles" that is lived before it is discussed or presented. Only when the first three are in place do the curricular acts of preaching the Word and gathering for instruction and catechesis—both of which are largely verbal—make sense." See Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education, Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 21.

⁴³⁴ Fiorenza identifies for me the meaning of Christian feminist liberation theology: "A feminist theology of liberation must remain first and foremost a critical theology of liberation as long as women suffer injustice and oppression of patriarchal structures. The theology explores the particular experiences of women struggling for liberation from systemic patriarchy and at the same time indicts all patriarchal structures and texts, especially those of biblical religion. Such a theology seeks to name theologically the alienation, anger, pain, and dehumanization engendered by patriarchal sexism and racism in society and church. At the same time it seeks to articulate an alternative vision of liberation by exploring women's experiences of survival and salvation in our struggle against patriarchal oppression and degradation, as well as by assessing Christian texts, traditions, and communities in terms of such liberation from patriarchal oppression." Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Women-Church: The Hermeneutical Center of Feminist Biblical Interpretation," in *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 6.

and insights from these theologians as my underlying theology in the women's spirituality gathering at Our Place. As a person who educates in the faith, it is both important and necessary for me that I have a clear understanding and articulation of the theology that underlies my educating.⁴³⁵

Context of Statement of the Research Problem

My greatest desire for the women who participate in the women's spirituality gathering is that they will develop a deepening sense of hope⁴³⁶ as they look at their life experience with other women from Our Place, Christian feminist liberation theologians and a God who loves them unconditionally. I think that hope gives us a personal power and, with hope, we can overcome even the most difficult situations. I want to know what has been the experience of hope of women in the spirituality gathering as well as to determine if the spirituality gathering has nurtured their hope. I will explore this using the following question:

How does adult religious education nurture hope among women at Our Place?

Ministry Base

My ministry base group has met at my home over 18 months and has worked with me in focusing my research. Members of the group include: a person skilled in the area of education, two members of Our Place, a person who was a previous director at Our Place, a director of a women's shelter, a Sister of Charity of Halifax, a theology student, a professor of liberation theology who is also a city of Toronto alderman, and a ordained minister who has ministered with the poor in East York.

⁴³⁵ Miller notes the importance of the recognition of the theology that underlies the work of the religious educator. Although the theologies might differ from educator to educator, each religious educator must have a theology. Randolph Crump Miller, "Theology in the Background," in *Religious Education and Theology*, ed. Norma H. Thompson (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1982), 23.

⁴³⁶ I have chosen to define hope broadly because I think that any experience of hope has a potential to empower and to lead to deeper experiences: "As one of the "theological virtues," and the "three things that last" (1 Cor 13:13), hope has traditionally been understood together with faith and love as the modalities which describes Christian existence." "Christian hope is a learned hope but it is also fundamentally a human construct, it is a will to live that presupposes life to be worthwhile." "Theologians have come to understand Christian hope as a receptivity to God "who has come and who will come". "Hope opens us to a future to be filled by the praxis of liberation which is the creation of provisional anticipations of that ultimate realm of freedom which is the Kingdom of God." See Michael J. Scanlon, OSA, "Hope," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 492 – 498 passim.

The Theoretical Framework and Assumptions Involved in the Study

Theory at Work in the Study

The work of Christian feminist liberation theologians in the Third World⁴³⁷ has helped me to recognize similarities in the experiences of violence and the layers of oppression that the women at Our Place share with women in the Third World. Their work has also brought to my attention the strong resilience and hope that lies deep within Third World women and enables them to fight for life even in the most difficult of situations. I have seen evidence of this resilience in the women at Our Place. I believe that when this inner strength or hope is nourished it can only grow stronger. I think Christian feminist liberation theologians contribute a great deal to nurturing hope in the world.

The liberation of women has taken a unique shape as Christian feminist liberation theologians in Third World countries are finding that their needs for liberation are much different than those of men. Although liberation theologies have led the struggle against poverty and oppressions from classism and racism, they often do not recognize sexism in the struggle for liberation.⁴³⁸ The struggle against sexism is a unique struggle of women. Women living with mental illness experience sexism in the field of mental health. The women who live with mental illness share similar experiences for many who live with mental illness live in poverty, lack opportunities for employment and education, struggle with low self-esteem and suffer abuse. These women live on the margins of society and

⁴³⁷ Third World Christian feminist liberation theologians will be my primary source of theology because the starting place of their theology is with the experience of the poor.

⁴³⁸ Christian Feminist theologians are noting the need for women to struggle against sexism in their struggles for liberation. In India, women are claiming their place in theological discourse and church participation. In doing so, they are articulating the points of oppression that women experience because of their gender. See Indian Theological Association. "Theologizing in India—Feminine Perspective," in *Feminist Theology From the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 60 – 62. The 1986 Mexican conference of Third World women noted similar facts of gender oppression that women experience. They noted the overwhelming oppression of women as a reality that overarched all of their life. See Mexico Conference. "Final Document on Doing Theology from Third World Women's Perspective," in *Feminist Theology From Third World Women's Perspective*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 35 – 44. Mercy Amba Oduyoye talks about the 'interruption' of women's theological reflection within the larger context of Third World Theology. She tells the story of women challenging EATWOT [Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians] as they began to take their place in the theological discourse. The women spoke of their experience of sexism within the organization. Although Third World theologians were familiar with diversity in the experiences of oppression and exploitation in Third World countries, they were not prepared to see the oppression that women experienced from sexism and especially within their organization. As theologians, their main concern was racism and classism. Women's needs were categorized to be of less value when needs were put into a hierarchical structure. Mercy Amba Oduyoye. "Reflections From a Third World Woman's Perspective," in *Feminist Theology From the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 23 – 34.

are marginalized, that is they are made or treated as insignificant.⁴³⁹ They suffer from many levels of oppression. Kwok Pui-Ian notes the significance of multiple oppression that women experience. Many women suffer not just from one or two oppressions but there can be several oppressions, which increases the complexity of their lives and their struggles for freedom from oppression.⁴⁴⁰

I will use the work of Christian feminist liberation theologians⁴⁴¹ because they affirm the work of women, created in the image of God and participating in God's reign. They are actively involved in justice and the emancipation of women. They use language that is inclusive of women and make theology accessible to women by using the language of poetry and music in speaking to their hearts and deepest human longings. Knowing themselves as life givers, birthing, feeding, and caring for all of creation affirms an interconnectedness that is core to women's knowing. Such realizations facilitate the dream and hope of a new reality that respects life and nature.⁴⁴²

Assumptions Operative in the Study

- Hope is central to Christian faith and to living life fully.
- Hope is nurtured and deepened when we reflect on our life experience in the context of a community of faith.
- The gospel message is life giving.
- God calls us to live the gospel message in a particular way and each person comes to know this not only through the Christian story but also through reflection and self-knowledge.
- God calls all people to know God and this call creates a yearning within us to search for God.
- People want to learn about God.
- All people have a need to be heard and I value the experiences of all people whether or not they are able to articulate their experiences.
- Adult religious education includes the integration of the learning, i.e., living faith in our everyday life.

⁴³⁹ Katherine Barber, ed. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998), 882. I use a broad definition for the term marginalized in order to include the diverse experiences of marginalization that the women at Our Place encounter.

⁴⁴⁰ Kwok Pui-Ian. "The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective" in *Feminist Theology From the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 64.

⁴⁴¹ I will be using the following theologians: Ivone Gebara, Ana Maria Diaz, Chung Hyun Kyung, Sun Ai Lee-Park, Maria Pilar Aquino and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Third World Christian feminist liberation theologians), Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, and Letty Russel (First World feminist liberation theologians) and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (feminist biblical scholar) in preparing the reflective material for the women's spirituality gathering and interpreting the research data.

⁴⁴² See Ivone Gebara, "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World, A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 47 – 59. See Aruna Gnanadason, "Towards a Feminist Eco-Theology for India," in *Women Healing the Earth: Third World Women On Ecology, Feminist and Religion (Ecology and Justice)*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 74 – 81. Both of these women point out how feminist liberation theology methodology make material available and relevant to women.

- Adult religious education includes learning from experience, scripture, tradition, theology, spirituality, prayer, and lives of people.
- Each person who hears the Christian message will have his or her own way of reflecting on it and integrating it.
- The journey of faith is a process and although there are some similarities, it will ultimately be different for each person.
- Whenever people gather together to pray or to learn about the Christian message we are creating a healing space that is not just self-contained in the particular group but flows out into the world.
- Christianity has the potential to change the world and to bring about a just and peaceful world, i.e., the reign of God.
- Christian faith gives life, liberates us and transforms our lives.
- Acquiring knowledge of scripture, tradition, and prayer, helps us to live more fully our everyday life.
- Opportunities for learning about Christianity are less readily available for people of low income, e.g., the homeless.
- It is both possible and valuable to make opportunities for religious education in places outside of a church structure.

The Action in Ministry

In order to know the women's experience of hope and to determine if the women's spirituality gathering nurtures hope for the women who have participated in the women's spirituality gathering, I will use an interview process to gather this information. I will interview five women from Our Place who live with mental illness and who have participated in the women's spirituality gathering. I will personally invite participants who I think will be able to communicate their story and enter a dialogue about their experiences of hope. In facilitating the interview, I will ask open-ended questions that will invite them into a process of reflection and dialogue. I will also invite participants into their experience of hope through the use of art. I will invite them to draw their experience and to discuss their experience through this medium. The questions and drawings will help the interviewee to talk about her story and her experience of hope.

I have chosen to learn from within the stories of these women their experience of hope. In this way, we become co-researchers, for the participant's story is the medium from which data is gathered. Levinson⁴⁴³ gives a good description of how the interviewee and interviewer work together:

A biographical interview combines aspects of a research interview, a clinical interview and a conversation between friends. It is like a structured research interview in that certain topics must be covered, and the main purpose is research. As a clinical interview, the interviewer is

⁴⁴³ Levinson's description of a biographical research interview is relevant for my research. Daniel J. Levinson, *Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 15.

sensitive to the feelings expressed, and follows the threads of meaning as they lead through diverse topics. Finally, as in a conversation between friends, the relationship is equal and the interviewer is free to respond in terms of his own experience. Yet each party has a defined role in a sustained work task, which imposes its own constraints.

As the interviewer, I will listen attentively, affirming the value of what I hear as well as offering questions or comments to help the participant give a more coherent or fuller account of her story.

I will interview five women and the interviews will take place on the premises of Our Place. I will audiotape the interviews. They will be approximately 60 minutes in length. There will be an option for a second, follow-up interview if I need further information. The interviewee will have the information and guiding questions one-week before her interview in order that she may be able to ask me for any clarification they need about the questions or the interview.

Proposed time line

December 1999

- Invite people to take part in the research and set dates for interviews.

January 2000

- Interview
- Transcribe and organize data
- Analyze data
- Validate the data

The Research Method Operative in the Study

Through the process of interviewing, I will gather the experience of hope and the meaning these women give to this experience, which is integral to qualitative research. "The mission of the qualitative researcher is to discover the experience of another person and understand the meaning which that person accords to that experience."⁴⁴⁴ I will analyze the data I gather from interviews and interpret meaning from both my own experience and from the interpretive lens of Christian feminist liberation theologians. The specific steps I will use in data analysis are as follows:

- I will transcribe and read all descriptions in their entirety.
- I will extract significant statements about hope from each description, paying attention to statements and words of despair, pain and suffering which are possible indicators for hope or lead up to descriptions of hope.

⁴⁴⁴ Larry VandeCreek, Hilary Bender, and Merle R. Jordan, *Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling, Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* (Journal of Pastoral Care Publishing, Inc. 1994), 99.

- I will formulate these statements into meanings, which will be clustered into themes or meaning units for each interviewee.
- I will also include those statements that are different from the common themes and give them recognition and value.
- I will integrate the individual narrative into an overall narrative description in which I will reflect on the diversity of perspectives in the interview as well as the areas of dissonance and contrast.
- In the narrative I will describe what happened in the interview and include verbatim examples of these experiences.
- The narrative will also include reflections of my experience and interpretation of the material.

I will construct an overall description of the meaning and the essence of the experience.⁴⁴⁵

The purpose of this action in ministry is to learn how adult religious education nurtures hope among women at Our Place. From the work of the Christian feminist liberation theologians I have named and from my own experience and knowledge, I will interpret the experience and data from the following perspectives:

- Experience of hope.
- Women's spirituality.
- Faith Community.
- Christian feminist liberation theology.
- Experiences of survival.
- Liberative pedagogy.⁴⁴⁶
- Categories which emerge.

I will use the validation criteria of Polkinghorne⁴⁴⁷ who has developed questions to examine the validity of a phenomenological study. I will use the following questions from Polkinghorne in examining this study for validation:

⁴⁴⁵ The methodology employed here is phenomenology. Creswell describes the specific steps of analysis as follows:

5. The researcher first reads all descriptions in their entirety.
6. The author then extracts significant statements from each description.
7. These statements are formulated into meanings, and these meanings are clustered into themes.
8. The researcher integrates these themes into a narrative description.

John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, Choosing Among Five Traditions* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 32.

⁴⁴⁶ See Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation, A Handbook for Community Workers*, Book 1 (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1991). Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation, A Handbook for Community Workers*, Book 2 (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1991). Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation, A Handbook for Community Workers*, Book 3 (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1991). This series of books describe a process of liberation for communities and peoples who live with oppression.

⁴⁴⁷ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, Choosing Among Five Traditions* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 208. Creswell draws on the works of Polkinghorne who finds validity in how well the study is grounded and supported. A question Polkinghorne asks is, "Does the general

- Did I influence the contents of the subjects' descriptions in such a way that the descriptions do not truly reflect the subjects' actual experience?
- Is the transcription accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation in the interview?
- In the analysis of the transcriptions, were there conclusions other than those offered by the researcher that could have been derived? Have I identified these alternatives?
- Is it possible to go from the general structural description to the transcriptions and to account for the specific contents and connections in the original examples of the experience?
- Is the structural description situation specific, or does it hold in general for the experience in others situations?⁴⁴⁸

Ethical issues that I will need to be aware of are whether or not the interviewees understand the study they are involved in, why I am doing the study and why I have asked them to be involved in the study. Each participant will sign a consent form at the time of the interview. (Appendix 1)

Risks and Limitations of the Study

The risk in the study will be the possibility of not collecting significant data from the participants in a one-hour interview. For this reason, I may have to re-evaluate the time limit for each person. It may require that I have a series of interviews for some people. Some people have difficulty articulating their experience but I do not think they should be left out of the research project. These interviews will take time and could cover a lot of ground before we focus on the questions.⁴⁴⁹

A factor that needs to be recognized in this study is that the persons who participate in the women's spirituality gathering are constantly changing. The amount of participation in the spirituality gathering varies each week. Because the people vary each week, those who participate in the study will not have a common experience as such. Another challenge to this study will be the organization of the volume of material from the interviews and categorizing the data in a way that will enable me to determine meaning from it.

structural description provide an accurate portrait of the common features and structural connections that are manifest in the examples collected?"

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁴⁹ Nelle Morton speaks of an ability to articulate which is the result of being listened to. She talks about a person being heard into speech: "A hearing engaged in by the whole body that evokes speech—a new speech—a new creation. The woman had been heard to her own speech." Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 128.

The Contributions of the Study

By exploring how a programme of adult religious education nurtures hope with the women at Our Place, it will assist me as well as others to minister more effectively in similar settings. It would influence how those of us in ministry approach the world of those who live with the complexities of mental illness. This research is also a contribution to the field of adult religious education. It will contribute to curriculum preparation in faculties of theology to prepare people for the ministry of adult religious education with people who live with mental illness and people who live in poverty.

APPENDIX C

QUESTIONS

1. What has been your experience of hope?
2. What has hope meant to you?
3. What has nurtured your hope?
4. What would be helpful in terms of nurturing hope for you? This is an opportunity to dream a little about what would help to nurture your hope.
5. Has God been a source of hope for you?
6. What aspects of your experience of hope have been or have not been nurtured in the spirituality gathering?

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