

*"Faith, Fear and Feminist Theology"*

**THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN,  
IN A SMALL FREE STATE TOWN  
OF SOUTH AFRICA,  
DEMONSTRATE SOME OF THE EFFECTS  
OF PATRIARCHAL DOMINATION  
IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY.**

**J.L. SPRONG**

**2002**

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SMALL FREE STATE TOWN OF SOUTH AFRICA,  
DEMONSTRATE SOME OF THE EFFECTS  
OF PATRIARCHAL DOMINATION  
IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY.

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE

**Master of Arts** (Christian Theology)

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AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN-WESTVILLE

J.L. SPRONG

**DATE SUBMITTED:** 25 November 2002

**SUPERVISOR:** Dr. J.A. Smit

# Declaration

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The Registrar (Academic)  
University of Durban-Westville  
Private Bag X54001  
**DURBAN**  
4000

Dear Madam/Sir

I, Jenette Louisa Sprong,

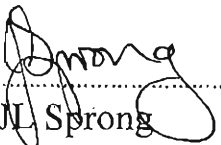
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hereby declare that the dissertation, entitled:

***‘Faith, Fear and Feminist Theology . . .***

The experiences of women, in a small Free State town  
of South Africa, demonstrate some of the effects of  
patriarchal domination in Church and Society’,

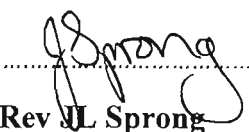
is the result of my own investigation and research and that it has not been submitted in  
part or in full for any other degree or to any other University.

  
.....  
Rev J. L. Sprong

25 November 2002

*I, Jenette Louisa Sprong, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work done in this research is my own. I have done my very utmost to acknowledge authors, and other sources, and to give credit wherever it is due.*

*Throughout these past three years of study, at the University of Durban-Westville, I have endeavoured to maintain the kind of integrity, which will bring honour to this institution.*

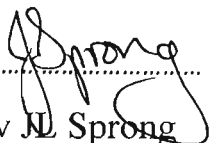
  
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Rev **JL Sprong**

25 November 2002

**Registration Number: 200000211**

*This research project has only been possible because of a generous grant. The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF South Africa) towards this project is hereby acknowledged. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Board of the Foundation.*

*I wish to confirm that I have abided by the terms and conditions stipulated in the scholarship agreement, and that the National Research Foundation is absolved of any responsibility with regard to this scholarship. The opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation. However, it is hoped that the objectives of the Foundation have been honoured throughout. I sincerely believe that gender equality in South Africa impacts on society and, 'In so doing, it contributes to the improvement of the quality of life of all the people of the country' (NRF: SSH9/2001).*

  
Rev J. L. Sprong

25 November 2002

# Abbreviations:

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AGS	<i>Apostoliese Geloof Sending</i> (AFM)✠
AFM	Apostolic Faith Mission ✠
AIC	African Independent Churches
AIDS	Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome
ANC	African National Congress
DNA	Deoxyribo Nucleic Acid
DRC	Dutch Reformed Church *
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
NGK	<i>Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk</i> (DRC) *
NIV	New International Version (of the Bible)
NRF	National Research Foundation (South Africa)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (of the Bible) (Unless otherwise stated all Scripture references in the text are taken from this version of the Bible)
RSA	Republic of South Africa
STEP	Systematic Training in Effective Parenting
TEEC	Theological Education by Extension College
UDW	University of Durban-Westville
UK	United Kingdom (of Britain)
UNISA	University of South Africa
USA	United States of America

*For our foremothers . . .*

*grandmothers, godmothers,  
stepmothers and mothers.*



*"Feminism did not inspire me to write this book. I wrote it because I am angry. In the feminist interpretation of a text, anger is indeed a sound hermeneutic principle. But my anger is not in service of a theory. I am angry, and I am sad, especially when I look around me and I see Afrikaans women who are socially and politically enslaved by their piety.*

*I am, of course, not angry at the women. I identify very strongly with those women whose diaries I have read. In a certain sense, their story is also my story: the story of a woman fervently seeking her God, pleading for religious answers to life's problems and losses.*

*These women are my foremothers. They lived on border farms in the eighteenth-century Cape Colony; they formed part of the Great Trek; they clung to life in British concentration camps. They searched for religious comfort when their children and their other loved ones died. They had no theological training. Furthermore, they were regarded by society as Eve and therefore as guilty of the misery of all society.*

*Now that Afrikaans women are beginning to undergo theological training, it is no longer possible to believe this pious but deadly lie. This is my story of my foremothers' story. Now we are no longer storyless."*

Christina Landman (1994:vii-viii)



# Preface

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Much is currently being written about this new 'Age of Aquarius' we have just entered and many people believe that Africa, as a continent, will be coming into her own during this new millennium. Religious freedom is being strongly advocated and people are generally becoming more spiritually aware. The age of colonialism, racial exploitation and male dominance is gratefully over - or is it?

Attempting research, such as this, has been a daunting experience, to say the least. My efforts ought therefore to be seen as ones coming from a white woman, with an Afrikaans-speaking background and in the light of my limited exposure to inter-faith and cross-cultural experience. However, it was with a keen sense of anticipation and much enthusiasm that I approached a number of women to join a spirituality group at the beginning of this year. Those who accepted the invitation became the working group, whose experiences form the basis for most of the qualitative empirical research embarked upon for this project.

Although most Afrikaans-speaking people in South Africa have their roots in a local brand of Calvinism, I have had the good fortune to be raised in a Methodist Church, which endeavoured to consistently challenge the racist *Apartheid*<sup>i</sup> system in which I grew up. The conflict between the values I was taught at school, church and home contributed much to my adolescent confusion with regard to the nature of God. Even though I have had a close and personal relationship with Jesus Christ since my early teens, it has only been in very recent years that the images I have of God have matured and that my understanding of the nature of God has developed more fully.

The way we relate to God therefore seems to also guide the way we develop our spirituality. This research project will focus on a very specific type of spirituality and an inclusive attitude will be encouraged and fostered throughout.

Similarly to the way in which Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins (1992:121) were challenged by Marjory Zoet Bankson<sup>ii</sup>, I too am being challenged to not only bask in the knowledge that I am a 'child of God' but to also grow into becoming an 'adult of God'. This challenge confronts all people, including the white Christian women in this Eastern Free State town.

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<sup>i</sup> This term for 'separate development' has become universally accepted.

<sup>ii</sup> From *Braided Streams: Esther and a Woman's Way of Growing*. San Diego: LuraMedia, (1985:70).

The development of the project, constantly monitored during the research period, will hopefully give an objective view of the material covered and also of the group's resistance or openness to these theories.

The bibliographical reference list has been compiled from all the books and other sources, either in their entirety or in relevant sections, which have at some stage during this research period been consulted. Although only a fraction of the scholars consulted are in fact quoted directly in the final project, their works have all influenced and directed my thinking to either a lesser or a greater extent. Without the dedication and commitment of scholars and authors, who put their thoughts down on paper, this research would not have been possible.

Part of the mission statement of the Christian Church denomination, to which I belong, states that we pledge to be a church for 'healing and transformation'. This project therefore endeavours to stay true to this pledge. I believe that healing and transformation in both Church and Society can only become a reality if true feminist theological perspectives are embraced and implemented. This project wishes to examine and declare what these theories entail.

Daphne Hampson (1990:24) challenged the Church when she wrote that

At a time when my country had a woman in the highest office of state,  
women were still not admitted to the lowest order in the church, that of  
deacon.

These kinds of challenges will be examined in this research and comments, suggestions and hope for the future will be expressed throughout.

*Jenette Sprong*

November 2002

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# Acknowledgements

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Many and probably countless people have shaped my life and here I wish to acknowledge their contributions, both directly and indirectly, to the ongoing quest for equality and wholeness for all humanity. Like Jean Lanier, I too acknowledge that

I am part of a network of events that have occurred in the lives of many people, some of whom are unknown to me. I know that their deaths must have contributed to my life, and that without them I would not be who I am. To be aware of this is to carry their love within my heart, and to live in a spirit of gratitude. *“The Communion of Saints”*<sup>iii</sup>

I therefore pay a special tribute to those who remain nameless. I am grateful to the many people who have influenced my thinking and guided my life’s journey and I am deeply indebted to teachers, ministers, family members and friends who took me seriously and made time to talk to me about the important things in life. I salute colleagues in the ministry of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, who have both challenged and encouraged me.

I wish also to acknowledge lecturers, professors, tutors, markers and fellow students at both the Theological Education by Extension College (TEEC) and the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), for their contributions to my more recent development and thinking. At times it seemed as if I was being stretched beyond my capabilities but now I am grateful for the demands made on my ability.

It would not have been possible to bring this research to fruition had it not been for the participation of a special group of committed women. The spirituality group, *Anaphaino*<sup>iv</sup>, met weekly from April to October and even though some found many of the issues under discussion very disturbing, most of them persevered with the group right to the very end.

I acknowledge the contributions of all the people who participated in the questionnaires prepared for this research. Their honesty and their willingness to share their thoughts, feelings and beliefs have helped me to analyse, in part at least, the attitudes of a fairly balanced cross-section of the white community, in the Eastern

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<sup>iii</sup> Quoted by Anderson and Hopkins (1992:206) in their book, *The Feminine Face of God*.

<sup>iv</sup> Greek for ‘show’, ‘cause to appear’, ‘have pointed out’ or ‘discover’  
- Number 398 in Strong’s Concordance (1977:12).

Free State, toward gender equality, women in leadership and general wholeness for all. I am also most grateful to all who were generous with their time during the formal interviews.

I acknowledge the support, in principle, of the Leaders' Meeting of this Church, more especially so because the subject of my research did not meet with the overall approval of many of the members.

I acknowledge the works of feminist theologians, through whose books and articles I have grown and deepened in my faith and understanding of God, and that of secular feminist scholars, whose works have broadened my horizons. I pay tribute to those who produce television programmes that keep feminist perspectives on the agendas of Communities and Churches. The two authors, whom I wish to single out, are Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza whose works have by far influenced my thinking the most, and Christina Landman, whose Afrikaans roots resonate with mine. I am awed by their balanced insight and deeply grateful to them for addressing enormously complex issues and being brave enough to disagree publicly when convicted to do so. Their humility has taught me so much about how to go about convincing others to join us on this journey of discovery to greater wholeness and equality. Their disciplined dedication to writing challenges me to do the same.

I also wish to pay a special tribute to the works by African women theologians as they have made me more aware of the deep spirituality of African people. Women like Nyambura Njoroge, Musa Dube, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro have contributed so much to my understanding of African spirituality and their views of Christian feminism have helped me to understand my African black sisters better.

It also needs to be acknowledged that much of the reading and research done for my Honours Degree continues to influence my thinking and that the major topics covered in the mini dissertation for that degree have formed the outline of the weekly discussions during this year's research. As these form part of the foundation upon which feminist thought is structured, it was deemed essential to expand on that research, even though the empirical section of this dissertation has narrowed down the discussion of these theories considerably.

It seems appropriate here to acknowledge the contributions of other aspects of my spiritual development. The discipline of silence, the various practices in listening to God - including the walking of the labyrinth, participating in retreats and discussions outside of this community and serving on ecumenical social concern

forums have all added to my sensitivity to God and to others. The people, who have led and guided me, especially during this past year, have also indirectly contributed to this research project and for that I am thankful.

Finally I acknowledge the support of my family and, very especially, that of my spouse of almost thirty years, Kevin, who believes in me.

*Jenette Sprong*

November 2002

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# Foreword

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The pilgrim's call to journey into wholeness holds the promise of much that is enjoyable and life fulfilling. But the call also leads the pilgrim to face the death of so much that has been sustaining in the past and seemed hopeful for the future. Identifying with Christ's journey to the cross sharpened the recognition that resurrection is only experienced after journeying through death.

As Jenette has explored feminist theology over the past fifteen years or so there have been times of death. Family and friends have not been able to understand more than the rudimentary elements of her journey. Colleagues have not comprehended why she could not leave well enough alone. Leadership abilities previously employed in many useful activities seemed now to be channelled into this alienating journey that promises so little. For an Afrikaner girl it has been a journey of giving up so much that is precious.

Yet God's graciousness provided resurrection companions also, fellow explorers of this new life. Some have been real live people willing to explore new wholeness paradigms. Others have been pilgrims who travelled a little further and, writing of their own journey, left a trail for her to follow. These have all been life sustaining, assuring Jenette that her journey is one of hope and wholeness.

As this part of her journey is documented it reflects the elements of death and new life. Reported here are the fears that need to be overcome if the journey is to continue. Thankfully also, it records the faith that sustains her in the dark days and enlightens and calls forth celebration in the lighter moments. This account holds tenaciously to the hope that wholeness is possible and the courage to pursue it brings its own holistic reward.

This story of her journey adds her light on the path to wholeness as she recounts her and her companions' pilgrimage through fear and faith as they explored a feminist theology.

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\* [Terms coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza]

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\*\* [One of the Chapters in *The Feminine Face of God* by Hopkins & Anderson (1992:72)]



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# Chapter One : Introduction

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## 1.0 Autobiographical Sketch

Jenette Louisa Sprong (nee Forster) was born in Johannesburg, South Africa on 7 June 1951 into a lower middle-class, white, Afrikaans-speaking family. She attended Afrikaans medium schools in the southern suburbs of Johannesburg and her family, and most of the extended family, were active members of the local English-speaking Methodist Church. She is therefore fully bilingual in Afrikaans and English.

There were five children in her family, three boys and two girls, of whom she was the eldest. Her mother was a “housewife” for most of her childhood – at least until she was in her teens - but then the family’s financial pressures forced her mother to seek employment outside the home. Her mother worked behind the counter at the local post office and later also as a receptionist for a local doctor. Her mother never drove a car and they never had a telephone in their home. Her father bought their first family car when she was about five years old.

She matriculated in 1968 and had to quit studying in order to “earn a living”. With three younger brothers and a sister to raise and educate, her parents could not afford to continue supporting her, not to even mention the cost of tertiary education fees. She worked as an accounting machine operator and saved furiously in order to, two years later, spend three months in Europe. This was the beginning of a whole new dimension in both education and experience for her. She was compelled to ask important questions regarding the political situation in South Africa in the 1970s. Soon after her return to South Africa she became actively involved in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s youth leadership and social awareness programmes. In 1973 she married Kevin Sprong, who entered the Methodist ministry in 1975. They have two daughters, Bianca (25) and Camilla (19).

In the late 1980s, whilst in ministry in Brackenhurst, Alberton, Jenette embarked on the TEEC<sup>1</sup> Diploma in Theology, duly completing the course and subsequently registering for an Honours Degree at the University of Durban-Westville in the year 2000. After completing this degree she was encouraged to continue her research and read for a Masters Degree in Feminist Christian Theology.

Her involvement in the leadership, at local and district level, with the Women's Auxiliary, Women's Network and Social Concerns Commissions of the Methodist Church confirmed her desire to address the issues of gender inequality in her own country, and more specifically, within her own church. Exposure to the United Church of Canada, through a "Face to Face" exchange programme in 1997, challenged her to pursue a course of formal study in feminist Christian perspectives.

During an eight-day 'Life Revision' retreat at the end of 1998, she came to grips with her heritage and consciously decided to reclaim her full name, after having accepted to be known by her nickname ever since her late teens. The journey inward was both exhilarating and painful but as she started to plan the journey outward she became very aware of some definite dreams. Her goals for the future, therefore, included a deep desire to continue to invite and challenge others to read more, to study courageously and to grapple with the issue of gender equality and wholeness for all people, in both the church and in the wider community.

In August 2002 she was accepted into the ministry of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and starts her journey towards ordination with Phase I at the beginning of the year 2003. Currently serving in a conservative community, which embraces a fundamentalist perspective of theology, is proving to be a serious challenge for her. In this town patriarchy and hierarchical structures are as it were 'cast in stone' and white male dominance seems to be taken as a given. She discovered that most of her opposition and resistance to feminist perspectives actually came from the women in the community, who have fully bought into the patriarchal system.

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<sup>1</sup> Theological Education by Extension College – member of the Joint Theological Board of Southern Africa.

## 1.1 Title, Topic and Rationale of Contextualisation

The title of this project was carefully chosen in order to demonstrate that faith and fear are closely linked when it comes to feminist perspectives in the Christian Church, especially in a small South African town in the Free State. A Native American teacher, when asked about her response to feminist spirituality, said that

If we who know what it is to bring forth the unknown from our own bodies can't be comfortable with this process, we'll just continue to perpetuate the old ways and we'll all be in trouble. Because, while it's scary for us women, it's far scarier for men who have never had the experience of giving birth and who must be very frightened.<sup>2</sup>

The radical transformation, to which it is believed that Christ called people, seems to be 'spiritualised' in this community. It is hoped that the title captures the essence of the research undertaken and that it evokes in the reader an interest and, more important, an awareness of the academia's responsibility to expose and challenge exclusivism in both church and society. The title, "*Faith, Fear and Feminist Theology*" seeks to both incorporate the theory of some of the major subjects covered by feminist scholars as well as cover the empirical research embarked on during this year.

The topic or subtitle, "The experiences of women, in a small Free State town of South Africa, demonstrate some of the effects of patriarchal domination in church and society", was chosen particularly because it is being recognised that feminist theological studies are crucial in the quest for religious, cultural and social transformation in the South African context. Moreover, it is acknowledged that this kind of research is breaking new ground in this town. Most of the women who joined the working group did not understand the terms 'feminism' or 'feminist theology' and none of them had ever read a book or an article on feminist perspectives.

It is clear, as I have outlined in my autobiographical sketch that this research is being presented from a particular bias. I deemed it necessary to state my own position because, I believe, all research begins at one's own perspective. It is also important, however, to add that

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Anderson and Hopkins (1992:225) in *The Feminine Face of God*.

the research for this particular project grew out of the research done for an Honours Degree, which was conferred in May 2002.

I wish to state that every effort has been made to guard against some common pitfalls. Firstly, I have endeavoured, throughout, not only to examine and accept those viewpoints of scholars, which resonate with my own experience and secondly, I have consciously tried to look at those scholars, whose arguments, at times, go against my beliefs and my own points of view. I have also taken great care to accurately reflect the opinions of others, with whom I have worked very closely throughout this year, in order to examine the situation in the Eastern Free State and bring to light the experiences of the members of the working group as authentically as is possible.

## 1.2 Objectives

The first of the two main objectives of this research has been to engage with a small group of Christian women in order to monitor their responses to feminist theological perspectives. They have been instructed, according to a programme<sup>3</sup> of weekly sessions, in feminist thought in general and, more specifically, exposed to excerpts from some of the finest works by feminist theologians. As far as possible Scripture references have been used to support or inform the topic under discussion.

The second key objective has been to continue to study the works of feminist scholars and to critically review aspects, which seem to impact directly on the responses and experiences of the people in this town. Two scholars' works that are being reviewed specifically are Professors Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's (USA) books, *In Memory of Her* (1983<sup>4</sup>) and *Discipleship of Equals* (1993) and Christina Landman's (RSA) book, *The Piety of Afrikaans Women* (1994).

Although the qualitative research with the working group is stated as the first objective, the empirical section of the research will be dealt with after the theory has been examined. Cross-referencing will happen throughout but the overall analysis, especially with

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 5.

<sup>4</sup> Using the Tenth Anniversary version (1994).

regard to the more formal responses to the questionnaires and interviews, will be presented in the empirical section in chapter four.

It will, at all times, remain a priority to contextualise the theories studied. It is believed that an analysis of those aspects, which have a direct bearing on the South African context, will be more helpful than attempting to draw analogies with all 'Western Feminisms'. A concerted effort, however, will be made to relate the various scholars' research to gender in/equality in South Africa. It is therefore also hoped that some of these scholars' findings would speak into the experience of the South African community, and more especially into that of the people living in the Eastern Free State.

The final objective of this research is to dream some dreams and to look to the future. No research can ever be exhaustive, so some aspects for future research will be suggested in the hope that research, such as this, will continue.

As achieving gender equality and wholeness for all humanity has been a high priority in this research, it must be mentioned at the outset that this project met with heavy opposition, criticism and even led to some of the women, who participated in the working group, becoming alienated from members of the Leaders' Meeting of this congregation. In his book, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*, Daniel Goleman (1985:240) suggests that

A group may implicitly demand of its members that they sacrifice the truth to preserve an illusion. Thus the stranger stands as a potential threat to the members of a group, even though [s]he may threaten them only with the truth. For if that truth is of the sort that undermines shared illusions, then to speak it is to betray the group.

The 'group' in this case would be the 'church community' and the 'stranger' would be me. The 'truth' being presented is a feminist perspective on Christian theology and this is certainly being seen as 'undermining the shared illusions' of a patriarchal religion and the hierarchical structures of the church. It is therefore acknowledged that gender equality is neither a reality in many South African communities nor is it always practised in our Christian Churches. In this Free State town, more especially, patriarchy also seems to be deeply ingrained in most of its people's life-styles, relationships and business, and even perpetuated in the church. Hierarchical structures are viewed as 'holy' or 'God-given' and there is strong resistance to any new model of leadership. Young people, for the most part, are ignored completely and

women have been marginalised and are constantly discriminated against and viewed as the weaker, irrelevant or incomplete sex. I therefore believe that this kind of research is absolutely essential. It is hoped that the exposure to feminist thought and the introduction to new paradigms for leadership would conscientise this community to such an extent that transformation could begin to take place in people's attitudes, everyday life, practices and religion. In the preface to her book, *When The Heart Waits*, Sue Monk Kidd (1992:ix) talks about the importance of waiting,

for in many ways waiting is the missing link in the transformation process. I'm not referring to waiting as we're accustomed to it, but waiting as the passionate and contemplative crucible in which new life and spiritual wholeness can be birthed.

If something of this kind of 'waiting on God' could begin to happen for a small group of women during the course of this year, I believe that the exposure to feminist perspectives, as is hoped this research will facilitate, will achieve a major milestone.

### 1.3 Aims

One of the aims of this research is to make South African people aware of the effects of gender inequality. Another aim is to document observations, both the informal information gathered and the data collected through the formal questionnaires and recorded during interviews. The results of this research will be analysed and attempts will be made to relate the findings to some of the current points of view in the Eastern Free State and the wider South Africa.

As the system of patriarchy seems to be alive and well in this Free State town, it is anticipated that the exposure to feminist thought could be explored through an intensive empirical research programme. The purpose of this study would be what Denzin (1989:83) calls a 'thick description'<sup>5</sup> of the experiences of a small group of Christian women - in their

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<sup>5</sup> "A 'thick description' does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history (*her-story*\*) into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard."  
(\*my own insert)

homes, careers and in the Christian Church [quoted by Mouton (2001:188)].

## 1.4 Hypothesis

The subtitle of this dissertation presents us with a particular kind of hypothesis for this research, which is being attempted with a small group of women this year. That “*The experiences of women, in a small Free State town of South Africa, demonstrate some of the effects of patriarchal domination in church and society*”, is being anticipated. It is, however, envisaged that as the project evolves this proposed hypothesis will unfold into more of a reality.

## 1.5 Relevance of Research

At the commencement of this research it is acknowledged that we live in a patriarchal world, with hierarchical structures and patriarchal values. It would seem that a need exists to unmask the oppressive function of patriarchal theology in the church and to expose damaging values in society and in the academia.

The diversity of the feminist approach is recognised and the hope is expressed that this research will extract some of its value and find ways of imparting aspects of these new paradigms to the people in this town.

Even though the approach of this research has been influenced predominantly by Western feminism, it is acknowledged that

Third World feminisms in turn insist that the inter-actions of racism, colonialism, and sexism are defining women’s oppression and struggle for liberation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:254).

These various perspectives result in different conceptions of feminism, of women’s liberation and that of being human in the world.

## 1.6 Key Critical Questions

Some of the general questions to be asked in this research will be to encompass familiar feminist concepts, starting with examining the terms: “Feminism, Womanism and



Feminist Theology” and then steadily working through the following: “The Question of ‘Her-story’ - Patriarchy and its effects on women throughout the ages”, “*Discipleship of Equals*”<sup>6</sup>, “The Traditional Roles of Women and Men”, “Our Christian Heritage”, “Women in the Parables”, “Language and Culture”, “Symbols and Rituals”, “Social Transformation”, “Circles versus Pyramids”, “Women and Choice”, “The Nature of God and whether God could be ‘More than that ...’ ”, “Feminine and Masculine”, “Women and the Christian Church”, “Relating to God”, “God-talk and Inclusive Language”, “Sainthood and Sisterhood”, “Hope for the True Liberation for all People” and concluding with “A Dream for the Future”.

The ultimate, and what I believe to be the key question in this research, will be to examine the responses of, firstly, the small working group of women and secondly, those of the wider community in the Eastern Free State, to some of the general questions, as they have been outlined in the previous paragraph.

## 1.7 Methodology

The method adopted is to systematically and thematically address the pertinent issues. It will be endeavoured to reflect on the two main scholars’ opinions and contributions and, where applicable, suggestions for future research will be made in each sub-section, where space and time does not allow for an in-depth discussion of that particular issue. On the whole all the theory will be considered in the light of its effect on the people in this town and, more specifically, its effects on the women who are part of the working group. Their responses will be discussed fully in chapter four, which examines the empirical research.

The research is being presented in six chapters. The first chapter is divided into nine sections, each dealing with an aspect of the research design. The theory, which has been taken mainly, but not exclusively so, from the two key scholars mentioned in 1.2, will be examined and presented in the second chapter, which forms an important part of this research paper. This chapter is divided into six sections and each of the middle four sections deals with a specific theme. These themes attempt to relate to one another through sub-sections and it is endeavoured that the themes flow into the next and/or follow on from the previous topic. By

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<sup>6</sup> Terms in italics coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

the nature of this research there will be some cross-referencing throughout. It is hoped that a thematic approach, such as this, will propound a clear understanding of the various aspects being discussed. The third chapter presents the purpose of the 'Working Group', *Anaphaino*<sup>7</sup>. Here the topics for all the weekly discussions are considered through, firstly, an introduction to the project and a recording of the initial expectations of the members of the working group, followed by twenty-two distinct headings. The theory is covered, frameworks and formats of each of the meetings are outlined, reflections on the group members' participation are embroidered upon and some final observations are offered in 3.23.

The fourth chapter, which is divided into twelve sections, deals with analysing, interpreting and documenting observations. In this chapter various research methods are incorporated, especially those that help to link an academic approach with spiritual experience. The formal questionnaires as well as the interviews are assessed and discussed, some deductions are made and recommendations are suggested. The actual questionnaires are included at the beginning of each section that deals with its analysis.

Chapter five is set aside specifically to gauge any levels of growth or change in attitudes, beliefs and practices amongst the women of the working group. I believe that the eleven sections in this chapter, by necessity, will be less of an academic exercise than the preceding chapters and more of an attempt to examine the identified gaps in the spirituality, initially that of the women in the working group, but not exclusively so. For research, of this kind, to have a deeper relevance it is deemed imperative to include such a chapter.

The final conclusions are drawn in the four sections of chapter six. The first examines the initial expectations through a brief overview of the whole project, the next two sections deal with the various insights gained by undertaking this research, identifies aspects for further research and looks towards the future, with hope.

The final section hopes to draw this research in social transformation in the Eastern Free State to an appropriate close.

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<sup>7</sup> Greek for 'show', 'cause to appear', 'have pointed out' or 'discover'  
 - Number 398 in Strong's Concordance (1977:12).

## 1.8 Synopsis

When I heard, towards the end of last year, that we would be moving from living and ministering in the city of Durban to living in a small town and ministering in a Circuit<sup>8</sup> in the Eastern Free State, I was apprehensive, to say the least. First of all, I was aware of the fact that the majority of the people in our new congregations - we were to serve five - would probably come from predominantly Afrikaans-speaking backgrounds. I also recognised that only a few, if any, of the people in these new communities we would be serving, would be open to feminist thought or Christian feminist theology. However, it seemed right nonetheless to embark on an empirical research programme of this nature, even in such a conservative community, so that the level of openness, or resistance, to feminist perspectives in the Eastern Free State could be determined.

Although, at the stage of writing, it seemed as though it might have been better had this kind of research only been introduced after an initial period of time had passed, during which the people in this community could have been given some time to build up a relationship with us, I believe there were also elements of 'surprise' that were invaluable for this paper.

Patriarchal domination oppresses women and to achieve their full liberation is the hope of this exercise. Doing this research has relevance for all people, not only for women. Men, too, are deprived of their full potential when they oppress others, whether these are women or other groups, identified by race, age or ethnic grouping. As we are examining, very specifically, Christian principles in this research, it has come to light that true Christianity, as I believe Christ sought to institute it, seems to have been lost since very early on in the history of the faith. The aspects being examined in chapter two are intended to furnish several points of view and, most of all, to challenge all South African people to re-look at their attitudes towards gender in/equality in church and society. It is hoped that this exercise will in turn lead to a change in attitude towards all other forms of exploitation, oppression and abuse.

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<sup>8</sup> Similar to a small Diocese.

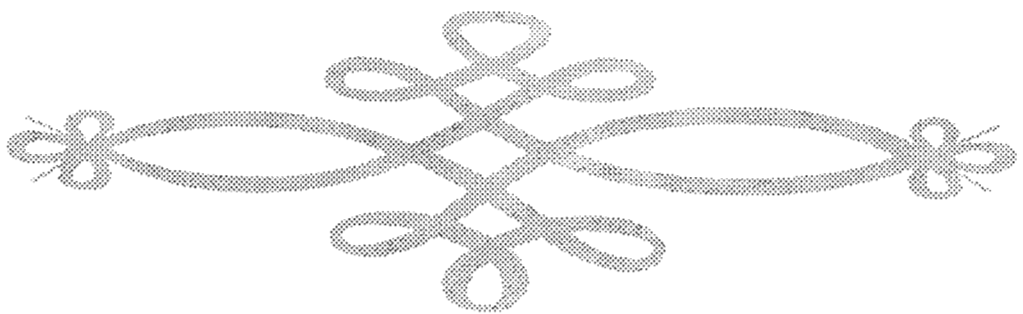
Chapter three deals with the weekly discussions, and as has already been acknowledged, these topics formed the basis of the research done for my honours degree, which was conferred earlier this year.

The methods used to obtain data, either formally or informally, are discussed in chapter four. Apart from regular observations, at the weekly meetings and during informal get-togethers in members' homes or at church, willing participants completed four questionnaires during the research period. Notes were kept of all incidences, stories shared, insights gained and these have been used in the presentation of the assessments in each relevant section of chapter four.

Chapter five has been designed to cover some aspects of spirituality, which may be lacking in the understanding of the people in this area, many of whom have never been exposed to an alternative way of relating to God.

This comprehensive introduction should give a glimpse into what is intended to be an intensive examination of patriarchy and the effects of gender inequality on women in South Africa and, very particularly, in this Eastern Free State community.

Chapter two introduces us to the theoretical review and it is hoped that these debates will reveal how each aspect relates to the theme of this research.



# Chapter Two : Theoretical Overview

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## 2.0 Prologue

So it will be said that Christianity has weathered many a crisis: feminism is simply the latest. As the saying goes, Christianity is always adapting itself to something believable: it will do so again. It is conservative Christians who, together with more radical feminists, perceive that feminism represents not just one crisis among many. For the feminist challenge strikes at the heart of Christianity (Hampson 1990:1).

Although Daphne Hampson classifies herself as a post-Christian feminist, I deem her comments regarding many key aspects in the Christian faith to be pertinent. If the feminist challenge does indeed strike at the heart of the Christian faith, what is or at least should be an appropriate response? Such a question is a mammoth matter, especially since answers to some other questions need to be attempted first. Questions like “What is essentially Christian?”, “Can both conservative and liberal schools of thought, which are poles apart, be classified as being Christian?” or “Are literalists and those who are happy to read the Bible with openness to symbolism, both categorised as Christian?”. I believe the two authors, whose works have been used principally to inform much of the research for this project, deal with quite a number of these initial questions.

Even though Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes from a mixture of European (Roman Catholic, German) and North American (USA) backgrounds, she applies a sound biblical hermeneutical scholarship. She covers almost all, if not all, of the components of feminist thought in her Christian theological books. It remains a discipline to contextualise her material for use in South Africa but she offers exceptional frameworks from within which to work. The weekly discussion themes, to be examined fully in chapter three, are all taken from Schüssler Fiorenza’s book, *In Memory of Her* (1983<sup>9</sup>), with regular reference to another of her

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<sup>9</sup> See footnote 4.

fine works, *Discipleship of Equals* (1993). One of the reasons why this author's work is being reviewed in this chapter is very particularly because she charts her own feminist theological struggles. She, as Krister Stendahl Professor of Divinity at the Harvard Divinity School, herself writes that

More than ever before, the women's movements in society and religion need a critical feminist analysis of patriarchal religious structures and a critical feminist theological articulation of liberation. By tracing my own unfolding journey of vision and struggle and by relating it to the collective struggle of women in theology, I seek to intervene in the contest over who has the right and authority to define and claim biblical religion. (Cover of *Discipleship of Equals* 1993)

This author's balanced insight and skilful writing challenges the Christian Church and the wider community to evaluate their attitudes to people in general. Not only does she work for gender equality but her efforts also clearly encompass the value of all of humanity. Wholeness, which is a focus of feminist theology, wants to revere the place of old and young, women and men, those of another sexual orientation, those of other racial and ethnic groupings and addresses any other way in which human beings tend to exclude 'the other'. In this town, where this specific research project is being conducted, it seems as if very little 'wholeness' is experienced. I therefore believe that the exposure to feminist perspectives, even if this has only been to a very small group, has been a vitally important exercise.

The second author, whose works have been used in undertaking this research, is Christina Landman. She is a Professor of Church History and she is also attached to the Institute of Research in Theology and Religion, both at UNISA<sup>10</sup>. Her research for her book, *The Piety of Afrikaans Women* (1994), has shed light on the ways in which patriarchy and ecclesial hierarchy have influenced women and men in South Africa. It must be acknowledged that her book is addressing the piety, or spirituality, of Afrikaans-speaking women but much of the research during this project has shown that many families, including some English-speaking South African families, have inherited many of these unworthy values and are perpetuating them by imparting them to their children. This Free State town, where I now live and with which community I have engaged during this year, has its history steeped in Afrikaans and its religion firmly rooted in local Calvinism. My guess is that Landman

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<sup>10</sup> University of South Africa.

accurately discerns the effects of eighteenth century German/Dutch patriarchal piety on Afrikaans women and I believe that by examining her research, a more beneficial series of observations will be made. As an Afrikaans woman by birth, I myself recognised many of her theories and because they rang true for me I felt secure in pursuing similar avenues of research with the working group, who will be introduced in chapter four.

Professor Landman has earned her credibility in local feminist theological research by being one of the pioneers in South Africa. She has regularly written scholarly articles for theological journals and for a newspaper column. Her book, in Afrikaans, *Wat nou van Isebel?*<sup>11</sup> (Landman 1996), challenges the traditional rendering of stories about women in the Bible. While expounding a different angle in each brief story, she also helps the reader to reflect upon God in a new way. It was a true delight to find this book in the local public library. Because it is a fairly short book, written in Afrikaans, and in lay language, it has proved to be a great tool for motivating the working group to start reading articles and books on feminist perspectives. She tells their stories in between the lines of the stories of the biblical characters.

## 2.1 Male Dutch and German Pietism

Landman introduces us to early eighteenth century Dutch pietism and although this 'brand' of Christianity lost support in the Netherlands in the early nineteenth century, it seems to have come along, to stay, with the settlers to South Africa. Maria van Riebeeck, whose father, Abraham Quevellerius, had been the Reformed *dominee*<sup>12</sup> of Rotterdam since 1619, came to the Cape as the 'housewife' of Jan van Riebeeck, who was the first official white settler in South Africa. A local Khoi-khoi woman, Krotoa, who was renamed Eva, became Maria's servant. Landman (1994:9) uses these two women's names to draw an analogy between what she calls 'a good biblical story' of the beginnings of Christian women in South Africa, and the Bible stories of Eve, in the account of creation, and Mary, especially in the

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<sup>11</sup> Translated into English as *What now about Jezebel?*

<sup>12</sup> Afrikaans for minister.

birth narrative of Jesus. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination was one of the hot issues of that time and Landman (1994:10) suggests that

It is assumed that the religious concepts conveyed at this first contact of a Dutch woman with South Africans were those of Dutch male orthodoxy of the seventeenth century: God chooses us; God civilises us; God sends us to hell with our cooperation. Probably under the compulsion of these concepts, Maria van Riebeeck effected the first conversion to Christianity amongst the local Khoi-khoi, namely her servant, Krotoa, renamed Eva, whose life subsequently displayed the influences of these religious concepts: as God's chosen she left the context of her tribe, only to die eventually in her own hell of prostitution and alcoholism.

It is both interesting and sad to note that while Christianity in South Africa was going through an orthodox 'Mary-and-Eve' phase, the Netherlands were entering the process of producing an 'early form of pious religious feminism with Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678)' (Landman 1994:10). This woman also became the first female student at a Dutch university. She joined a religious household of Jean de Labadie towards the end of her life, 'where women held a higher level of influence than in the mainline churches' (Landman 1994:10). The Labadists were part of a pietist reaction against contemporary orthodoxy in the Netherlands.

However, it was the orthodox brand of pietism that was influencing Afrikaans women in South Africa. It seemed to have manifested itself in different forms and according to Landman (1994:10) it became clear that

In general it carried the characteristics of self-guilt, heavenly joy through continuous prayer, a pessimist view of humanity and the renouncement of everything natural and worldly. Eventually these religious tendencies concerning pessimism and the emphasis of guilt became characteristic of the religious experience of Afrikaans women. Despite their isolation, these women radicalised the ideas, using as their sources not the Dutch women, but the male European pietists.

The diaries examined by Landman (1994) in her book, *The Piety of Afrikaans Women*, reveal a mainly pessimistic, guilt-ridden piety, an obsession with hell, Satan and with personal sin. They also reveal that women recorded their fantasies of God's physical presence and care, and the experiences of divine visions. They write, however, in a self-humiliating language and refer constantly to the threat of many personal enemies, including Satan and the



heathen. Landman observes that the form of piety expressed in these diaries speak of the type of theology these women were exposed to and, to an overwhelming extent, of the restrictive experiences in their female subculture. Catharina van Lier's diary, which was published in 1804, 'is characteristic of what eventually became the trademark of Afrikaans female piety: excessive feelings of guilt expressed in terms of a demanding God, a poor view of the self as well as of other people' (Landman 1994:12).

Landman, when discussing the inauguration of the Women's Monument, plainly states that their own men misused Afrikaans women in order to accomplish their nationalist ideals. It seems as if the *Women's Monument*, erected just outside of Bloemfontein in the Free State, was a misnomer, as only men were buried at the foot of this monument, with the exception of Mrs Steyn, the wife of President Steyn, who 'received the dubious honour of being buried on top of her husband' (Landman 1994:4). She goes on to suggest that 'because of this nationally honoured martyrdom, suffering became an inseparable part of the nature of these women' (Landman 1994:4).

It also seems as if men have always written most of the 'history' <sup>13</sup> of Afrikaans women. Landman (1994:3), however, declares that these histories were seldom the authentic experiences of women but were more often than not written from an 'antipathetical point of view of an Afrikaans male ideology towards women's suffrage'. She believes that Afrikaans women were 'convincingly indoctrinated' by these 'historical' illustrations that the 'natural beauty of their souls rendered them unsuitable to vote' (Landman 1994:3). Infuriatingly during the 1910s, when women in Europe were busy working towards freeing themselves from male dominance, Afrikaans women were portrayed as 'pious martyrs and as fervent patriots' and 'they were honoured for taking part in the religious activities of their subculture and simultaneously remaining passive and submissive to the male dominant culture' (Landman 1994:3). The Dutch *Réveil* <sup>14</sup>, in the early nineteenth century, paved the way for the first waves of feminist activism, which hit the Netherlands in the last few decades of that century. Unfortunately, the women in South Africa were totally unaware of the role European

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<sup>13</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza also helps us to look at 'her-story' in relation to 'history'.

<sup>14</sup> A Protestant movement, through which women were encouraged to engage in charity work, in the Netherlands between 1815-1865 (Landman 1994:13).

women were playing during that time, and almost unbelievably, most traditional and conservative Afrikaans women still are.

### 2.1.0 Local Calvinism

Local South African Calvinism, according to Landman, was as sexist as it was racist. The Dutch-Afrikaans women, who mostly lived on farms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were excluded from any theological training. They therefore developed their own brand of unorthodox Calvinism. Whilst most Afrikaans men were formulating biblical Calvinism and applying ideological Calvinism, the women were (and Landman believes many still are) ‘serving the personal God of eighteenth-century Dutch piety’ (Landman 1994:2) and they took this outdated European piety along with them on the Great Trek. She suggests that

Although it was partly a male-formulated piety, it was attractive to these women because, on the one hand, it allowed them a personal relationship with God, which they were often denied with their husbands; on the other hand, because they were naturally proactive people, it afforded them the attraction of a life of individual holiness, self-sacrifice and service to God (Landman 1994:2).

It is also distressing to discover that the Afrikaans women who could read were reading the works of Dutch pietists, for whose books there was longer a market in the Netherlands and which were therefore shipped out to South Africa. Eric Stockenström, the historian, linked Afrikaans women’s morals with the nationalist agenda: “the women kept the nation white”. This applied also to those who remained in the Cape. ‘Morality and racism, as combined Christian characteristics, were responsible for making the Afrikaans women great’ (Landman 1994:7). She suggests that it was presupposed that Afrikaans women inherited their morals from their Dutch and French foremothers, but their religion from their forefathers. Two excerpts from Stockenström, as translated by Landman (1994:7-8), read as follows:

It is an irrefutable fact that the Boer women, however simple they appeared to be, were truly inspired with a deep religiosity, and that they, through their far-reaching moral influence were, and still are, the reason why the Boer population of the Cape Colony has remained a white race and why even today the great majority have remained true to the church and religion of their fathers (1921:246), and

If anyone should ask: ‘But now what was actually the influence of the Boer woman on the history of the Cape Colony?’ then we must answer that, in spite of the overwhelming indigenous influences, and no thanks to the attempt by the

British since 1806 to Anglicise the Dutch population, the Boer women, through their religiosity, their sense of freedom, their love of their fatherland, their love for their nation and language have been the most powerful reason why the Dutch population at the Cape never became one with the English but they have remained to the present day the unique, pure nation that has come to be associated with the name 'Afrikaner Boer' (1921:255).

Although some historical aspects of the 'Afrikaner Boer' have changed since 1921, here in the Eastern Free State much of what Stockenström wrote is still found to be true within both church and society. Landman (1994:8) purports that 'the religiosity of Afrikaans women was described and prescribed in terms of a male ideology which treats nationalism and morality as the main components of religiosity' and she sets out to examine the diaries of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Dutch-Afrikaans women in order to substantiate her claim.

### **2.1.1 My Personal Story**

Whilst on a Life Revision Course, at the beginning of 1999, I was afforded the opportunity to write my life's story in seven-year segments. It was here that I put into words some of the feelings I'd only been vaguely aware of before then. Although as a teenager I possessed neither the tools, nor the maturity, to assess some of the conflicts in the sphere of my spiritual upbringing, I somehow knew they existed. As a child, in the 1950s and early 60s, I recall sensing that there was something very different in what I learnt at our Methodist Sunday School and what was taught in our Afrikaans School's 'Religious Instruction' class. I could never understand why my mother was not comfortable for me to attend the Dutch Reformed Church's *Kinder-Krans*<sup>15</sup> on a Thursday afternoon. I suppose I consoled myself with the idea that it was important for me to learn to speak good English and that that was also the reason why we belonged to an English-speaking church. Only in my late teens did the differences in theology begin to dawn on me and it has only been in the last decade and a half that I have formally studied some of the key distinctions in what we believe and how we exercise our faith.

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<sup>15</sup> Similar to a junior children's guild in the Methodist Church.

The ‘doctrine of assurance’<sup>16</sup> helped me to work through some of the niggly bits that remained in my mind regarding the most unhelpful slant of the local brand of Calvin’s ‘doctrine of predestination’, which we were taught at school. Only in recent years have I begun to understand that much of South African ‘Calvinism’ is not an authentic example of Calvin’s doctrine at all. According to Landman, and other scholars, most South African Dutch Reformed theologians were strongly influenced by Abraham Kuyper. Landman (1994:6) describes Kuyper as ‘a conservative, woman-unfriendly Dutch statesman who actively resisted women’s suffrage in the Netherlands during the 1910s’.

Growing up in a South Africa that was ruled by a predominantly Dutch Reformed government and structure meant that some of the laws of the land reinforced what was taught at school. I am not suggesting that all the restrictions imposed on South African people were necessarily bad but I have come to respect the freedom of choice for all people. I also highly value that the new dispensation has made room for the individual’s religious devotion and commitment, rather than the majority only appearing pious on the outside because they had no choice in the matter anyway. The restrictions regarding shopping hours for instance, especially on Sundays, reinforced the importance of Sunday Observance. The local DRC *dominee* was very often a member of the Afrikaans school’s board, as was the case when I was at school, and so we took it for granted that certain activities were forbidden. No dances, except *Volkspeler*,<sup>17</sup> were allowed on school premises. Girls were not allowed to wear make-up to any school function to which we were allowed to wear ‘civvies’<sup>18</sup>. No alcohol was permitted on school premises – not even for a function attended only by parents and/or teachers. These restrictions became synonymous with so-called Christian beliefs and religion in general. Even today, after having studied theology for a number of years, my attitudes still tend to be dominated by my restricted upbringing unless I consciously channel my thinking to include alternatives. It seems, therefore, that to deduce that local Calvinism concentrated far more on the ‘law’ of the Old Testament than it did on the ‘abundant life’ offered by Jesus Christ in the New Testament would be quite tenable.

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<sup>16</sup> A distinctly Wesleyan doctrine.

<sup>17</sup> Afrikaans folk dancing.

<sup>18</sup> The common expression used when school uniforms were not required.

Discovering that local Calvinism was as sexist as it was racist was disconcerting even though it almost went without saying. The type of schooling and education of the 60s, especially in Afrikaans schools, left very little room for thinking and reasoning. We were mostly spoon-fed and forced into moulds according to our gender, our age and our race. In the early 70s, when I started to realise that all people of colour were human beings too, I discovered that in South Africa their education was not on a par with the standard of white people's education. The years of struggle against the wicked racist system of *Apartheid* stand out in my mind as being lonely years. Even my own family disapproved of my 'new phase' of social consciousness. I recall a heated argument between my father and my boyfriend, Kevin (whom I later married), when at 19 years of age the two of us had decided to go to a political meeting at which the leader of the Progressive Party was speaking. My father could not even begin to perceive that I would not automatically vote for the Nationalist Party. He believed that I **had** to follow his direction at home, in the church and in national life. At the time I did not yet have the freedom to discuss issues with my parents but I knew that I had to find out for myself what each political party stood for. At that time I had also not yet been exposed to any feminist perspectives, other than perhaps the revolutionary slogan that "feminists burn their bra's". I had only very recently begun to question the *Apartheid* system, after having spent three months in Europe. I realised later that my parents were very unhappy that I had found an English-speaking boyfriend even though I had met him at our local church. When the relationship became serious and there seemed nothing anyone could do to stop us from getting married – after courting for almost six years – my parents accepted him but my brothers did not. To this day they are fiercely critical of him and our relationships, as siblings, are very superficial. My only sister seems fairly comfortable with him as a brother-in-law but we've never lived within close proximity to one another and so our relationship is also not what one could call deep.

Few white people were willing to be arrested for their faith during the protests against *Apartheid*. I recall how members of our families, friends and neighbours warned us against going into black townships and against taking part in marches and protest meetings. It was not possible to heed their warning because I believed implicitly in the saying that suggests that

“for evil to triumph, good people must merely do nothing”. This does not mean that I was not often very frightened. I recall one protest march, when we were walking along a main street in a city centre, being very conscious of all the police officers and their dogs walking and standing alongside us, and taking heart from walking two paces behind Father Albert Nolan. He somehow inspired me to be calm and to remain focused. However, the miracle eventually occurred in 1994, when a more democratic dispensation was inaugurated in South Africa. I say ‘more democratic’ on purpose because I am under no illusion that any government is perfect. This government has made, and will continue to make, its mistakes but the changes in our national constitution do point towards a more balanced and holistic life-style for all the people of South Africa.

My spiritual formation started when I was very young. Being privileged to grow up in a worshipping family was something I never diminish. Being encouraged to study for and write Bible Knowledge Examinations when I was a child gave me a sound foundation of the content of the Bible. Being encouraged in Youth and Women’s Leadership within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa has stood me in good stead. Being married to a minister of religion allowed me additional opportunities to grow and deepen my faith and my spiritual awareness. Formal theological training is continuing to equip me for the ordained ministry, fostering a still deeper faith and enabling me to develop a more mature relationship with God.

My story, so far at least, will be incomplete without reference to my experiences this past year. In this conservative Free State town I have again come face to face with some childhood spiritual influences. The local Calvinism, spoken of earlier, is observed here and it has survived almost unscathed since the eighteenth century. A pastors’ forum meets in this town and my husband went along to their ‘all male’ meetings. The members are made up of a few DRC *dominees*, an Afrikaans Baptist pastor, an Anglican priest, an AGS pastor and several ‘Christian Centre’<sup>19</sup> pastors. I had to leave ‘the Methodist minister’ off the list as my husband felt it was better to resign, even though he had been elected onto their management committee at his second meeting.

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<sup>19</sup> Congregations that follow a *Rhema*-type worship and practice, and who probably tend to adopt a fundamentalist evangelical stance in their theology.

At one of their meetings a 'declaration of purpose', which was to form a kind of press statement was discussed and my husband felt that he was unable to sign such a statement. This led to quite a debate, after which several of the members declared that they did not think my husband could be a Christian if he believed that God may accept people of other faiths into 'heaven'. For the sake of 'peace' in the pastors' forum he has resigned. Another aspect of 'exclusivism' in this forum is the fact that the Roman Catholic priest and bishop have never been invited to their meetings and when my husband challenged them on this issue some of the members stated categorically that they could not share a platform with Roman Catholics.

This unfortunate interaction between the pastors' forum and my husband transpired about a month before I was accepted as a Methodist minister in Phase I and appointed to serve with my husband in this Circuit. It thus seems very likely, deducing from their responses to inter-faith relationships, that a woman minister, especially one who holds similar views to those of her husband, would not be welcome at this forum either. This situation makes the ministry a very lonely place as it is quite difficult and, at times, inappropriate to share with members of the congregation issues that pertain specifically to the ministry and/or to clergy. One would also prefer, at times at least, to share some of the joys and sorrows, challenges and victories in pastoral work with colleagues in the ministry. We also believe that our growing edge should be stimulated and challenged by colleagues, and within the Methodist Church in this part of our District, our Circuits are quite far apart. This kind of challenge therefore happens very seldom, mostly at the annual Synod and perhaps at District Retreats or other special workshops. I have made e-mail contact with the secretary of the Methodist Woman Ministers' Forum and I hope to connect regularly with them on issues facing women in the ministry.

In our local Methodist congregation we are dealing with some other challenges and because I sense that they are closely related to an inflexible background in patriarchy, I deem it necessary to attempt to paint a general picture of the ethos, within which this particular local church seems to have existed for more than a century. My husband, who has been in the Methodist ministry for twenty-seven years, was asked to take this 'difficult appointment' because the Connexional Stationing Committee believed he might be the 'right' person to

minister to this community. Had it not been for the fact that *his wife* was in the process of candidating for the ministry herself and, more important, pursuing feminist theological studies, he may very well have proved to be at least 'okay' if not quite 'right'. It is true that they did not ask for a woman minister. It is also true that because I am married to the minister who has been appointed by the Conference, they have little choice in now having one, but even apart from this current stumbling block, we need to examine some of the other blocks to effective ministry in this church. In 1904, so the minutes state, it seemed as if the minister was having difficulties with the leadership and he wanted to resign but was convinced not to do so by his superior, the Chairman of the District, at the time. Ever since then it seems to have become a pattern that 'unhappy' ministers and lay leaders either threaten to resign or actually resign from their office. Last year, the minister who was serving this congregation, finally left the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, after several threats to resign. He has formed his own 'Christian Centre'-type church down the road from the Methodist Church and he took all but one of the leaders in the Methodist Church with him. Most of the musicians also left with him and so when the Stationing Committee portrayed this church as a 'difficult appointment' it was probably a fairly accurate description. Some of the leaders have even enlightened us, with tongue in cheek, that this church has a reputation of being 'a graveyard for ministers'. In the beginning we felt strong and ready for the challenge to break such a negative reputation but as the months went by and we discovered just how deeply entrenched some of the bad habits and poor theology are in the lives and beliefs of these people, we are less confident as to whether we may in fact be the 'right' people for this congregation, or for this town.

Exposing a small group of women in this congregation to some specific aspects of feminist theology, as will be discussed in chapter three, has been quite an undertaking. The discipline to keep at it week after week became a serious strain. The realisation that all of the women in the group needed to be coached in some of the simple Christian basics, even though most of them had been regular 'church-goers' for many years, put an extra demand on the group. Most often the time set aside for discussion was inadequate and very little progress seemed to be made regarding theological depth and spiritual maturity. Attempting a circle-style of leadership has been an ongoing grind with slow, if any, participation from the group



members. As I am reflecting on my personal experiences these past eight months, I am very aware that this particular section is tending to be wholly subjective, as I suppose a personal narrative should be. However, when dealing with the analyses of questionnaires and interviews, in the fourth chapter, every effort will be made to remain objective and to apply an appropriate level of critical scholarship.

At the outset of this research I had committed myself to incorporating whatever the responses are of the women who join the working group. Now that the research is nearing its closing stages, I find myself asking another set of questions. At first I had believed that their responses would be enough. Now I sense a need to convince myself that: 'It is about doing research then, is it not?' My own feelings include elements of disappointment, disillusionment, sadness and anger. I am angry at the system, which has robbed these women of their freedom, of which for most part they remain oblivious. It is necessary for me to add that I have also experienced a degree of impatience with intelligent women who refuse to open their minds to new paradigms of leadership or who are most reluctant to acknowledge that the way they relate to God may only be one of the many ways in which God can be experienced.

It has also become clear to me that many of the women in this town enjoy their 'oppression'. They have someone (usually their husband) to blame when they do not care to be involved. Taking responsibility for one's own liberation is hard work and it may just be the case that the idea of liberation is not as attractive as is a gilded cage (for some of the wealthier women in this community). The hope remains, however, that once feminism is being explored, even if only by 'other' people in the community, this will also raise the awareness of other relevant social issues. One of these issues would be the exploitation of domestic workers. This definitely remains a key topic for future research in South Africa.

Recognising that this project really focuses on the experiences of other women, I draw my own story to a close. Fortunately, like all of our life stories, it is not over until the final chapter has been written. 'Hope springs eternal' for the women in this church, this town, this province and in our land. This hope, as Paul suggests in his first letter to the Corinthian Church, is one of the three most important qualities of Christianity. 'And now faith, hope, and

love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.’<sup>20</sup> The most important attribute, love, which is also described as the key fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5<sup>21</sup>, casts out all fear, according to John,<sup>22</sup> in his first epistle. This ‘fear’ is the crucial subject being addressed in the next section.

### 2.1.2 Fear and Guilt

Three different ways of approaching fear will be considered in this section. Firstly, the fear of a demanding God, which seems to be closely linked to excessive feelings of guilt, will be investigated. Secondly, the fear of change, which most people have experienced at one time or another, will be explored and thirdly, the fear of self, or what ‘the self’ represents, will be discussed.

To attempt to do justice to the title of this paper, fear, in many of its facets, needs to be examined as fully as possible. Fear, I believe, has both positive and negative qualities. As human beings we understand the value of having a healthy fear of, or respect for, nature when it comes to the elements such as fire, the ocean, volcanoes, snowstorms, avalanches, tornadoes and such like. Experience has taught us that a wholesome or creative fear of these mighty forces helps us to survive their onslaught. This kind of fear has stimulated humanity to engage in extensive research to improve our understanding of nature.

Science, geology and many other academic disciplines have secured funding in order to encourage research that helps us to anticipate earthquakes, hurricanes and other phenomena, which happen from time to time. In one sense one could claim that this kind of fear is being harnessed for the good of all humanity. In another sense it would seem that when there is a level of understanding, for instance of the ocean, the fear can be controlled. Life-savers would often advise those who get into difficulty, when swimming in the sea, to entrust themselves to the waves. Those who have studied the ocean understand how the waves behave and they know that to expend one’s energy in fighting the natural movement of the ocean is futile.

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<sup>20</sup> 1 Cor. 13:13 ‘And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love’.

<sup>21</sup> Gal. 5:22a ‘By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, ...’

<sup>22</sup> 1 John 4:18 ‘There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love’.

Once one begins to co-operate with the natural ebb and flow of the waves, the ocean itself eventually brings one back to the beach.

The other side of the coin is that for many people fear is a negative emotion or concept. Before even beginning to elaborate on the features of negative fear it is essential to recognise that fear can be an enormously powerful force. It remains one of the key sources of energy that drives people. Many people are driven positively but many others are driven to despair and even to criminal activity because of their fear.

At a workshop on creative thinking the group was given an 'Emotions Dictionary' and it seems fitting here to record how fear was described and what the suggested suitable action for this emotion could be. The dictionary suggests that fear signals danger and that this emotion is only appropriate if one's life is being threatened. Where this is not the case, it is usually a feeling that comes from old negative learnt behavioural patterns. Such fear is often generated by memories of past experiences where one lost power. Fear consumes energy, and because of this loss one becomes immobilised. One does not have the energy to activate inner resources like courage. Fear is debilitating. The suggested action is that if one's fears are holding one back the only way to break through them is to do whatever it is that scares one. Start with the easiest things and work one's way up to confronting bigger issues. Each experience will build one's courage and provide new excitement. Soon one would wonder why fear was experienced in the first place.

For the purpose of this paper we shall concentrate on the three aspects of fear mentioned in the introductory paragraph to this section. In the foreword of her book, *The Piety of Afrikaans Women*, Landman (1994:vii) mentions that in every single diary she had read of Dutch-Afrikaans women, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, she discovered the same kind of piety. 'It is a piety concealed by submission and guilt ... This piety involves pleasing men, the nation, as well as a male God ...' (Landman 1994:vii). One of the diaries, that of Catharina Allegonda van Lier, which was published in 1804, represents what Landman believes 'eventually became the trademark of Afrikaans female piety: excessive feelings of guilt expressed in terms of a demanding God, a poor view of the self as well as of other

people' (Landman 1994:12). This observation by Landman introduces the first aspect of fear to be examined in the context of faith and feminist perspectives in this Free State town.

On our arrival here, at the end of last year, many of the people in the town were still talking about the musical drama production, *'Heaven's Gates and Hell's Flames'*, which had recently been staged in the town as a joint effort by many of the local churches. Deciding to merely 'listen', for at least six months, to the stories and the history of the people, in the church and in the town, we found out that many people, including the leaders of this local church, have this kind of image of God. Such an image supports the idea that if one had not prayed 'the sinner's prayer' or followed the 'four spiritual laws' one would be condemned, by God, to the everlasting "Flames of Hell". When visiting a Bible study group we were subjected to watching the video of this production and it was even worse than we had originally suspected it would be. The point I wish to make with this illustration is that I suspect that a fear of a demanding God drives these people to church. I think that a perception, such as one that cannot, or refuses to, work through the deeper symbolic meaning of the Book of Revelation, severely limits one's image of God.

Another point that has bearing on this aspect of fear is the belief that if God were a demanding God then no one should be permitted to alter the traditional images of what God is like. Somehow these two things seem to go hand in hand. The Old Testament image of a 'God of war' has given many people and nations the licence they wanted to perpetuate violence, greed and exploitation of others. This obviously has repercussions when trying to reconcile what Christ came to introduce with what many people, including the present governments of the USA and the UK, believe about a 'Christian' response to 'terrorism' and violence. In theory one can accept and 'spiritualise' the teaching of Jesus, which we call 'turning the other cheek', but in practice the 'God of war' seems to make much more sense to those who have a stake in getting their own way, whether this be politically, socially or even in the realms of religion. A strong, masculine, warrior-image speaks of power and control and that is the image many people, especially those living in this town, want of their God.

When feminist theologians dare to suggest that God has feminine traits, they are ostracised. It may well be that the church universal has not focused noticeably enough on

Jesus Christ's vulnerability, when He came into the world as an infant. The incarnation narrative makes for a wonderful children's story, with angels and shepherds and wise men from the East, but who actually wants a vulnerable God? It seems as if people, especially those who live in this area, want a God they can be afraid of. Some people would even quote Proverbs, chapter 1 verse 7a<sup>23</sup> to back up their belief in a frightening and demanding God. This 'fear'<sup>24</sup> of God is often interpreted incorrectly and the 'beginning of wisdom'<sup>25</sup> is seldom viewed as a blessing.

The challenge may be too great, at this stage, to suggest to the many people who hold on to their 'fear-driven devotion' to God that their image of God may indeed be too small. The more holistic view of God as Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer and Nurturer encompasses much more than that of a 'demanding' God. In Jesus Christ, I believe, we have been introduced to the possibility of having an intimate relationship with God - a relationship that surpasses anything we can ever hope to experience in human terms. The invitations to accept this new spiritual life-style are extended to us positively and lovingly, and not, as so many people seem to think, through religious manipulation or by spiritual blackmail. I do not, for one moment, believe that a response to God because one has been spiritually blackmailed can be termed 'love'. If our free will is truly God's gift to us, then when we respond to God in a positive and enthusiastic manner, our genuine love for God becomes our gift in return.

In all the diaries of the Dutch-Afrikaans women she examined, Landman also discovered evidence of the links to fear, most often expressed in the feelings of excessive guilt. Referring again to local Calvinism, which somehow suggested that 'God sends us to hell with our cooperation' (Landman 1994:10), it is clear that guilt played a big part in these women's experiences of God. Without diminishing the fact that there is sin in the world and that people do need to acknowledge their need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God, I

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<sup>23</sup> 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;'

<sup>24</sup> '*Fear of the Lord* is the traditional (and not fully satisfactory) translation of "yir'at YHWH," literally, "revering the Lord". The phrase means giving to one's God what is due, knowing and accepting one's place in the universe. It primarily designates neither an emotion (fear) nor general reverence, but rather a conviction that one should honor and serve a particular god.' (The Access Bible Commentary 1999:809)

<sup>25</sup> 'The verse is the climax of the introduction, for the Lord is the source of blessings for the wise.' (The Access Bible Commentary 1999:809)

wish to clearly state my belief that God is more than willing to accept us and to forgive us.

It is 'excessive' guilt that is of great concern here. Anderson and Hopkins (1992:148) interviewed a Native American woman for their book, *The Feminine Face of God*, and her response to their question about her early memories of Christian spirituality was quite disturbing. As was common practice in those days, this woman had, as a young girl, been removed from her parents' home on the 'Indian Reserve' and at the age of fifteen was sent to a Roman Catholic boarding school. She remembered how, in abject fear, these young girls would lie awake in their dormitory at night, listening to how their ward sister, a nun, would whip herself repeatedly whilst pleading with God for forgiveness for the sin of being a woman. Somehow a traditional prayer of a Jewish man, in which he thanks God for not making him a 'dog'<sup>26</sup>, a gentile or a woman, slipped past Jesus' radical teaching and infiltrated Christianity. Paul tried, in several of his letters<sup>27</sup>, to remind the churches to whom he addressed his epistles, that in Christ there is no distinction between various groups of people. It was St. Francis, however, who went a little further to include 'dogs' or at least ALL of God's creation. The excessive guilt-complex of the nun, who was the boarding school ward sister, had been passed on to her and reinforced by the worst kind of patriarchy in the church. Her internal conflict, though, was not very different from that of the women whose diaries Landman had studied. A similar theology, derived from the conservative Dutch patriarchal theologian, Abraham Kuyper, informed their faith and practice.

This excessive guilt was often, and still is today, manifest mainly in two ways. The first is that because of my sin, or usually many sins, God is going to 'zap'<sup>28</sup> me if I do not toe the line by 'going to church' or 'giving a tithe' or whatever it is that presses my peculiar 'guilt button'. For the unfortunate nun, in that boarding school, it was 'being a woman', which in itself seems totally absurd to me but in its context one recognises that she had been indoctrinated that merely by being a woman she was partly responsible for the sin that 'Eve'

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<sup>26</sup> Other sources suggest that it is a 'slave' – be that as it may they were both viewed as mere possessions.

<sup>27</sup> See Gal. 3:28 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' and 1 Cor. 7:19a 'Circumcision is nothing, and un- circumcision is nothing...' & v.24 'In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.'

<sup>28</sup> Strike, curse or send disaster upon.

had committed in the 'Garden of Eden'. I am pleased to convey that this theological thought no longer seems to be entertained in modern Roman Catholicism. Landman's observations suggest that for most of the Dutch-Afrikaans women, who experienced similar feelings of excessive guilt, their subculture was to blame. The difference between Catharina van Lier and her brother, Helperus van Lier, is that

The brother, who loved all people, preached this positive message to them. In her self-chastisement, however, his sister did not hear this message. In the light of our thesis concerning the influence of the female subculture on religious experience, it is interesting to compare the views on God, the self and other people, of two people influenced more or less by the same religious sources, the one belonging to the dominant culture and the other to a subculture (Landman 1994:24-25).

A preoccupation with guilt and sin, which often also resulted in an obsession with Hell and Satan, seems to indicate that most of these women had great difficulty in receiving forgiveness. Landman (1994:26) refers to their experiences as 'a trinity of female piety ... a poor self-image, a view of a fearful God, and a negative view of other people'. Their experiences show that they believed mainly in 'God as Judge'. I believe that this examination of the spirituality of the foremothers of today's Afrikaans women is vitally important because there are so many similarities to the experiences of the women in this town.

Secondly, the fear of change seems to be a universally accepted emotion or reaction. This kind of fear meets us, in general, throughout our life. When a baby, we fear the change of being separated from our mothers, when we start to toddle we fear the change of having to use our legs, when we begin pre-school we fear the change of having to relate to other children and teachers, and so the fear of change grips us to a lesser or greater extent at every new corner or passage in life. Using the expression 'fear of change' almost seems inappropriate for most of these events in our lives because when we reflect on our past, most of these key events were probably exciting and had positive results. Mastering new skills brought with it satisfaction and placed the initial 'fear of change' in its appropriate perspective.

However, for many adult people who stay in the same town for many years or work for the same company for a long time or even those who worship in the same church that their parents belonged to, fear of change is an explicit reality. When asked to change, even just slightly, they usually experience some level of fear of, or at least resistance to, change.

Although a funny tale, it certainly rings true when the story is told of a new minister who arrived to serve a rather traditional and extremely conservative congregation. When he wanted to move the piano from the left to the right hand side of the church he moved it ten centimetres per week. In that way, he did not challenge the people head-on but got through what has been referred to as the ‘Watchful Dragons’<sup>29</sup> of change. Many, many weeks later the piano would eventually be on the other side of the church and most people would not even have noticed that it had been moved. There might be some merit in this method of getting people on one’s side but I think a danger also exists that the change can happen around them without them being helped to actually address and manage their own fear of change. The method I prefer is to treat all people as thinking beings, give them as much information as possible, create environments for consultation and discussion and constantly encourage them to risk change and to be surprised by God.

My appraisal of the experiences of the people in this town sustains the reasoning that when people have lived in a particular way for most of their lives they have a greater fear of change than those who have had to deal with change often. Many of the people in this town, including most of the members of our local church, have lived in this town since childhood and most of their parents and even many of their grandparents had lived on nearby farms. The church has already celebrated its centenary, so it has a long history. Although the building has been altered and renovated to accommodate modern facilities, its original sandstone features have been preserved. Having been built with the traditional sandstone of the Eastern Free State places it on the town’s ‘sandstone trail’ of historical buildings.

Many of the people with whom we come in contact here have never been out of South Africa or even have a wish to visit another country. Although some have tertiary education, many have followed in their parents’ footsteps, either in business or on the family farm. For many the church seemed the only ‘safe’ place that has stayed the same during these past ten years of transition in our land. It therefore seems very likely that our appointment here has threatened this last ‘stronghold of sameness’ for many of the people in this town.

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<sup>29</sup> Our internal mechanisms to fiercely resist change – a term reportedly coined by CS Lewis.



One leader, when discussing his ‘unhappiness with feminism’ with my husband, stated as his reason that white men are feeling vulnerable in business and in national life. The two places where he was not willing to let go of his ‘male authority’ was in his home and in his church. I need to mention that he most definitely would not even have considered discussing this with me, a woman, even though I had on several occasions indicated that I was willing to discuss my views with anyone in the congregation. Only two of the younger men have responded and both times the discussions between us have been fruitful. However, when discussing this leader’s objections to the spirituality group, with whom I am working on the research for this project, my husband and I discovered that we differed in our responses to him. Although I sympathised with him and cover his story more fully in section 4.5, I suspect he is representative of most of the Afrikaans men who live in and around this town. This leader is angry because he and other white men have had to make room for those who belonged to the previously disadvantaged groups of people in our land, through the process of affirmative action. However, I also believe - and said so to my husband - that, probably for the first time in his life, he was being given an opportunity to empathise with how women have always been treated. My husband, who is also a white male, seemed to find my attitude towards him and others who react similarly rather vengeful. As part of this research, I believe that I need to give this comment some careful thought because the ultimate purpose of the research is not to offend people, but rather to invite them to join us on this journey towards greater wholeness for all people. Although I am not able, at this stage, to fully justify my view, the valuable opinion of my husband, who is a compassionate pastor at heart, will be used to regularly check any conversations I have with others, the interviews I conduct and the observations I make throughout the remainder of this project.

Research, such as this, impacts on the whole community. People in a small town talk about one another and the gist of the discussions at the open mid-winter celebration dinner of the working group, was all over town in no time. At this point it needs to be noted that two incidents, which have flowed directly out of the mid-winter celebration discussions, will be fully related in chapter four. The interaction between a male leader in the church and my

husband will be relayed in section 4.5 and the story of a member of the working group's experience will be told in section 4.7.0.

Although gossip is not to their credit, it has served the purpose of this research. One factor remains a positive aspect in the fairly negative overall response from many people and that is that people now have had to think about gender inequality in this town. Whether what they think or say is positive or negative, the issue is being aired. We know that much is said in jest, and most of it behind my back, yet some of the women who have remained in the group have become great supporters of the value of all people – women, men, young and old. I have purposely omitted 'black and white' because racism, although very much an integral part of feminist theological thought, will have to be dealt with in further research. When one has walked a long and soul-searching journey towards undoing racist attitudes, as I have done during these past thirty years, it is extremely difficult to have to go back to point 'A', to where the vast majority of people in this area are. Statements such as "*The enemy of the past is now the government of the day*" and "*I'm not a racist, I'm a realist*" are merely two examples of the kind of stubborn resistance to change, which is prevalent in this town. This kind of talk may well be a cover-up for the 'fear of change' but more often than not I suspect that an unwillingness to grow into a deeper awareness of God and a wider understanding of humanity, overshadows any traces of fear. What is alarming, however, is that some of these statements are uttered by Society Stewards<sup>30</sup> of this local church.

Fear of change is part of being human. It is how we harness that fear, and how we redirect it, that matters. As Daphne Hampson suggests, feminist perspectives are only some of the many challenges facing the Christian Church. They are the current and most relevant challenges of our day and so even though people may resist even considering their credibility, another move towards wholeness has begun. People will either get on board or they will be left behind. If this does happen, and it surely looks that way, at least for many of the people living in this town, history will merely be repeating itself. This is exactly what happened when the conservative Dutch pietists moved to South Africa. Many of them were avoiding the move towards a more balanced belief in and view of God, which was beginning to grow in the

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<sup>30</sup> Members of the Church Executive Committee.

Netherlands and so they were 'left behind'. The sadness is, though, that many of the Dutch-Afrikaans women were only exposed to the literature that was no longer being read in the Netherlands because of its narrow approach to piety. For almost four centuries Afrikaans women have kept alive an outdated, patriarchal and exclusive faith of their 'fathers'. May God bless Afrikaans women, like Christina Landman, who are helping us to break this inherited chain of bondage in our spirituality. May we recognise the fear of change within ourselves and engage in a creative process of redirecting this energy.

As the opening paragraph to this section suggests, change is a part of life, and not only human life. Feminist scholars have for some time already been grappling with the promotion of responsible ecological research and interaction, especially between world leaders, big business and Third World countries, where exploitation still seems to be rife. It therefore might be quite appropriate to conclude this section on fear of change with a quote from Margaret Wheatley's (1999) introduction to the revised edition of her book, *Leadership and the New Science*. A new chapter was entitled,

"Change – The Capacity of Life." In it, I describe the dynamic processes that facilitate change in a living system. I wanted to add this chapter because in our organizations, communities, and personal lives, we struggle to discover how to create change. The irony is that our struggle takes place in a world that changes constantly, that is quite adept at change. I believe that our greatest hope for moving past the ineffective change processes that plague us is to ally ourselves with life. If we can understand how life changes, we will dance more gracefully in this dynamic universe (Wheatley 1999:x-xi).

The third aspect of fear, which we will be discussing here, is linked to a negative image of God but it is also very specifically recognised as the 'fear of self'. Matilda Smith's diary revealed something of this fear of self because

In her diary she continually dwells upon her personal depressions because of her failure to live up to God's liking; at the same time there are her descriptions of her negative excitement caused by the sins of other Christians (Landman 1994:13).

The kind of depression that Matilda Smith wrote about in her diary seems to have been the experience of almost all the women whose diaries were examined by Landman. A poor self-image usually went hand in hand with a belief in an all-male, judging God, who had to be pleased. What Landman (1994:13) calls 'negative excitement' because of the wrongs of

others, could also be seen as an effort to divert the attention away from the self, to the sins of the neighbours.

Dorian Haarhoff, a professor of English who presents Narrative Workshops, tells a story of a traveller, who was asked to produce his ticket by the conductor on the bus. After looking in several of his pockets he declared that he could not find it, at which the conductor told him that he saw him purchase the ticket and put it in the top left-hand pocket of his shirt. The traveller replied in the affirmative but that he did not want to look there because if he did and the ticket was not there, then he would be truly lost. This is probably a story of all of our lives. Most often we suspect that there are precious gifts deep inside us but we are afraid to look in case we do not find anything there. Julia Cameron (1995), in her book, *The Artist's Way*, calls us to risk going deep within ourselves anyway because when we do, we find we are even more creative and more gifted than we ever imagined.

The comparison, which Landman (1994:24-25) makes between the van Lier brother and sister, emphasises the effects of a subculture. This should alert all women to the possibility that a poor self-image may stem from centuries of oppression and male domination. Whether or not there was in fact a connection between her 'self-hate' and 'a fear of self' one cannot be sure but Catharina van Lier was convinced that God caused her suffering, mainly because of her view of her own 'sinful nature'. She also misinterpreted some of John Newton's hymns and used what she believed he meant to aid her in her self-hate. Many of the women wrote in their diaries about their 'sinful nature', often without being able to spell out their actual sins as such. Sometimes they would name doubt or unbelief as their 'sin' and this should make us aware of the reality that they often felt guilty for 'sins' they had never committed. Landman (1994:31) suggests that because these women were influenced extensively by male sources, they were often controlled by the mood of 'self-meditative depression'. Her additional comments on the Dutch-Afrikaans female subculture are quite thought provoking, especially in the light of their pioneer-existence in this land, and she suggests that

Therefore, the piety of early Dutch-Afrikaans women empowered them to survive the hardships of their physical circumstances, simultaneously enslaving them within their female subculture in which submissiveness to God equalled

submissiveness to a male dominant culture in which the maleness of God prescribed a negative self-image for women (Landman 1994:58).

It seems appropriate to concede that not only women experience or sense 'a fear of self' and that the female subculture is only one of the reasons for this human condition that many people go through. However, it does seem as if women are more vulnerable to succumb to this condition because of the patriarchal system's effects on women for the duration of many centuries. It is noted though that there are many effects of patriarchy of which 'a fear of self' is only one.

Much has been written, especially in the spheres of psychology and sociology, about our human conditions but I do not believe that this would be a fitting place to go into the complex aspects of psychology. Let it suffice, however, to refer to some of the authors who have attempted to link psychology and theology in order to continue the age-old quest for the meaning of life and therefore, I believe, also a search for 'the self'. Viktor Frankl (1963) was one such author and he wrote the book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which I am sure would have had an inclusive title had he written it today. This search has been a human pursuit since time began and I suspect it will remain so for all time. Mary Daly (1985:169), a radical feminist scholar, suggests in her book, *Beyond God the Father*, that a cosmic covenant exists where

... being is discovered in confrontation with nothingness. ... Those who discover the covenant find themselves in new space. The old territory, then, is not encroached upon: one does not bother to invade non-being.<sup>31</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza (1994:26) suggests that this argument implies that the women who belong to what she describes as the 'territory of non-being' - to which I believe most Afrikaans women belong - are excluded from traditional 'patriarchal sacred space'. She goes on to say that

Since women are non-beings in patriarchal culture and erased from its consciousness and language, only those women who have moved into the sacred new feminist Time/Space participate in history and in the making of history. ... Only those who have the "courage to be" and to make the existential leap are historical subjects. While this theoretical understanding is able to construct a feminist life-world at the fringes of patriarchal culture, it is not able to restore

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1994:26), in her book, *In Memory of Her*.

history to women, since it understands patriarchal history as the “territory of non-being” but not as the arena of women’s struggle (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:26).

Debates such as this one between Christian feminist scholars and those who call themselves post-Christian feminists continue because although Schüssler Fiorenza acknowledges Daly and Hampson’s points of view, she herself extends her research further in her efforts to reconstruct the history/*her-story*<sup>32</sup> of women in the early Christian tradition. It would seem then that what is hoped for is a genuine reconciliation of history and not a mere ‘writing-off’ of patriarchal history. It is true that women have been omitted, for the most part, from the world’s history but that does not mean that women were absent from the world. What I believe Schüssler Fiorenza has been doing is going back and as it were ‘re-writing’ history in a way that, as accurately as is humanly possible, it reflects *her-story* alongside that of history. Julia Cameron, another author who has researched the purpose of human existence, suggests that we need to follow our destiny, which she believes we fully participate in. In this sense we co-operate with God to continue re-creating us, or in familiar Christian terms, renewing us.

Although it is in the context of and with reference to our creativity that Cameron (1995:98) recognises how perpetual self-sacrifice can actually be self-destructive, I believe it also speaks into the situation of a male dominant culture. Women, and more specifically Afrikaans women, have been born into such a culture. One of the ways in which this culture is manifest is in the custom that the majority of Afrikaans women organise most things in their home with either their grandfather, father, brother or husband in mind. I remember that in my childhood home everything revolved around my father. What he said was law. When meals were being served my father’s plate always had to be passed to my mother first and he had first choice of the best cuts of meat. When there were leftovers, he was offered a second helping before anyone else. One of the infuriating things for me about this custom is that I remember my mother often going without. It was a negative cultural habit, which has been extremely difficult to break. Even today, forty odd years since then, I still catch myself thinking along those lines. It has cost our family many family meetings and constant and

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<sup>32</sup> A term coined by Schüssler Fiorenza.

conscious resolve to share in decisions, me with my husband and us, as a couple, with our children. Creating our partnership has involved much effort but we would not want to even consider exchanging our relationship for a hierarchical one.

I recently received a letter from my mother, who had lived with us for some years when our younger daughter was still at pre-school. Our journey, as a nuclear family, has been a very difficult one for my mother to even begin to understand but I have, at times, shared with her as much as I discerned she would be able to deal with. Now that I am seriously pursuing feminist studies she has been trying very hard to understand what I mean when I say that I am committed to promoting wholeness and equality for all people. In her letter she struggled to express something of her grasp of what it means to be equal, at least in the sight of God, as women and men. She told me that she now understood why it seemed so strange to our daughter when her grandmother always gave her dad the best piece of meat. I had not known about the conversation they had had one day when, while I was away, my mother was serving supper. Our daughter had asked her why she always did everything for her dad and why he always had to be served his supper first. Only now, about fifteen years later, did my mother feel free to tell me that she actually had not known how to respond to her grandchild. When she herself had reflected on her little granddaughter's questions she discovered that she did not actually know why she did it, she just did.

I believe that many of the unworthy values, beliefs, traditions and habits that are passed on from one generation to another require careful examination. It is quite possible that unbeknown to us they contribute to a low self-image or a fear of self. The ones that are deemed to be destructive need to be rooted out and consciously reversed, especially so that our girl-children will grow up with a fine sense of self-worth and so that our boy-children will develop a more balanced sense of being created equal, and although different, not in any way superior to girls. When this becomes a goal for more people I believe our country, and our world, will truly experience a positive transformation. These are also some of the sentiments, which I believe motivate feminist scholars to continue their work in the world. The next section will review some of the key thoughts that govern Western feminism.

## 2.2 Western Feminism

All brands of feminism would probably claim that their roots are located firmly in the conscious decision to oppose domination and oppression. It would also be appropriate, in the introduction to this particular section, to say that feminism has been around for very much longer than most people may imagine. The previous section has alerted us to some of the fears people have and also to some of the negative perceptions of feminism in general, and so this section, through the provision of helpful information, will hopefully address some of those fears, without diminishing the challenges of feminist thought.

The Western slant to feminism has probably evolved out of a combination of some of the early European and later Latin American feminisms, which have usually been linked to the various liberation movements. In this section we shall endeavour to examine both the stance of secular feminist thought as well as some of the perspectives asserted by feminist theologians. The third sub-section will explore Afrikaans feminism, in order to assess whether such a concept does in fact exist or not. In this discussion we shall also pay tribute to those Afrikaans women who have begun to acknowledge that their foremothers had been in bondage for almost four centuries and who are becoming more willing to protest against the male domination, which has been so deeply embedded in their subculture.

### 2.2.0 Secular Feminist Thought

According to Rosemarie Tong (1989:11) liberal feminism has its roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The struggle for the same education for women as men started as early as then. Affluence affected the bourgeois women negatively in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century because most working class women had opportunities to develop skills, other than those required for homemaking, in the budding era of industrialisation. Tong (1989:9) believes that this was one of the first steps for women 'towards thinking themselves into the fullness of their being'. A tribute is paid to Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1799) who broke new ground for equal rights in an era when women, especially wealthy women, were mere decorations in a man's world. Her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [Tong quotes the edition edited by Poston (1975)], was a



major milestone in an era when the world did not believe that a woman was an autonomous person in her own right. Although Wollstonecraft did not seem to question the value of “traditional male traits”, she did, however, recognise that the world’s view of women, as emotional and frivolous beings, was totally inadequate.

Harriet Taylor made some great strides for women’s liberation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Tong (1989:18) writes about her and John Stuart Mill working together to produce some key essays for their time. Taylor (1851), in *Enfranchisement of Women*, argued that sexual inequality is the result not of nature’s decrees but of society’s custom and traditions. This fact, according to Taylor, would become apparent to all as soon as women were given ‘equal education opportunities, partnership status and a co-equal share’ (Tong 1989:18)<sup>33</sup>. Mill usually stressed co-equal sharing but Taylor more frequently stressed partnership. Reflecting on these statements allows us to assess our progress in the last one hundred and fifty years. Technically women have been given all three of these “privileges” but still inequality remains a major issue in most of the world’s communities.

Betty Friedan is probably one of the more noted feminist writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century CE. As early as the 1960s, in her book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she focused on the mistaken worldview that women can only find satisfaction in the traditional role of wife and mother. She said that ‘middle-class, suburban, white, heterosexual housewives’ are left feeling ‘empty and miserable’ when they are deprived of a ‘meaningful goal’ (Tong 1989:22). Even the experts, ‘– from the legion of doctors, gynecologists, obstetricians, clinicians, pediatricians, counselors, psychiatrists, and ministers -’ (Tong 1989:23), she believed, were not able to convince most women that being a full-time housewife was a big enough challenge. Women wanted, and needed, to be recognised for who they were as people in their own right. In *The Second Stage*, written 25 years later, Friedan (1981) suggested that if women in the 1960s had been victims of the “feminine mystique”, then women in the 1980s were victims of the “feminist mystique”. She had discovered that there were minuses as well as pluses to career-marriage combinations and that the single career woman was often disillusioned with the “rewards of success”.

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted by Rosemarie Tong (1989) in *Feminist Thought*.

As social transformation remains one of the goals of this research, it would be fair to suggest that part of the problem of the “emptiness and despair” expressed by the women whom Friedan interviewed may be attributed to their lack of spiritual expression and/or experience. Feminist theology has not been widely accepted, nor has it been practised in many churches, and so only small pockets of communities have been working towards realising the *discipleship of equals*<sup>34</sup> and most career women have had to deal with the church’s criticism of their choice, or need, to work outside the home and earn their own financial remuneration.

Examining secular feminism cannot be complete without looking at the fairly controversial aspect of reproduction. Acknowledging the approach of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century CE, which is still very much in its infancy, scholars in the 1970s addressed the issues surrounding women and reproduction technology. Shulamith Firestone (1970) in her book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, presented her challenging debate regarding the biological revolution that, she believed, would end sexual oppression, as we know it. She suggested that modern technology had by then already begun the process of eliminating the sexual act between a man and a woman in order for reproduction to take place. A woman can now become a mother without bearing the child or she can bear the child without rearing the child. Once babies can be brought to full term in an artificial placenta, any number of caring human beings, male or female (or both) will be able to attend to their needs, and that is why

Firestone believed that when women and men stopped playing substantially different roles in the reproductive drama, it will be possible to eliminate all sexual roles (Tong 1989:74).

In her belief Firestone clashed with orthodox Marxist feminists because she considered “reproduction” rather than “production” to be the driving force in history. She stood by her opinion that if we wanted to understand why women are subordinate to men, we require a biological and not merely an economic explanation. She also suggested that the inequality is not attributed to the observable, biological differences between the sexes. She felt that it was

the fact that men’s and women’s differing reproductive roles “led to the first division of labor at the origins of class, as well as furnishing the paradigm of caste discrimination based on biological characteristics” (Tong 1989:73).

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<sup>34</sup> Term coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

Heedless of how one views the division of labour issue, the fact remains that in almost every culture “women’s work” (despite its nature) has been regarded as less valuable than “men’s work”. Historically this means that the institution of heterosexuality as well as the institution of private property can both be held responsible for the oppression of women. Tong (1989:81) points out that other radical feminists, especially Rich, fiercely disagree with Firestone’s hypothesis. Rich and other radical feminists have developed a theory which views reproductive technology as a huge threat to whatever powers women still possess and they suggest ‘that biological motherhood ought not to be forsaken in favor of artificial motherhood’ (Tong 1989:81).

Despite the many criticisms against post-modern feminism, it remains one of the most exciting developments in contemporary feminist thought. Tong maintains that humans could do with a whole new conceptual start in response to what has been a policy of exclusion in the past. She believes that society needs to be informed, by the post-modern feminists of where women currently are and by the social feminists of where women could be. She affirms the fact that white, middle-class and heterosexual women do not automatically have to find themselves being separated from women of colour, neither from those of the working or upper class nor from lesbian women. Difference, however, does not need to mean separation, rather

Like a kaleidoscope life can bring together hundreds of chips of varying colours to create a single pattern – only to break it, and to form an even more beautiful one. Initially feminist thought may give the impression of chaos and confusion but closer inspection and perseverance will reveal new visions, new structures, new relationships for personal and political life - all of which will be different tomorrow than today (Tong 1989:237).<sup>35</sup>

Woman’s quest for recognition continues and the points raised so far are merely highlights in the secular part of *her-story* through the ages. The next section addresses her ongoing pursuit for equality in the field of theology and religion.

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<sup>35</sup> Paraphrased (from *Feminist Thought*).

### 2.2.1 Christian Feminist Theology

The various key topics of feminist theology, examined specifically by the working group for this research, will be discussed in chapter three. A general overview of the work of feminist theologians will form most of the discussion in this section. However, we shall also endeavour to reply, from a feminist theological point of view, to some of the fears expressed in section 2.1.2.

One of the key aspects, which feminist theologians are seeking to address, is that of an authentic feminist spirituality. Sheila Collins believes that the wholeness that feminists are proposing is 'a wholeness based on a multi-dimensional vision of the world, rather than on the single vision which has dominated Western culture and most theological thought' (Loades 1990:276). This would mean a vision that would grasp complexity, live with ambiguity and enjoy the great variety that exists in the world. It would also embrace the new dimension in feminist spirituality, which is rooted in women's own experience. It is made up of a new relationship between body and nature, and a search for wholeness, integration and peace. This new feminist spirituality is mostly found on the margin of official religious institutions because of the traditional "exclusion" of women in the past. It is important, however, for Christian feminists to challenge existing church structures, which still deny full equality and space to women and thereby restrict and dehumanise, not only women, but men too. Ursula King's experience affirms that

Feminists have discovered a new sense of divine immanence and transcendence closely related to the experience of the wholeness of body-spirit, of the closeness to nature to which we all belong and of the bonds of community. In seeking new paths of spirituality, women are drawing on old and new sources commensurate to their own renewed experience of self, world and divine. In this sense the dialogue and *oikumene*<sup>36</sup> of women bears the potential for transforming spiritual and theological thinking, including the thinking on ecumenism (Loades 1990:279).

A recovery of the rightful place of women in worship, leadership, ministry and pastoral care would, therefore, benefit not only the whole of the local church, but also affect the wider community. In a divided Christian community, as is the case at present in this town, if there

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<sup>36</sup> Ecumenism.

were to be an ecumenical witness to the inclusive nature of the Church of Christ, the effects could result in an astounding transformation of people and community. Contrary to the present effects - some of which have already been mentioned in this paper - of the narrow approach to the Christian faith by most of the people who belong to Christian churches in this town, acceptance, tolerance and above all, the love of God, 'would be shed abroad' <sup>37</sup> in the hearts and lives of all people.

The empirical section, set out in chapter four, will be dealing specifically with people's responses to the various challenges presented by feminist theology. However, a brief examination of how a general fear of change differs from a more specific fear of feminist theological perspectives may be helpful at this stage.

The first fear discussed in section 2.1.2 was that of the fear of a demanding God. Traditionally all cultures seem to have viewed God in a way which suggests that their God needed to be feared, appeased or placated because unless that happened some awful tragedy was going to befall them or their nation. This kind of belief or understanding about the nature of God has surreptitiously been transmitted into the Christian faith even though I believe that Christ deliberately attempted to introduce people to the possibility of entering into an intimate relationship with God.

It is certainly true that in human relationships with parents - mothers or fathers - there are often elements of fear as many parents are unreasonable and even over-demanding of their children. All of us have known families where the children are frightened of their parents. Yet all of us also know of families where parents and children have sound, fulfilling and deeply intimate relationships. My guess is that our relationship with God should resemble something of the latter image, which I believe seems closer to the truth revealed in Jesus Christ. This, however, should not necessarily exclude any other way of relating to God.

Whilst raising our two daughters, who are now young adults, we endeavoured to follow the STEP<sup>38</sup> Programme. Although it involved a twelve-week course and many exercises and discussions between us as parents, and between our two daughters and us as a

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<sup>37</sup> Romans 5:5a '... and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts...'

<sup>38</sup> Systematic Training in Effective Parenting.

couple, the principles, which STEP stands for, are very simple. It promoted parenting through logical and natural consequences. This programme alerted us to the possibility that our relationship with God could be viewed in a similar way. While we relate to God as ‘child to Parent’, we can trust that God is the best Parent there is and this, amongst other aspects too, will mean that mutual respect is exercised. God respects the free will we have been given and when we violate ‘family rules’ (as in STEP), logical and/or natural consequences run their course. In the Christian Church the emphasis has largely remained on the ‘Law of God’, and therefore also on the punishment for sin, whereas I believe Jesus came to fulfil the prophecy of Ezekiel that the ‘Law of God’ will be written on our hearts<sup>39</sup> once we discover that the Christian faith is actually about life in all its fullness<sup>40</sup> rather than about sin, guilt, punishment and death. So, as is often the case in our secular life, when we have violated God’s law we have to bear the consequences of our actions even after our repentance, confession and having received forgiveness. However, Jesus is still here, saying to us too: ‘Go in peace and sin no more’.

I believe feminist theologians are exploring the more positive ways of relating to God and are challenging us to move away from the idea that God is waiting for us to make a wrong move so that we can be struck with disaster.

An additional insight which, not so long ago was a completely new one for me, is that of relating to God as “Child” - the child who delights in play. Matthew Fox has introduced me to the side of God not many people appreciate yet and this is an insight which now affects the way I relate to God. The way he views the “Motherhood of God” has also broadened my outlook on how everything fits together in the Cosmos. Matthew Fox (1983:225ff) invites people to not only view God as Father/Mother but also as Child. He suggests that

in some sense God is not born yet. And that is indeed the case. Wherever compassion and wisdom are lacking, wherever justice and delight are missing, there the full presence of God does not yet exist. In the creation-centered tradition there is ample awareness of the childhood of God. But patriarchy, if it

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<sup>39</sup> Found in Ezekiel 11:19 ‘I will give them one (*or a new*) heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,’ and in 36:26 ‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.’

<sup>40</sup> Found in John 10:10b ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’

has acknowledged God's childlikeness at all, has done so only in the sentimentalized context of a "sweet baby Jesus". Its truer meaning, that God must be born and must be allowed to grow up into human society, and social structures, and that humanity is responsible for the birthing and the nurturing of God - all this has for rather obvious reasons not been heralded as integral to the Good News of late. But in fact it is among the Best News one could imagine (Fox 1983:225).

Fox goes on to say that the incarnation is a shock because it suggests that God would come in a male form to announce divine compassion and wisdom. These qualities, he argues, are expected in a woman. He also puts forward Eckhart's view that when we say that God is eternal, we are in fact claiming that God is forever young. For him the sight of an eternally young God is one 'to behold, to meditate on, and to imitate' (Fox 1983:225). According to Jesus, greatness will be found in something the child has.<sup>41</sup> And Fox suggests that the key to becoming childlike, without being childish, is play. He believes that the artist has the skill to recover childhood, because art seems to demand a life-style true to natural instincts and therefore true to childhood. He argues that a paternalistic culture takes itself so seriously that all imagination has been aborted along the way. He also challenges modern society to become aware of what has happened to play. Fox (1983:227) suggests that

The poisoning of play is one of the greatest sins of patriarchy. Jesus warns, at the same place in the gospel where he insists that God's kingdom is of childlike adults, that scandal to these little ones is among the most heinous of all crimes. The scandal of changing play to war, Eros to Thanatos, that our consumer society is now engaged in cannot go unnoticed by the cosmos as it groans to give a more delightful birth.

Fox (1983) concludes a most challenging chapter in his book, *Original Blessing*, by affirming the role of the human race in the Cosmos - a Cosmos, which is still birthing, still expanding and still calling humans to birthing and expansion. He sees the human race as the most recent and most surprising child of the Cosmos, who is called to play a conscious role in its birthing process.

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<sup>41</sup> Matthew 18:1-4 'At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'

This is what Fox (1983:227) believes the recovering of the Motherhood of God is all about:

Theology promises that the Creator, who is not yet done with her work, desires additional delight still for the cosmos. And we, artists all, are to be instruments of that delight which is the delight both of wisdom and compassion.

This idea of Fox has become very popular with authors who are addressing creative business principles in our time. Authors like Bryan, Cameron and Allen (1998) in *The Artist's Way at Work*, Wheatley (1999) in *Leadership and the New Science* and Michalko (1991) in *Thinkertoys*, are all exploring creative ways of applying 'play' to business. Leaders are recognising that people need to be stimulated to think creatively and that is something all children do when they create their own games.

Fear of change, to some degree or another, exists in all people and creative leadership enables people to learn to manage this fear. The fear of 'feminist theological perspectives', however, presents the church with a challenge it most often does not know how to 'manage'. The concept of 'love patriarchalism'<sup>42</sup>, which is discussed by Schüssler Fiorenza (1994:78-80) in her book, *In Memory of Her*, helps enormously to pinpoint one of the key reasons why there exists such a fear of feminist theological perspectives. She argues that

The Christian religious ingredient is agapeic love which reduces frictions and leads to a "willing acceptance of given inequalities." It makes these inequalities "fruitful for the ethical values of personal relationships." In other words, the "gift" of Christianity to the Greco-Roman world is the internalization of the status inequalities and structural hierarchies typical of a patriarchal society (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:78).

Her suggestion, along with the thinking of Theissen and Gager, that Christianity was so successful in the second and third centuries CE largely because it perfected the concept of 'love patriarchalism', has a sound basis. Contrary to the sectarian thinking and activism of Montanism and Gnosticism at that time,

Christian love patriarchalism offered a different integrative pattern: the basic inner equality of all "in Christ" while the basic social differences and hierarchies in the political and ecclesial order were maintained (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994:79).

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<sup>42</sup> Theissen's term.



Feminist theologians have for some time now been challenging the maintenance of the 'status quo' and assert that Christ did not only call people to an 'inner equality' but to an actual equality. When Mary of Bethany chose to 'sit at the feet' <sup>43</sup> of Jesus He affirmed her choice, probably to the outrage of the 'learnéd men' who were also present.

Jesus did not send Mary into the kitchen to help her sister, Martha, with some pious platitude about serving others. I believe He was demonstrating that a woman could be a disciple and learn from Him in exactly the same way as a man could. In the same way as the men of Jesus' day 'feared' the radical changes He was introducing, so too the men of today, and the women for whom patriarchy is a comfortable cage, 'fear' the radical challenges of feminist thought. They only seem to see the threat of possibly having their privileges taken away from them, rather than viewing the changes as facilitating liberation from bondage for all people. When men view women, children, the elderly and the youth as being of less value, they impoverish themselves because they are then not able to see the world in a complete perspective. Each person's experience of the world and of God allows for a richness and a diversity that can in turn become a blessing for all people.

Another aspect, although an assumption on my part, is what Schüssler Fiorenza calls the stories of 'the marginal' of society. These were usually the sick, the hungry, the outcast and the poor. A fear that may well be awakened in people, and in men particularly, when they are confronted with specifics regarding exploitation, oppression and exclusion of women, is that their 'security' is being threatened. It somehow seems to be far easier to adopt a theology that generally 'cares for the poor' rather than one that expressly challenges one group, which is oppressing another. Our South African history is proof of this. Schüssler Fiorenza (1994:141) points out that

In antiquity widows and orphans were the prime paradigms of the poor and exploited. Yet in Christian consciousness and theology "poor Lazarus" but not the "impoverished widow" has become the exemplification of poverty. Therefore, we have neglected to spell out theologically Jesus' hope for women who are poor and destitute.

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<sup>43</sup> Term used to describe discipleship – incident referred to recorded in Luke 10:38-42 (v.39b '...Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.' & v.42b '...Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.')

Moreover, I do not think that the social category of “the poor” is sufficient to describe the inclusive character of the Jesus movement. Added to this category must be that of “the marginal”, because the healing stories, as well as the descriptions of other persons in the Jesus traditions, indicate that Jesus and his movement were open to all, especially to the “outcast” of his society and religion. Although the majority of the tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners might have been poor, some of them probably were not.

When we recall how Jesus allowed Himself to be touched by ‘sinners’<sup>44</sup>, including lepers and a woman who was perpetually menstruating, we can draw a parallel with our modern day Christianity and assess whether we, and men particularly, are willing to be ‘touched’ by people who need such a touch most. The way in which Jesus drew Simon, the Pharisee’s attention to the woman,<sup>45</sup> who was ministering to Him in Simon’s home, alerts us to the fact that Pharisees probably only saw ‘sorts of women’. Jesus, however, wanted Simon to see her for the person who she was, deeply forgiven and equal to even Simon the Pharisee. Neither accounts in the Gospels that record the events of women ministering to Jesus, according to Mark 14 nor Luke 7, give us the name of the woman who ministers to Jesus. This alone underlines the idea against which Schüssler Fiorenza (1994:142-143) argues when she says that

I am not quibbling here merely with words, but am arguing against a whole direction of Christian theology, which has allowed women “to identify” with general (male) categories and groups, for example, the poor, the lonely, the brothers, the priests, but has not allowed them to identify themselves *as women* in solidarity with other women. The self-alienation of women promoted by Christian generic language will continue an exegetical and theological tradition that keeps poor women *as women* invisible.

Even those recording the events in the Gospels probably did not realise, at the time of writing, that they were part of a tradition Jesus came to break. Fortunately, I believe, they were inspired to record these radical events nonetheless. They are of great value to hermeneutic scholars, like Schüssler Fiorenza, in their efforts to reconstruct the early traditions of the Christian faith, especially with regard to the presence of women.

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<sup>44</sup> This would have ritually defiled a male Jew of Jesus’ time.

<sup>45</sup> Luke 7:44 ‘Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair...”.’

One of the main purposes of feminist theological perspectives, therefore, would be to focus the attention of men on women *as women* and not as general groups, and this seems to evoke some fear of change or even loss for them *as men*.

It seems important also to focus on the probability that a major part of fear of feminist perspectives may be due to ignorance. As will be discussed more fully in chapter four, it has been very interesting to witness the changes in the attitudes of the majority of the women who joined the working group for this research. Whereas most of them were completely against identifying with the term 'feminist' at the beginning of the year, most of them expressed a change of heart six months later when they prefaced their decision with '*now that I understand what it means to be called a Christian feminist*'. I think, however, it would be safe to say that apart from my husband, not a single man in this local church, which we serve, has ever read a book or even an article on feminist theological perspectives. When challenged they respond, very often, from a severely biased and often limited knowledge of Scripture, which is either interpreted from a 'literal' <sup>46</sup> point of view or with a conservative fundamentalist perception of the Bible. In this area, especially, it also needs to be kept in mind that most people have a general religious background based on local Calvinism. That includes the tradition that most people have attended Sunday school and church since childhood, and in later life they went to church because they had been indoctrinated to do so. For many families their 'church life' and their 'everyday life' were experienced as two separate ways of living. I believe feminist theologians are challenging all kinds of dualisms. If wholeness for all people is an ultimate goal of feminist theological research, then wholeness in our personal, political, religious, social and family life is of vital importance. Spirituality needs to become an integrated aspect of life and not remain separate from that which is lived out from Monday to Saturday.

Experiencing the fear of self, as was alluded to in section 2.1.2, is a complex psychological state, which needs much more in depth research than could possibly be embarked on in this project. However, it is my belief that feminist theology begins to open doors to a deeper understanding of the self and its intension is to alleviate the fear or denigration of self rather than to add to it. The affirmation, especially of women, builds sound

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<sup>46</sup> When the context of the passage, the book or the people of the time are seldom taken into account.

self-esteem and once men too become willing to explore the breadth and depth and length of possibility being opened up by feminist theological thought, in faith and theology, I believe that fear will begin to lessen considerably.

This kind of exploration is exactly what the Afrikaans feminist theologian, Christina Landman, has been doing and the following section looks at whether an Afrikaans brand of feminism exists and also, if it does, whether it has come to stay.

**2.2.2 Afrikaans Feminism**

If only hills could speak and stones  
And the quiet village well,  
What stories of that quiet man  
Would they not have to tell?

But if the Word was silent there,  
There is nothing to unfold.  
The silent hills and well and stones  
Tell all that can be told.

Peter de Rosa (1974:91)

Landman tells of a ‘divine appearance’ that was recorded in Johanna Brandt’s diary in December 1916. It seems that these four visits from the Divine, experienced a week after her mother’s death, inspired Brandt (1918) to write her book, *The Millennium*. Landman (1994:97) summarises her visions as follows:

In the first vision she saw her whole life in one flash, but it was not clear in which direction it was moving. In the second vision she saw her children, sitting around her in full harmonious bliss. They were all together in her late mother’s house, Harmony. From this centre of human happiness the whole world was to move towards the ideal of harmony in human relations. In the third vision she saw the battlefields of Europe, and how Light slowly conquered Darkness. The fourth vision revealed to her the future of South Africa. A tornado of violence swept over the country. However, the Messenger posed to her an alternative to the coming disaster: the nation should unite politically; people should forget political and personal differences and work towards righteousness. The coming destruction of the land would then be averted.

It may well be that Brandt’s boldness stimulated other Afrikaans women (we know of at least

one) to think about the socio-political iniquities in both Europe and South Africa because three years after

the covert call upon the international community at the National Women's Monument to acknowledge the righteousness of the Afrikaans nation, an Afrikaans woman criticised national and international discord and disharmony, and personal lust for money and gold, as male yearnings causing wars (Landman 1994:98).

Landman raises the question as to whether Johanna Brandt could have been the first potential Afrikaans feminist because soon after the war, when she wrote her book *The Petticoat Commando* on her war memories, her views of women and their roles in the dominant culture were beginning to change. In 1916, when Brandt formed 'The World Harmony Movement' in Pretoria, she defined it as a non-political, non-racial, non-sectarian establishment, embracing the basic principles of the 'Universal Peace Movement' (Landman 1994:101). Brandt's (1918:111) deep insight recognised that the 'enemy' was a society at war with itself and so her appeal to South Africa rang out to

put aside your personal grievances, and join hands, every one of you, **men, women and children of every race and class and creed**, join hands and present an undivided front to the approaching enemy.<sup>47</sup>

In 1933, when Brandt was almost sixty, her church officially rejected her. Her *dominee*-husband was asked to 'retire' and the reason given was because Johanna had been re-baptised sixteen years earlier.

It had obviously been implied that the church had ignored her challenging writings. There is no evidence as to whether other women, especially members in her own church, had read any of her work or that they had been influenced by her thinking but the final outcome shows that her views had not made much of an impact on the church. Three years later Brandt's radical book, *The Paraclete or Coming World Mother*, was published. It seems as if Dr Anna Kingsford had quite an influence on her thinking because

Brandt quotes Kingsford's feminist insight, namely that the suppression of the femininity of God is because of 'a priesthood desirous of preserving a purely Masculine Conception of the Godhead' (Landman 1994:103).

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted by Landman (1994:101).

The revelation that an Afrikaans foremother, already in 1936, had been convinced that the time had come for God's feminine side to be made known to humanity, is both exciting as well as disturbing. Brandt's insight was developed almost a hundred years ago and Afrikaans women still, for most part, follow the restricting 'masculine' spirituality of their 'forefathers'. The pain, which the suggestion that God could also be addressed as 'Mother' caused one of the women<sup>48</sup> in the working group for this research, is evidence that South African women have not even been exposed to any of the historical spiritual writings of their foremothers.

Brandt maintained that her message was biblical and she herself continued to claim that she observed the Christian faith. In another vision Brandt (1936:10) declared that 'we are justified in believing that the equality of the sexes will establish harmony on earth'<sup>49</sup> and she also claimed that

We find then that in the Trinity as in the material Universe and in every earthly home, there is no masculine without the feminine, no positive without the negative. We cannot have a Father in Heaven without a Mother. God the Father is the Creator, God the Mother is the Holy Spirit, the Comforter of the World; and God the Son is the only-begotten Child of the Father and Mother God, our Elder Brother and Representative in our Heavenly Home, endowed with the qualities and attributes of both Father and Mother (Landman 1994:104).

Although such an interpretation is fraught with complexity, Brandt claimed that her message had been revealed to her and that her thrust was societal. Her views must also be seen as being expressed at a time when scholars and theologians were contemplating various explanations and descriptions of the Holy Trinity. Her view is one that was held by a number of early twentieth century theologians but most theological thinking has moved to the concept adopted and expounded by Suggit (1993) in his book, *The Simplicity of God – God as Trinity*. In this book he emphasises that

Each "person" of the Godhead, however, is not a *part* of God, but is fully and completely God, so that Paul [in Col 2:9<sup>50</sup>] could say that in Christ "all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in bodily form" (Suggit 1993:7).

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<sup>48</sup> Her story is told in 4.7.0.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted by Landman (1994:104).

<sup>50</sup> Col. 2:9 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,'.

Landman (1994:104) discovered that Brandt, however, was definitely ahead of her time, especially in South Africa, as she had recorded in her diary that

The Aquarian Age, the Age of Woman, follows naturally on the Piscean Age, ushered in by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago (Brand 1936:12, 14). This is manifested in society (Brand 1936:19): 'The world-wide movement for the emancipation of woman is explained by the fact that humanity has entered the sign of water.'

Brandt's view of the 'New Age' would be a corrective to the era of 'male-misgovernment'. She firmly believed that the Age of Aquarius would usher in an era when 'the gospel of motherly love and the essential womanly qualities of intuition and imagination' would become recognised as an answer to the world's problem caused by 'brute force or violence' and 'insatiable lust for power' (Brandt 1936:20).<sup>51</sup> Almost prophetically Brandt believed that men would feel threatened by 'women's credibility' because she claimed women would be empowered by the Divine.

Something of this insinuation, made by Brandt, is present in the responses of many men – and women - to the challenges of feminist thinking. In this Eastern Free State area, more specifically, even the idea is viewed as inconceivable. When struggling with whether we, my husband and I, could actually lead this local church to a point where the leadership will acknowledge their own prejudice and become willing to listen to the possibility of an alternative paradigm, we had to recognise that they believe firmly they are 'right' and that we are 'wrong'. This insight reminded me of the fact that many feminist activists, including Johanna Brandt, were lone figures in a male dominated world. At sixty Brandt experienced official rejection by her church and I doubt whether any of the members of their all-male church council had read her publications or even took the trouble to attempt to understand her point of view. In a similar way, even now in the year 2002, church leaders tend to oppose 'feminist perspectives' without so much as an attempt to begin to interact with those who are pursuing a more holistic ministry and view of God. They therefore cannot come to a point of understanding because they refuse to entertain the thought that God may be more than the limited image they have of God.

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted by Landman (1994:105).

The poem by Peter de Rosa, quoted at the beginning of this section, is a reminder that the 'Word' is not silent and that much remains to be unfolded. Feminist perspectives of the Christian faith are only another attempt to regain the truth, as Christ came to proclaim it. It is true that 'feminism' itself addresses the long-neglected issue of sexism but that is not the whole aim. As I see it, Christian feminist theology strives to address all the exploitative 'isms', and all other ways in which one group either excludes or attempts to dominate another. This means racism, classism, sexism, ageism, and the ways in which people of different faiths, creeds, social standing, sexual orientation or physical ability relate to one another, are being addressed. People are created in God's own image – all people. We are called to respect, honour and have regard for one another irrespective of any of our differences. Christ came so that, through Him, people might be reconciled to God and to one another. Local Calvinism did not seem to instil this kind of truth into the piety of Afrikaans women. There has always been 'an other'. Ever since the very beginnings of the Afrikaans nation there was an emphasis on keeping the 'Afrikaner pure'. The 'other' included the 'English', the 'Blacks', the 'Indians', the 'Coloureds', the 'Catholics', the 'Apostolics', and so I could go on. As a child I remember constantly being confronted with 'the other'. Landman (1994:7) writes about the historian, Eric Stockenström, who linked Afrikaans women's morals with the nationalist agenda: "the women kept the nation white". Their national policy was exclusive and that spilled over into every sphere of life.

Marie du Toit, whom Landman calls 'the first muted Afrikaans feminist', was the sister of Totius, who in 1920 headed up the commission, for the *Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika*, that had to investigate the suffrage of women. A year after the synodical decision against allowing women to vote in church, Marie du Toit wrote a book of protest against the position of the church. In this book she argued against each of the seven points raised by the church to prevent women from voting on 'Scriptural Grounds'. It is distressing to know that this book, written in 1921 by Marie du Toit, is the only Afrikaans book to have used the word '*feminis*'<sup>52</sup> in its title and also that extremely few Afrikaans women have ever known about its

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<sup>52</sup> Afrikaans for 'feminist'.



existence. Landman (1994:111) puts forward the thought that

Amongst the Afrikaans women of her time she was alone in pleading for women's suffrage.

Marie Du Toit attempted to address Kuiperism, which encouraged women to stay 'within the natural boundaries of womanhood, which is restricted to the personal sphere of their homes' (Landman 1994:111). She applied what Landman (1994:111) calls 'common-sense feminism' because she claimed that 'common sense should lead to acknowledging women's natural role in society and politics'. The following five points were presented to her readers, with which Landman (1994:115-116) believes she intended to energise Afrikaans Christian women:

- Neither Jesus Christ nor nature restricts women to a private life. Men will keep women from public life as long as women allow them to do so.
- Women are needed in public life because their insight into social problems can alleviate the suffering of people through legislation.
- Women's contribution to theology is that they place people and their experiences, and not principles which claim a divine origin, in the centre.
- Women's history testifies that they can make intelligent decisions during times when society is in need of independent and bold insights from individuals.
- Women are needed in public life not only as individuals but as a group. The agenda for political feminism should aim at the improvement of the plight of those who are oppressed, poor and muted.

History was to make Marie du Toit the first muted feminist amongst Afrikaans women. Neither her church nor her society was to take any notice of her insight into women's social inequality and personal suffering.

Although Landman (1994) states, in her summary of the *Piety of Afrikaans Women*, that Brandt's prophecy has not yet come true for Afrikaans women, I am encouraged by Landman's books and by her commitment to continuously challenge the Christian Church. Not only Afrikaans women have to be encouraged to recognise their need to be freed from their bondage, all South African people need to experience the freedom, which I believe Landman has once again confronted us with. Can we answer the question posed in the introduction to this section? My personal answer would like to be 'yes, Afrikaans feminism does exist'. However, it remains the responsibility of committed Christian feminist theologians to raise the awareness of Afrikaans women, and men, of the greater wholeness and equality that awaits everyone who dares to risk investigating, exploring and adopting a new paradigm in faith and theology.

The next section will highlight some of the experiences and results of other liberation movements' efforts throughout most of the twentieth century.

## 2.3 Third World Feminisms

Bonhoeffer's thought and example, climaxed by his acceptance of the guilt and responsibility of political conspiracy, continue to influence both conservatives and liberals in Protestant, Catholic, and secular circles, especially in the English-speaking world, and more recently in the Third World. His ideas have sparked and shaped diverse movements, including liberation theology ... (Ruth Zerner).<sup>53</sup>

Theologians of the middle and latter twentieth century were challenged by the birth and rapid development of liberation theology. The Second World War had left its wake of devastation and a post-war *Theology of Hope*<sup>54</sup> was being cultivated. South American liberation movements were being formed and later, as 'Black Consciousness' became more of a reality, African liberation movements were established. Some South African women's movements have also played an important role in the struggle for liberation in South Africa. The quest for liberation of the peoples in so-called 'Third World' countries has been closely linked to the development of liberation theology, from a Christian perspective. Although we shall only focus on the Latin Americas and Africa in this paper, it needs to be stated that the term 'Third World Countries' includes several countries in the East. A study of the struggle for liberation in the East, however, is a subject, which would need to be researched separately. The next three sections will briefly outline the links between liberation and feminist theology in the 'Third World'.

### 2.3.0 South American Liberation Theology

Colonialism had brought with it exploitation and the divide between rich and poor was huge. The liberation movements, and therefore also liberation theology, was born in Latin America in the context of the class struggle between those who were often extremely wealthy and those who had nothing. Poverty and hunger had become a serious problem and

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<sup>53</sup> Article in *The History of Christianity* (Dowley 1988:603).

<sup>54</sup> Title of Jürgen Moltmann's book (1965).

revolutionary leaders were being raised up to fight against their oppression. Marxism, as an ideology, greatly influenced the leaders of liberation movements in the Latin Americas. Most of these leaders were convinced that the capitalist system was to blame for their predicament and because the Marxist system seemed, at the time, to be working in Cuba, they thought that it would be a successful socio-political move for their Latin American countries too.

It was perceived that classical Western theology – that form of theology that came from Europe and gave shape to the church as people experienced it – was out of touch with the real needs of the peoples in South America, and that it was by-passing issues that it ought to be addressing. In short, faith and life were somehow separated from each other. The revolutionaries associated the church, which at that time was mainly the Roman Catholic Church, with European imperialism and out of that antagonism developed the beginnings of ‘liberation theology’. Soon many Catholic priests, like Father Camilo Torres, who was shot in 1966, began to share in the revolutionary perspectives of the liberation movements. Gustavo Gutiérrez of Lima, Peru, was one of the leading liberation theologians of his time. He used the biblical account of the Exodus as an analogy for the need of South America’s political liberation. He believed that salvation meant ‘to struggle against misery and exploitation’ (Dowley 1988:610). One can therefore understand why the key criticism levelled against classical Western theology was that it “spiritualised” the Gospel and that it was built on a dualistic view of life. In other words

life is divided into areas of sacred and profane, body and soul, spiritual and carnal, heaven (up there) and earth (down here) or hell (down there). These dualisms were inherited from certain aspects of early Greek philosophical influence in the church, which also stressed the superiority of the “soul” over the body. Liberation theologians see in most expressions of classical theology the promises of Christianity - its hope and its expectation - projected into this otherworldly, “spiritual” realm, the realm of the immortal soul. Further, the fulfilment of such promises belongs primarily to the future. Against the background of poverty and oppression in Latin America, the demand was for an interpretation of Christianity that is relevant for the **present**, a theology that addresses itself to the situation of bondage in which so many people live.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> TEEC Notes – Systematic Theology I - Basic Issues, pages 96-97.

José Porfirio Miranda of Mexico believed that the Old Testament prophets and the teaching of Jesus attack the principle of private property. The organising editor of *The History of Christianity* (Dowley 1988:610) suggests that

Western Christians have failed to see this because they have come to the Bible with capitalist presuppositions, and read it theoretically rather than with practical questions (on the basis of 'praxis').

It has taken the rise of liberation theology to alert Western Christianity to the fact that theology, as Padilla, in *The History of Christianity* (Dowley 1988:611) suggests, 'made in the West (preferably in England, Scotland, Holland, Germany, France and the United States)' is not universal. It was made clear by leading Latin American theologians that mainline Western theology had not adequately addressed the issues of social injustice, poverty and racial discrimination. Matters such as institutionalised violence and economic dependence were two more issues facing liberation theologians in the Third World.

It is important to note that liberation theology mainly addressed oppression on the socio-political level whereas its sister, feminist theology, started to assert that women were oppressed and dominated by men and a patriarchal society, and that they needed to be liberated from this tyranny. Although liberation theology found much support in the subsequent development of Roman Catholic liberation and contextual theologies, feminist theology remains 'an ugly sister' when it comes to the Vatican. It, however, continues to be important to be reminded, once more, that

Third World feminisms in turn insist that the inter-actions of racism, colonialism, and sexism are defining women's oppression and struggle for liberation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:254).

Acknowledging that this is the case does not deny that Western women also experience oppression but it does highlight the fact that in Third World countries there is often a triple bind on women - that of being female, poor and black (or of colour). For this reason, I believe, the South American liberation movements aided, at least initially, the development of feminist theology. At the same time these movements caused a spark, which has caught aflame in Africa. The following section will focus on the development of African/Black theology.

### 2.3.1 African Liberation Theology

It is widely known that, at present, the most rapidly growing theological movements are in Africa. Some call it either an 'African Renaissance' or a 'Black Renaissance'. It needs to be mentioned, however, that long before 1965, when at the 'All Africa Conference of Churches' African theology became recognised as a formal theological pursuit, the AICs<sup>56</sup> had already begun exploring their need for an authentic African expression of Christianity.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:78), a Western scholar who has recognised the need for reconstruction in church history and of Christian theology suggests that

Just as black people search history for models of identification that indicate the contributions of blacks to culture and history, just as they strive to eliminate racist interpretations of history and culture, so too women and men in the church must attempt to rewrite Christian history and theology in order to recover aspects that have been neglected or distorted by patriarchal historians and theologians.

It is therefore not surprising that African Christians had begun questioning the presumption of Westerners to decide on issues of morality as well as appropriate worship for an African. It has been well-argued that

the concrete form and character that Christianity has taken in Africa has not been primarily determined by the actual conditions of Africa realities, but those of the founding mission bodies. African Christians have been deprived the opportunity to express their experiences of the Christian faith spontaneously in authentic African categories [Pato in *Towards an Authentic Christianity*, (1989:1)].<sup>57</sup>

Christian mission in Africa, as was also the case in the Latin Americas, was closely linked to European imperialism. All over the world, missionaries of the church had closely followed on the heels of their countries' imperialist settlers and governors. Often the missionaries themselves appeared to embrace or reflect imperialist or colonial ideals. In South Africa, especially, this association continued up until 1994, with the links between the DRC and the infamous socio-political structures in South Africa since 1948.

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<sup>56</sup> African Independent Churches.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in the TEEC notes for South African Church History, Book 4, page 71.

It is against this kind of background that African theologians are attempting to de-Westernise Christianity for African people today. One of the most traumatic aspects that detracted from a traditionally strong community in African culture was the tendency in Western Christianity toward individualism. Ntloedibe-Kuswani (Njoroge and Dube 2001:107) suggests that the African theologian, John S. Mbiti, has proposed that in Africa the saying by Descartes; “I think therefore I am” ought to be changed to “I belong therefore I am”. The emphasis on the individual, along with many foreign thought-forms, expressions and values, put an unreasonable strain on African people. Often, in the name of the church, stable communities were disrupted and those who did not convert to Christianity were ostracised. The emotional violence experienced by African people, when they were deprived of their customs and practices that formed part of being African, is only now being evaluated and reflected upon.

Mbiti makes two other vital points, one which emphasises that Africans do not distinguish the secular from the sacred and he poses the other in the form of a question as to why Western Christian missionaries did not use the many experienced and religiously prepared people from African religions to work with them. He reminds his readers that missionaries had to be trained in Europe and once here they would train new local people for their mission purpose. As we say this we are aware that

Western Christianity came to Africa to find that there were already priests, *dingaka* or healers who could have been utilized, but were rejected as heathens, witches, barbarians, savages and demonic individuals instead. These people were the people who understood African world-views better than the missionaries and everyone else (Njoroge and Dube 2001:109).

With regard to Mbiti’s point, presented by Ntloedibe-Kuswani (Njoroge and Dube 2001:108), that Africans have a holistic view of life that is opposed to the dualism practised by many Westerners, it is suggested that the Christian Church should have maintained the old community set-up because he also believes that

A Christianity, which is based in a church building, leaves Africans in a vacuum - uprooted, frustrated, and unsatisfied. If African peoples are “saved” without their cultures, history, and environment, their salvation will be lacking. Salvation for God’s whole creation would be another great contribution from African religions. Had Christianity not been aggressive, the African world-view

would have made a wonderful contribution to the prevention of the current ecological crisis that, at times, Christianity is blamed for.

The following excerpt helps us to reflect on the validity and relevance of African theology and gives us a little insight into what other aspects might also have been handled differently:

Had missionaries and the churches generally been more perceptive and sensitive, they would have found certain elements of African tradition on which to build in their presentation of the Christian message. They would have found, too, that Africa offers much that can enrich the Christian faith, instead of posing a threat to it. Further, they would have realised that history bears testimony to the Gospel being carried in an idiom with which people are familiar. For example, in a Hellenised world Greek philosophy was of great value in helping to give expression to otherwise foreign Christian truths and for sorting out theological conflicts in the early centuries of the church.<sup>58</sup>

African theologians are re-claiming the call to community, which is so decidedly Christian. This call extends beyond the boundaries of human relationships because, as is often also the case in some other indigenous cultures, it involves the accountability for nature, our natural reserves and our land.

Many other aspects form part of the quest for an authentic African Christian spirituality but something which is an important focus for all people is that the Christian emphasis 'ought not to be on **either** individual **or** communal, but rather on **both** individual **and** communal'<sup>59</sup> expressions of faith and theology.

This paints a very concise picture but I must confess that it gives us an incomplete view of the background to African theology. It also does not yet begin to address the major issue of a fiercely patriarchal society in which African women have been even more dominated and abused by the system than in Western society. The writers of the stories, which are published in *The Theologies of African Women* (Nyambura Njoroge and Musa Dube 2001), begin to relate some of the chronicles of African feminist theologians.

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<sup>58</sup> TEEC Notes – Systematic Theology I - Basic Issues, page 102.

<sup>59</sup> TEEC Notes - Systematic Theology I - Basic Issues, page 103.

One of these theologians, Grace Rose Imathiu, as presented by Njoroge and Dube (2001:38) writes, as she concludes a most thought-provoking Bible study, that

African women are a welcome recourse in biblical hermeneutics because of our experience of alienation as the Other in our cultural contexts. This experience has involved living in societies where we are not named as individuals but as men's daughters, men's wives or mothers. Our claim to individuality is a claim to our God-given right. Our reading strategy must therefore be one of seeking out the gaps and silences in the text and re-imagining the unspoken stories. The text will thus become our departure point for our speaking about our own unspoken stories.

Imathiu therefore confirms that the Christian witness in Africa needs to balance the sense of community with the rights and privileges of the individual, especially when it comes to the incorporation of women into the life of the church. African women theologians are also becoming aware of their responsibility to encourage African women to recognise their bondage, and to challenge their own cultural patriarchal system into becoming transformed, as Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001:242) appeals through Njoroge and Dube's book, *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*:

There is a vulnerability that does not empower but simply adds to the oppression of women. We need the power of God to transform this and work for its elimination. We may be able to articulate the true meaning of power by following the model of Jesus Christ. We may even be able to demonstrate how this transformed power works, but to transform the mentality of those who lord it over others, we depend on the power of the Holy Spirit.

Although I acknowledge my severe limitation in being able to appreciate fully the deep implications of African liberation theology, and I admit my indebtedness to African theologians who endeavour to help me, mainly through their writings, to grasp some of their experiences, I have valued most the insights shared by black women at cross-cultural workshops, seminars and informal gatherings. African theologians, like Maimela, Mugambi, Parratt and Pobee, have put forward a method of developing what they call 'inculturation theology', which would attempt to Africanise Christianity in the sense of affirming African culture and 'positing it as the basis for developing African liberation theology' (Njoroge and Dube 2001:167). The hesitancy I have, and I suspect African women theologians would have too, of accepting such a proposal unreservedly is that it seems as if all these theologians are



men and they 'were indeed perceived to be speaking for all African people' (Njoroge and Dube 2001:167).

Musimbi Kanyoro (Njoroge and Dube 2001:167) suggests that

African women theologians are caught in the dilemma of disagreeing with the presentation of inculturation as the basis for African liberation theology. While affirming the need for reclaiming culture through the theology of inculturation, we African women theologians make the claim that inculturation is not sufficient unless the cultures we reclaim are analyzed and deemed worthy in terms of promoting justice and support for life and the dignity of women.

African women theologians would therefore require that both African and feminist theologies are used in the development and examination of inculturation theology. They also call for the employment of an African method of story telling, which is familiar to African communities. In using a narrative method, they believe, theologians would be compelled to examine the 'cultural conditioning of African women's thinking in order to discover the roots of the belief system of which they are also a part' (Njoroge and Dube 2001:168).

Putting the insights of African theology into practice and making them an integral part of church life in Africa is a slow process. This remains true more especially in the South African context because, and here I refer specifically to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and other mainline churches who operate on similar lines, the membership of the national church is mixed. Although in most instances churches still have an either predominantly white or black local membership, its general ethos has remained decidedly Western. Special effort needs to be given to cross-cultural worship and an integration and understanding of authentically African religious practices. This quest for Africanisation, together with feminist theological perspectives, does not yet find many sympathetic participants in our church communities – whether they be either black or white.

The next section will briefly highlight the work of some of the South African Women's Movements and their contributions to the liberation in South Africa, especially of black women.

### 2.3.2 South African Women's Movements

Throughout the ages movements have evolved to express the feelings of groups of people who have been oppressed, marginalised or abused. What I believe made the twentieth century slightly different to any other age, in South Africa or in any other country, is the growing awareness that oppression and exploitation are unjust practices along with a bold courage, which fostered a growing confidence amongst marginalised groups to speak out for themselves. In an era when all peoples of colour were discriminated against in South Africa, groups of people came together to talk about their experiences and to deliberate what they could do about their plight. These groups had many varied agendas, of which some were political, others social, others religious and yet others still were concerned with gender issues, consumerism, the cultural and also the educational needs of their communities.

In a short overview, as not much more is possible in a project of this nature, we hope to show how many of these movements contributed to the overall pursuit for liberation for all the oppressed peoples of this land. It also bears mentioning that such a quest is ongoing. South Africa is definitely in a different place to where she was fifty years ago, or even ten years ago, but on the inter-personal level of integration much more work needs to be done in cross-cultural relations, education and training, development and the general raising of living conditions and opportunities for all people. That means that although much of the initial work of political movements has been accomplished, they need to continue to keep just principles before their members and on the agendas of their organisations.

The same thing, in principle, goes for each movement, whether they had been established specifically to work for women's emancipation or for any other cause. With this brief prelude we look at some of the movements that have made their mark in the transition process of the past few decades in South Africa.

Ecumenical movements, many of which are affiliated to the World Council of Churches, offered support and facilitation for other small groups. One such group has been the *Diakonia Council of Churches* in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. Their goal has always been to support non-governmental organisations - both secular and Christian - in order to be a

voice, for peace and justice, for and often on behalf of those who, especially during the *Apartheid* years, did not have a voice of their own. One of their main contributions has also been to provide office space in their buildings from which some women's movements could operate. At times they have also been able to financially sponsor various conferences, workshops and retreats, either through providing a venue, facilitators and/or through funding subsidies.

One of these movements is the Black Sash League. This movement's original goal was to defend the Constitution of the Union of South Africa and it was

established in 1955 to oppose the policy of the National Government of depriving the non-Whites of their remaining franchise, and of making other changes in the constitution (Rosenthal 1961:63).

The members of the Black Sash League wear a black sash as a sign of mourning and they 'maintain vigils of 'silent picketing' at places where Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament and other prominent personalities are expected to appear' (Rosenthal 1961:63). Their goals have been amended slightly since 1994 when the more democratic dispensation was inaugurated but they are still active in their quest for political, social, racial and religious equality for women in South Africa. They also give their support to campaigns such as 'Women Against Abuse' and other causes that affect women in particular.

Although it has received heavy criticism in recent years, mainly because of the corrupt behaviour of their leader, the ANC <sup>60</sup> Women's League cannot be omitted from a list of influential women's organisations in South Africa. During the years of oppression of all people of colour in this land, this movement not only campaigned for freedom from White oppression but also from that of male dominance. Today they remain actively involved politically and socially, and along with other groups, they plead for the end of abuse against women and children.

Christian Women's Organisations had probably been formed in almost all of the mainline denominations, but unfortunately their contributions to transformation in South Africa were usually limited to the 'spiritual' rather than becoming fully integrated with the

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<sup>60</sup> African National Congress.

social and political. It needs to be mentioned that in many instances individual leaders were raised up to speak out against social and political injustices, but very seldom were Christian women's voices heard speaking out against male dominance. That has only in recent years become a little more prevalent, even if only in isolated cases and mostly in city and suburban environments. Most Christian Women's Organisations maintain the status quo and are resigned to a fundamentalist reasoning that males have been created by God to dominate. In very recent years there has been a move to incorporate male members into the 'Women's Organisation' of the United Church of Australia. This move seemed strange to many women but if the Church Universal does become serious about her inclusive witness, then groups that meet under the auspices of a Christian banner should be challenged to redefine their purpose and become more inclusive and representative in their membership. Much can be said for and against this idea of fully integrated groups within the life of the church and it certainly remains a topic for further research.

Women's movements have also played an important role in the awareness campaigns for taking ecological responsibility. Feminist scholars have often posed the question whether ecological exploitation, as is experienced in the depletion of rain forests and in the damage done to the ozone layer, would have been allowed to happen if women had been sitting alongside men when the decisions, which have affected the world so negatively, were being made. It is important, however, to mention that movements, such as *Green Peace*, have a mixed membership and that they are international. They strive to draw from all people's experience - male, female, young, old, black and white.

The same can be said for organisations, which have endeavoured to address the issue of Western consumerism. Women, and here we refer to women throughout the world and not only in South Africa, often experience both extremes of the consumerism drive because they are probably the biggest market, doing most of the day to day shopping, but on the other side of the coin they also seem to be the victims of exploitative advertising. Consumerism has caused inflation to reach astronomical levels. The natural cycle of the earth has been bypassed through methods of preserving. Human beings no longer eat seasonally and all kinds of unhealthy processed foods have become life's 'necessities'. The space available in this

research allows us but this brief comment on the movements that have begun to address these issues. A response to consumerism, especially from a feminist Christian perspective, calls for more extensive research that could be embarked on in the future.

Although much more can be said about ‘Third World Feminisms’, the effects of liberation movements, in all spheres of life, have left their mark and the ongoing quest for liberation remains a reality. The next section will attempt to address some very specific alternative ways of relating, as Christians, to the world, to one another and to God in Christ.

## 2.4 Alternatives

In an introduction to a section, such as this one, it would seem essential to comment on its relevance. Looking at topics like ‘Wisdom-Sophia’, ‘New Leadership Styles’, ‘Spiritual Awareness’ and ‘An Authentic Christology’ may give to some an impression of moving towards a *New Age* way of thinking. My hope is that the discussion on each of these subjects will show that this is indeed not the case but rather that these issues all shed light on what Christian feminists would call ‘wholeness for all’. One of the best places to start, I believe, is with Wisdom-Sophia.

### 2.4.0 Wisdom-Sophia

Does not Wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?  
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;  
(Proverbs 8:1 & 2)

Marcus Borg (1995:96) refers to Jesus as the ‘Wisdom of God’. He points out how the Gospel writers and Paul speak of this relationship in various ways. Jesus is the incarnation of the ‘Wisdom of God’ and at the same time also wholly God. Examining this aspect of who Jesus is involves us in developing an authentic Christology, which will be the focus of section 2.4.3. For the purpose of this part of the discussion we shall concentrate on the proposal that Jesus embodies the feminine Wisdom of Whom we read in Proverbs and other parts of Scripture. Borg (1995:98) suggests that

In Jewish wisdom literature, wisdom is often personified in female form as “the Wisdom Woman”. Consistent with this personification, *wisdom* is a feminine

noun in both Hebrew (*hokmah*) and Greek (*sophia*). Among scholars, it has become common to name this personification *Sophia*, even when the reference is to a Hebrew text. The obvious reason for doing so (besides the fact that Greek texts use *sophia*) is that *Sophia* is a woman's name in English, thereby reminding us of the female personification in a way that the neuter-sounding word *wisdom* does not.

Proverbs 8<sup>61</sup> goes on to reflect that 'Wisdom-Sophia' was part of God's creation right from the beginning and that She participated in God's creative work. Borg suggests that it was 'through' Wisdom-Sophia that God executed the divine plan of creation. When Proverbs 8 recalls that Wisdom-Sophia was 'daily God's delight, rejoicing before God' (v.30b) and yet also 'rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race' (v.31), we are challenged to recognise the Christ - the True Wisdom of God and the Saviour of humankind (Borg 1995:100).

Borg (1995:101) also refers to Wisdom-Sophia as She Who is spoken of in the Apocryphal books of Sirach and The Wisdom of Solomon. Sirach speaks of Wisdom-Sophia having Her being **in** God whereas The Wisdom of Solomon speaks about Her **as** God.

Jesus Himself is recorded by Luke to have said

Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' (Luke 11:49).

In Luke 7<sup>62</sup> Jesus is recorded to have claimed that Wisdom-Sophia is vindicated by Her children. Borg (1995:103) believes strongly that the early Christian movements saw Jesus 'as both the spokesperson and the child of Sophia, and that Jesus himself may have spoken of himself in these terms'.

Another strong image Borg holds before us is that of God being like a womb. He suggests that

To say that God is like a womb is to say that God is like a woman, just as the personification of God as Sophia suggests that God is like a woman, and Jesus is a spokesperson for the compassion of Sophia/God (Borg 1995:103).

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<sup>61</sup> Verse 22a 'The Lord created me at the beginning ...' & verse 30 '... then I was beside him, like a master worker; ...'

<sup>62</sup> Verse 35 'Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.'

Paul also holds the image of Jesus as the ‘Wisdom of God’ fairly central to his writings. Paul’s emphasis, though, is on the post-Easter Jesus whereas much of the emphasis in the Gospels is obviously on the pre-Easter Jesus. It is important to keep in mind that Paul, in almost all of the letters he wrote to the churches, was addressing local problems. Borg (1995:105) suggests that

In response to factionalism within the Christian community at Corinth, Paul developed a strong contrast between “the wisdom of this world” and “the wisdom of God”. Implicitly, the factionalists (who, it is to be remembered, were Christians) were living by “the wisdom of this world”.

In 1 Corinthians 1<sup>63</sup> Paul explicitly talks of Christ as the *Wisdom of God* and the *Wisdom from God*. Furthermore in this, his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses familiar Jewish language about Wisdom–Sophia. The pre-existence of Jesus Christ, that is, Christ existing from eternity with God and being active in creation (1 Cor. 8:6b<sup>64</sup>), speaks again of Jesus as God’s Wisdom or Wisdom-Sophia. Something, which is not usually expounded upon, is that for Paul Jesus is the embodiment of Wisdom-Sophia.

The Gospel of John’s prologue says it very clearly that ‘The Word’ (*Logos*) was with God and is God - from the beginning. Borg (1995:109) sees all the descriptions of Jesus - *Logos, Sophia, Wisdom, Son of God/Abba* - as metaphors and he believes that

This is important to understand in a tradition whose Christological and devotional language has been dominated by patriarchal imagery. Trinitarian language and liturgical formulae that speak of “Father and Son” easily create the impression that this is the definitive Christian way of speaking about God and Jesus. But it is useful to realize that the dominance of father/son imagery reflects the fact that Trinitarian thinking took shape in a patriarchal and androcentric culture. To imagine the impossible: had the Trinity been formulated in a matriarchal culture, Jesus might still be spoken of as “son”, but one may be quite sure that he would not be spoken of primarily as Son of *the Father*.

Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:133) views Sophia as ‘sister, wife, mother, beloved, and teacher’ and also sees Her as ‘an initiate (*mystis*) of God’s knowledge, an associate in God’s works, and emanation of the God of light, who lives in *sympiosis* with God, an image of God’s

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<sup>63</sup> Verse 24b ‘...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.’ & verse 30b ‘...who became for us wisdom from God, ...’

<sup>64</sup> ‘... one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.’

goodness'). Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:133) also suggests that

She is the leader on the way, the preacher in Israel, the taskmaster and creator God. She seeks people, finds them on the road, invites them to dinner. She offers life, rest, knowledge, and salvation to those who accept her. She dwells in Israel and officiates in the sanctuary. She sends prophets and apostles and makes those who accept her "friends of God". Sophia is described as "all-powerful, intelligent, unique" (Wisdom 7:22). She is a people-loving spirit who shares the throne of God (9:10). One can sense here how much the language struggles to describe Sophia as divine (without falling prey to ditheism).

This author reminds us that in Christ we witness God-Sophia at work in the preaching, teaching, healing, exorcism ministry, and very especially in the inclusive table fellowship of Jesus. Jesus welcomed everyone who was open to His message and ministry. He was known as someone who ate and drank with 'sinners' and we are told that he touched lepers and even allowed 'unclean' women to touch Him. He spoke with women, even a Samaritan woman (with whom the Jews usually had no dealings), he forgave 'sinners' and freed them from the bondage of sin and disease. The most remarkable aspect of all is the circle He called forth to continue His ministry. Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:135) believes that

Sophia, the God of Jesus, wills the wholeness and humanity of everyone and therefore enables the Jesus movement to become a "discipleship of equals." They are called to one and the same praxis of inclusiveness and equality lived by Jesus-Sophia.

Based on this 'circle' that Jesus formed around Himself, we too start looking at a circle-style of leadership. For some years now this has become a practice for some secular companies but the church seems reluctant to reclaim a practice that is her original heritage. The following section will highlight some of the major differences between the traditional hierarchical leadership style and a circle leadership style.

### **2.4.1 New Leadership Styles**

When modern secular authors introduce new leadership styles for improving business management, their books become best-sellers. Margaret Wheatley (1999), with her book, *Leadership and the New Science*, experienced this too. Thousands of business leaders from all over the world attended her 'Thinking Conference' in Canada a few years ago. Business leaders brought her ideas back to South Africa and I was one of those who joined a group to



study her methods. What a surprise to discover that what she taught was nothing new. The sub-theme of her book is *'Discovering Order in a Chaotic World'* and she focuses on treating business as a living system. Jesus knew that everything was a living system. He called forth a circle of disciples and entrusted His message to them, teaching them to operate as a 'body'. The Bible, and more especially the New Testament, is full of analogies of 'the body'. The church is called 'The Body of Christ' and yet in the one place where circle-style leadership should be as natural as breathing, the hierarchical pyramid-style is so entrenched it is almost impossible to change back to the original plan that Jesus Himself inaugurated.

Margaret Wheatley has founded an organisation, which she has called *'From The Four Directions'*, and so groups of people are forming circles around the world to work on her principles in order to, as she puts it, 'astonish the world'. If we, as Christian people, were to reflect on this for just a moment we would clearly recognise that this would not be the first time a 'circle' has 'astonished the world'. Christians or the 'People of the Way' were accused of turning the world upside down in the first century CE. If we took seriously Jesus' teaching and Paul's direction on the 'Body of Christ', we could be part of a major reclaiming process for God.

What exactly does 'circle-style' leadership entail? How would one explain the differences between circle and pyramid leadership styles? Why does it seem more effective to operate in a circle? These three questions are but some of the many that might be asked in relation to this complex issue of leadership.

Firstly, circle-style leadership, as I understand it, entails group participation in a form where no one person dominates. A helpful suggestion is that one leads by exception rather than merely perpetuating the same procedure at every single meeting. Reports could therefore be tabled and only exceptional events be highlighted. A principle, which may govern the process, is that each person in the circle gives what they have to offer and asks what they require of the group. At various times during the 'meeting' different people will take the lead, as and when their expertise is required. At the beginning and end of each circle the co-ordinator or facilitator will allow for a 'check-in' where each person would be given an opportunity to reflect their feelings, expectations or evaluations of the 'meeting'. Another

helpful element is that before each 'meeting' someone volunteers to be a guardian of the circle. This person is entrusted with a bell, which is rung when there seems to be a deadlock in the discussion or during a heated moment when a brief time for quiet reflection is recommended, before continuing the discussion. It is hoped that this will facilitate more committed co-operation and participation by each member in the circle.

Secondly, the major difference between pyramid and circle styles of leadership is probably that the former is hierarchical and often male dominant and the latter is a more inclusive style. In the traditional pyramid-style one usually finds a top-down operation with only the 'important' people's suggestions and ideas being valued. A circle-style attempts to view everyone as equal in value no matter which position they hold in either the company or in this case, the church. In a pyramid-style a chairperson usually does most of the talking and in a circle it is envisioned that everyone has equal opportunity to give and seek information.

To endeavour to answer the third question of whether circle-style leadership is more effective than a pyramid-style, would depend on one's experience. In this church, where we introduced a circle-style leadership about nine months ago, it is still a little early to evaluate whether the new style is in actual fact more effective. Not all the leaders are entirely happy with the change, for a number of reasons, of which the main one seems to be an obstinate desire to maintain a male dominant hierarchical tradition. Strange as it may seem, one of the people who requested that the Leaders' Meeting go back to its traditional pyramid-style, is a woman.

Another reason may well be that the leaders cannot yet see that such a style, where people consult with one another, is a point of strength. They perceive this style, in which everyone has an equal opportunity to offer their opinion, as a weakness. Our experience has also been that some of these leaders do their 'consulting' outside of the circle with other members of the Leaders' Meeting who agree with them and then make decisions, which affect the rest of the church community, without the whole circle's consensus or approval. Such a decision caused much pain and conflict but the church is nonetheless left with an irreversible decision. This particular decision impacted specifically on the youth ministry of the church and the leaders in question did not see it as their responsibility to discuss the decision with the

leader of the youth. When confronted on this issue, one of the leaders categorically stated that in their tradition young people are not consulted. In circle-style leadership the hope is expressed that all members of a group, and especially a Leaders' Meeting of a church, will equally value the contributions of young and old, black and white, women and men, abled and disabled, in any discussions and decisions which need to be made for the community it serves.

Much more could be said about these two styles of leadership. However, in my opinion the circle-style leadership seems to offer the most effective way of including all the members of any group to equally participate in the growth and development of any big company, small business, school or church committee. The difficulty lies in choosing the right methods by which to promote the style and motivate the people to risk change. At the time of writing the season is changing from Winter to Spring and while standing under a tree outside our study window I noticed a tiny shoot forcing its way out of the main trunk of this huge tree. A small vulnerable leaf was forming on the tip of this little shoot and it was such a graphic reminder that like the tree our Leaders' Meeting is also a living system. On the surface its 'body' is huge, seems unmovable and hard (like the rough bark of the big tree outside our window) but new life may just be starting to push through, forcing its way into being. With sensitivity and skilful facilitation the leaders of this church may well be motivated to risk the vulnerability of new growth. Risk probably plays a big role too in the topic of the next section, where we shall examine the trends in general spiritual awareness.

## 2.4.2 General Spiritual Awareness

As I came to own and accept and celebrate my womanhood as a gift from God, bringing my own new value for the female side of life into prayer, I experienced a kind of inward leaping which was ecstatically physical as well as spiritual; an inward bodily leaping that made me feel God in my nerves and blood and deep down in my bone marrow as well as in my emotions and intellect.

I was not able to approach God with this kind of engagement until I began to open up my prayer life to the feminine aspect of God, and to celebrate my own femaleness in that aspect.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Rev Alla Renee Bozarth - quoted by Hopkins and Anderson (1992:127).

Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins (1992) have helped us a great deal with the research they did for their book, *The Feminine Face of God*. They interviewed over a hundred women, hoping to find a general thread that would give them some specific clues about women's spiritual awareness. The wonderful thing about this research is that they had to come to a conclusion that there is no such 'general thread', which linked women's spiritual experiences.

It is true that some women have experienced God in similar ways, but most often each person's spiritual experience reflected their own journey with the Divine. Many authors of books on spiritual disciplines have endeavoured to give general guidance on various aspects of spiritual direction and many of these are extremely helpful but I expect that the outcome of the research done by Hopkins and Anderson is more valuable. Their findings remind us that each person needs to engage with God at their own pace and in their own context, whether this is within their community or as individuals. Native American, Black African and other aboriginal cultures point us to the value of spirituality in community and in contemplative orders. Both Western and Eastern spiritualities remind us of the importance of bringing one's authentic self into the presence of the Divine.

The kind of spirituality that has been encouraged in this local church, for some years now, and which tends to focus on presenting to God what is perceived by some as that which God wants to see, is not altogether helpful. This fundamentalist view also tends towards fatalism, which I do not believe is part of the Christian call to faith. The next section will deal more specifically with what an 'Authentic Christology' entails, but it is important to realise one's own game-free<sup>66</sup> spiritual awareness.

In the latter part of the twentieth century CE many people were exploring various avenues of spirituality. I venture a guess that this was in response to the general ineffective witness of the traditional Christian Church. People were turning to Eastern practices of religion, the 'New Age' movement came into being, and through its emphasis on wholeness, attracted a substantial following. During this period too, possibly as a counter-reaction, the fundamentalist 'charismatic' Christian movements flourished. They seemed to attract

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<sup>66</sup> With reference to the book, *Games People Play*, by Eric Berne (1964).

thousands of people and their focus on 'prosperity' as 'the King's kids' often secured the membership of rich and famous personalities. Outrageous claims for healing, with devastating results for people who are not healed 'because their faith is not strong enough', however, often results in a high turnover of membership.

Mainline Protestant denominations mostly have both fundamentalist and liberal sections within their ranks and both of these branches have failed to be the Church of Christ - in a real sense. Liberals are often so caught up with social activism that spirituality is neglected and fundamentalists are often so concerned about the 'Law of God' that the 'Life of Christ' is seldom allowed to be fully expressed. To a certain extent both of these sections of the church have maintained a hierarchical structure and in most instances these have remained male dominant. Women, on the whole, have inherited their 'spirituality' from their forefathers and for many women it seems almost impossible to believe that God has created them equal. This is certainly the experience of most of the women in this local 'mainline' church.

Another aspect of spiritual awareness, which I believe is important to mention, is that people experience God differently at various stages in their lives. In her book, *Dear Heart, Come Home*, Joyce Rupp (1996) discusses mid-life spirituality. It seems as if we go through a very particular change in our spiritual awareness when we enter this 'second stage' of life. Aspects of life, which were not so important when we were younger, now seem to be more significant and demand careful attention. At this stage in life people seem to have a greater desire to engage in spiritual disciplines, which may lead to a more rounded maturity, improve their self-image and foster a deeper understanding of who God is. Joyce Rupp's prayer for healing seems apt as we conclude this section and it also helps to introduce the next section, which will explore an authentic Christology.

Healing God, come to my hidden corners,  
open the doors to my soul rooms that are tightly locked.

Awaken in me. Bring to life all my deadness.  
Enthuse the depressed emotions. Reenergize my inner weariness.  
Bathe the grime of my ego-centeredness.  
Clarify my confusions. Fire my neglected loves.  
Brush off my spiritual hungers. Ease my sore relationships.  
Deepen my sense of self-esteem.  
Stir up my connection with the world.

Tenderly gather in your arms all that still needs healing,  
all that remains wounded and wanting.  
May I grow each day into greater wholeness  
with a stronger, purer inner freedom (Rupp 1996:137).

### 2.4.3 An Authentic Christology

Marcus Borg (1995:96ff) discusses the subject of Christology<sup>67</sup> in the fifth chapter of his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. Deducing from the traditional history of the church, the foundation documents<sup>68</sup> and the emergence of Trinitarian dogma, Borg (1995:97) suggests that

As a result, the most familiar Christology to people both within and outside of the church is one that images Jesus' relationship to God as Son of the Father. This Son of God Christology is the core of the popular image of Jesus. So familiar is it that it is easy to think of it as the normative or definitive Christology.

But this had not yet happened in the New Testament period. There was as yet no official Christology. Rather, the New Testament contains a variety of Christological images, which function as metaphors for imaging the significance of Jesus and his relationship to God. They had not yet been crystallized into doctrines, and the language of "substance", "person", and "two natures" was still far in the future. Among these metaphors was the root of what was to become the Son of God Christology of the later church: the New Testament does use son/father imagery to speak about Jesus and God. But along with son/father imagery were other images. One of these, probably as early as and perhaps even earlier than son/father imagery, is an image of Jesus as intimately related to divine wisdom.

Recognising the strong case, which theological scholars have for a Wisdom Christology, affects our image of Jesus in more ways than one. Borg (1995:98) encourages his readers to attempt this theological exercise and he commends those who do to look through the 'window' it provides for seeing into 'the nature of Christological language'.

In her book, *Theology and Feminism*, Daphne Hampson (1990:54) reminds us that as Christians (women and men) we are baptised into 'Christ'<sup>69</sup> and not into the 'Man Jesus'. The difference, she suggests, is because Jesus, as the Christ and as the second 'person' in the

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<sup>67</sup> The branch of Christian Theology that deals with the nature of Christ.

<sup>68</sup> The Creeds drawn up by the Councils at Nicea (325 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE).

<sup>69</sup> God's Messiah or Saviour.

Trinity, 'presumably has no sex' (Hampson 1990:54). This has strong bearing on the baptismal confession of Galatians, chapter 3 verses 27-28<sup>70</sup> and remains a convincing argument against the official view of the Roman Catholic Church, which maintains that only men are qualified to fully represent Christ at the Eucharist, or any other office usually presided over by a priest.

Hampson (1990:60) also quotes Patricia Wilson-Kastner, who believes that her view of Christology and feminism embody the same ideals:

Feminism likewise, she argues, is concerned for the overcoming of dualism and alienation. Hence we should '[understand] the significance of Christ as embodying values and ideals which also are sought for and valued by feminists'. Trinitarianism too fits well with a feminist ethical position. '[Just as] feminism identifies interrelatedness and mutuality – equal, respectful, and nurturing relationships – as the basis of the world as it really is and as it ought to be, we can find no better understanding and image of the divine than that of the perfect and open relationship of love'.

Hampson herself, though, puts forward her opinion that no matter how one views the issue, there will always be a problem in fully reconciling feminism with Christology. She suggests that

Inescapably, if one is to have a Christology, one must bring the two natures [of Christ] together, and herein lies the problem. ... If it is to be a Christology, it must also concern Christ's person - whereupon all the problems which Christology entails are again present (Hampson 1990:59).

She therefore considers it debatable when a Christian feminist believes that it is of little consequence that women are of the opposite sex to Christ.

Schüssler Fiorenza, however, after her visit to South Africa, challenged us as African women theologians to develop our own authentic Christology. After discussing Christian Landman's research of Dutch-Afrikaans Christian women's diaries, one also recognises how important it is to re-evaluate the Christology of early local Calvinism in South Africa. Black South African women too are obliged to examine their own Christology. Does the nature of Christ, as depicted in a Western white Christology, speak into their culture and context? In response to Borg's deduction of what has become 'normative' in Christological understanding,

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<sup>70</sup> 'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'

it makes very good sense to re-look at how South African Christian women view Jesus the Christ, and also at what kind of imagery would be most helpful in our context. Such an exercise will demand hard work because not only will an in-depth study on the nature of Christ be essential, but extensive research on the South African context will also have to be conducted in order to put the two together in an acceptable way.

In Christina Landman's (1994) research for her book, *The Piety of Afrikaans Women*, it became very clear that the Christology of early Afrikaans women had been formed out of their fear of God and their excessive feelings of guilt. There seemed, though, to have existed a kind of dualism by which these women tended to completely separate God and Jesus in their spiritual experience. Many were able to fantasise about Jesus being their lover or husband whilst at the same time having an inordinate fear of God. Much of that dualism is still very prevalent in the spirituality of most South African people and, very especially, seems to still be the experience of many members of this local church.

Like Wilson-Kastner (Hampson 1990:60) I too believe that a sound Christology should embrace all people in the same way as feminist theology endeavours to do. Hampson (1990:60) quotes her as suggesting that the 'division of persons into male and female is significant, but it is one category among many'. Hampson, although agreeing with this statement, finds her argument, that the alienation of women is overcome in Christ, a little naïve. Hampson also suggests that Wilson-Kastner has not fully addressed the very real issue of the brokenness of the world. Christ came into a broken world and offered us life in all its fullness. In my experience this LIFE encompasses both extreme spectrums and everything in between the two poles. For me this means experiencing sorrow and joy, sadness and elation, plenty and hunger, youth and old age, and in all these encounters experiencing the very real presence of Christ.

Hampson (1990) draws her chapter on Christology to a close by referring to the realm of symbolism, which is manifest in Christology. She also associates the difficulty black people have in identifying with a white Christ-figure, with a similar difficulty experienced by women when trying to identify with a male Christ-figure. The Western image of a white male Christ is a very limiting image for Christians of any other orientation or culture. However,



when the Anglican Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York placed a female Christ-figure, named 'The Christa', on a cross there followed a huge uproar. Most people felt that the Christa represented a distortion of Christianity. Although this certainly does constitute 'distortion of historical religion', the symbolism in the Christa-figure is no different to that of the Christ-figure. They both are mere symbols of what God has done in Christ/a to redeem humankind.

The quest for an authentic Christology would be, as I see it, to relate to the liberating and saving act of God in and through Christ. When symbolism enhances one's understanding of the nature of Christ I believe it brings with it the deeper meaning of what I believe Christ's role is in our salvation. Although much more can be said, especially in the area of developing a Third World Christology, and in particular a Christology for South African women, this chapter will be concluded with some specific observations in the next section.

## **2.5 Concluding Observations**

In the wide theoretical overview, attempted in this chapter, we have been given a glimpse of selected portions of scholarly research as well as some brief glances at the personal feelings of some people who have participated in this project. In this section it is appropriate to focus once again on the purpose of this particular research and to highlight some of the observations, which may have direct bearing on the experiences of people who live in this Eastern Free State town.

One of the key observations in this chapter, I believe, has been the relevance of Landman's research on Dutch-Afrikaans women's diaries. Her comments and deductions are challenging, and perhaps more so because they are so close to our experience as Afrikaans women in this land. The sadness remains, however, that most of the women in this town do not want to be exposed or introduced to anything that might rock the boat.

The discovery that the then already outdated local brand of Calvinism had as it were been dumped on the Dutch settlers in South Africa, almost on purpose, leaves me feeling outraged. With the limited communication of the seventeenth century CE, the settlers, and especially the women, just did not know what the trends were in the Netherlands at the time.

Conservative Kuiperism, as imparted to the South African Dutch-Afrikaans men who went to the Netherlands to study theology, seems to carry much of the blame for keeping women in bondage within the church and within society.

Observing the development in my own life story and plotting some of the significant breakthroughs in my own spirituality were helpful exercises, not only for me personally but also as I relate to the women in the working group, many of whom are experiencing similar turning points in their journeys to mine. I acknowledge once again that section 2.1.1 was written fairly subjectively but this I trust adds value to the remainder of the project.

The issue of fear and guilt, although present in all forms of Christianity, seems to have been inordinately excessive in the experiences of Dutch-Afrikaans women. Such a view of the Christian faith has also influenced what can only be termed 'an obsession' with sin, death and hell. Although it was recognised that human beings have been created to recognise and respond to a healthy fear of danger, it remains my belief that excessive fear, especially of God, is not part of what God intended for us in our relationships with both people and with God.

Addressing the emergence and development of feminism, both in the Western tradition and in the Third World, did shed light on some long-neglected and unjust practices in secular society and in the Christian Church. Issues, such as reproduction, equal education opportunities, the division of labour into 'men's and women's work', and many others, helped to air some of the specific concerns related to women having full access to all of life. Only when dominance ceases to be the norm rather than the exception, will women and all 'others' be free to experience the entire spectrum of 'life in all its fullness'.

Christian feminist theology seeks to address crucial issues within the Church of Christ and it will continue to expose sexism, ageism, classism and racism for what it is. It was also recognised that Afrikaans feminism does exist, even if it had been nipped in the bud before it even had the opportunity to germinate. Afrikaans women, at least the one we know of, did raise some of the very issues that both Western and Third World feminisms protested against. More recently Afrikaans scholars are speaking out against some of the crippling values, which many people believe were to have 'built' the Afrikaans nation.

It was essential to examine the links between colonial imperialism, the church and liberation. Liberation movements in Third World countries have many similar characteristics but it was also of value to recognise that each context needs to be kept in mind when exploring the liberation of a group of people. However, it has been highlighted that political, social and religious liberation all need to be addressed if true freedom is indeed the goal.

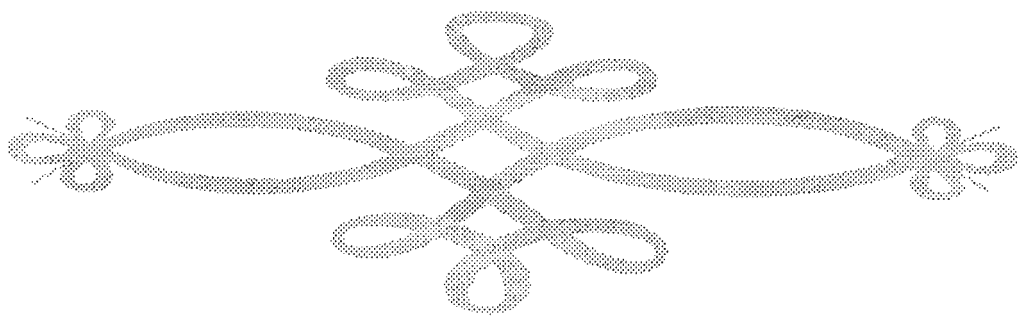
Feminism, as a discipline, also endeavours to explore alternatives. Looking at Wisdom-Sophia and how the feminine side of God is depicted in Wisdom helped us to gain insight into an area of spirituality and faith, which is seldom examined. This is true too in viewing the Christ/a in Christology. Developing an authentic Christology is an essential part of being a Christian feminist. Although some 'post-Christian' scholars doubt whether feminism and Christology could in fact be reconciled, feminist theologians, like Schüssler Fiorenza, believe that they could indeed inform each other.

Exploring circle-style leadership in exchange for the traditional hierarchical pyramid-style presents us with a challenge and also leaves us with some open-ended questions as to whether such a system might indeed work in the long term. These rather radical ways of looking at leadership and, more specifically at leadership in the church, affect how we in turn view spiritual awareness. A gradual drifting towards alternative spiritualities in recent years is a constant reminder that the mainline denominations are struggling to be relevant to many people of today. Feminist Christian theology endeavours to open up areas of faith where women can feel accepted in a male-oriented religion and church. A focus on the feminine divine has also helped to broaden the traditional view of Christianity. This shift has come in order to include both the feminine and masculine qualities of God in Christ and also in relation to creation in general.

As mentioned already an authentic Christology is absolutely essential in our quest for wholeness for all people, as Christians and as feminists. We need to understand the nature of Christ, and God's purpose for the world in and through Christ, so that true liberation can become a reality, not only for women but also for men and for all groups of people that are often referred to as being the 'other'.

Although this chapter could only deal with a small part of a very large subject, it is hoped that the following chapter, in which the various discussion themes are covered, will continue to investigate the faith, which is central to the religious beliefs, attitudes and practices of the people with whom I shall be working.

The fear that has been passed down through local Calvinism will also continue to be investigated as it often causes fierce resistance to change, and feminist theology, which presents this small group with a series of spiritual challenges, will form the foundation upon which all the discussion are based.



## CHAPTER THREE : THEMATIC DISCUSSIONS

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In this chapter the discussion themes are explored. The working group, *Anaphaino*<sup>71</sup>, will be introduced in section 4.0 but the material used for each of the twenty-six weekly sessions of the research programme will form the content of each of the sub-sections throughout this chapter. The preliminary invitations and introductions as well as the specific introductory session will be considered in the first section of this chapter.

### 3.0 Introduction and Expectations

Soon after arriving in this town, at the beginning of this year, invitations<sup>72</sup> were extended to twenty-five women to join a spirituality group that would become a working group for this research project. At the weekly discussions, which would introduce feminist thought and feminist theological perspectives to them, their openness and/or degrees of resistance to feminist ways of thinking would be monitored and recorded. Of the twenty-five women twelve responded positively to the invitation but of these twelve four were already committed on Saturday mornings and so would be unable to join the group.

Eight women met together for the introductory session, at which they shared their expectations of the group with one another. In the letter of introduction<sup>73</sup> to those who had accepted the invitation, each person had been asked to reflect on what they would wish to gain from the group and they had also been given the initial questionnaire, which is analysed in section 4.8.0, to complete. I believe it is important to note that at this beginning stage there was a very positive atmosphere amongst the group members. They seemed full of excitement and displayed a curiosity that was contagious.

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<sup>71</sup> See footnote 7.

<sup>72</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>73</sup> See Appendix 2.

The women were all members of the central local church we had come to serve and they all knew one another albeit at different levels of familiarity and intimacy. I tried to express the purpose clearly and outlined what the working group would entail and this meant that those who did accept the invitation seemed more open to exploring ‘feminism’ than those who had rejected the invitation outright. I am very aware of this fact and I shall continually keep this initial slight bias of the group in mind.

The format of the weekly get-togethers was proposed and agreed to by all. Most of the meetings would take place on a Saturday morning from 07h00 to 08h30, starting with a simple breakfast and a time for fellowship until 07h30, followed by an hour for input and discussion. At this initial session the name for the group, ‘*Anaphaino*’<sup>74</sup>, was introduced and its relevance was explained. The idea behind the name was that such a group would engage in some deep digging into Scripture, culture, experience and sociology. In a similar way to archaeological digging the hope was expressed that with ‘careful digging’ and some ‘brushing away of the dirt’, our efforts would ‘cause new insights into the eternal truths of Scripture to appear’. It was acknowledged that our efforts would be based on the Christian Scriptures and we expressed our dependence on God’s Holy Spirit for guidance.

Right from the very first meeting, even before the group was formally exposed to a teaching on recovering the place of symbols and rituals, a regular ritual was introduced. After breakfast we would usually form a circle around a small table, on which some relevant symbols for that day’s theme would have been placed. The three regular symbols were a burning candle, representing the Light of Christ, a cross, as the Christian symbol and an open Bible, representing the Word of God. The group’s name was printed in large letters and these were cut out and placed in a pottery bowl. Each week all the members of the group would take some letters from the bowl – until all had been taken – and then we would spell out the name of the group on the table whilst sharing something of our experiences during the past week and each bringing a relevant symbol to place on the table. This was an option and it was something to remind us to pay attention to our world and our relationships during the week, rather than merely a rigid or repetitive exercise. (During the first twelve weeks of *Anaphaino*

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<sup>74</sup> See Footnote 7.

meeting together a course on creative spirituality was also being run on a Tuesday evening and some of the women, those who participated in both groups, found many synchronicities<sup>75</sup> in their week and often shared these with the working group on a Saturday morning.)

The expectations of the various members, which they shared with the group, included the following statements:

- 'I'd like to learn more about myself and about God'
- 'I wish to grow spiritually'
- 'I hope to gain a more balanced perspective so that I do not hate the whole male species anymore'
- 'I hope to make friends'
- 'I'd like to satisfy my curiosity'
- 'I want to understand the Bible better - especially in its context'
- 'I thought it would be good to be part of an all-women group'
- 'I want to share in fellowship'

Another part of the introduction focused on the importance of building one another up in our faith and it was suggested that all the members of the group would share the responsibility of keeping one another accountable so that these hopes and goals may be realised during our times together.

As indicated in the introductory letter, two key passages were briefly studied at the first of the two introductory sessions. The members had been asked to prepare the two passages, one on creation and one on the baptismal confession of Paul. After a brief initial introduction to Genesis 1:26-28 and Galatians 3:23-29,<sup>76</sup> the circle was opened for discussion. Some questions and comments arising from the input included the following:

1. What about *Genesis 2*? We then discussed the creation myths in most societies.
2. The use of the plural '*us / our*' when God created humankind.
3. A realisation that in *Galatians 3*<sup>77</sup> Paul clearly shows that there is NO difference between male and female. The three-fold 'correction'. Whereas a Jewish male would have thanked God each morning for not making him a gentile, a slave or a woman, Paul now shows that there is NO distinction in Christ.

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<sup>75</sup> A term meaning that events seem to relate to one another – finding similar aspects in different situations.

<sup>76</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>77</sup> See footnotes 27 & 70.

4. That means women too are heirs - we emphasised the important role of women in childbirth and that many women are not recorded in Scripture. We claimed heritage from Sarah as well as from Abraham (Gal.3:29<sup>78</sup>).

It is recognised that at this stage the majority of the women in the group could agree with being created equal in the sight of God from a 'spiritual' perspective but the strong belief that God had 'ordained' the male dominant hierarchy was very evident in this initial discussion. After giving the group some reading to prepare for the second introductory session a time of prayer brought the first meeting to a close.

One of the key resources, the tenth anniversary edition of Schüssler Fiorenza's (1994) book, *In Memory of Her*, was introduced at the second introductory get-together. I felt that it was imperative for the members of the group to have some level of understanding of what motivated this author to undertake to write such a book. The prepared reading was from the Gospel according to Mark, chapter 14, verses 3-9<sup>79</sup>, which reflects the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' head in a 'leper' named Simon's home. Although many muttered about the waste of such expensive ointment, Jesus told those present to leave her be and at the conclusion of the narrative it is recorded for us that Jesus commended the woman for preparing Him for His burial and then He said that whenever the good news is proclaimed what she had done for Him would be told 'in memory of her' (v.9: NIV).

Before the discussion commenced the following quote from Julia Cameron (1995:81) in *The Artist's Way*, was read with the hope that the story in Mark 14 would indeed help the group members to recognise what Jesus was doing: 'As we clarify our perceptions, we lose our misconceptions'. Something of interest - and this is speculation on my part mixed with

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<sup>78</sup> 'And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.'

<sup>79</sup> 'While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was this ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. (v.9) Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."



the beliefs of some scholars - is that the account in Luke, chapter 7, verses 36-50<sup>80</sup>, which tells of an incident where Jesus was at the home of Simon, a 'Pharisee', and a woman came and anointed His 'feet', could be one and the same story. Some scholars, like Schüssler Fiorenza (1983:129), believe that these two accounts may actually be relating the same incident because of the similarities in the name of the host and of the 'type' of woman. It would be interesting, however, if Simon, the Pharisee, and Simon, the leper, were in fact one and the same person. The insult to Jesus would then be even greater, especially if Jesus had brought about the healing of the 'leper' who must have been cured, and pronounced clean by the priest, for people to be having dinner with him in his home. It would then have been this same man who did not provide the common courtesy of a welcome kiss and a servant to wash Jesus' feet on his arrival.

When Jesus asked Simon, in the Luke passage, whether he saw the woman I think He meant far more than whether he physically could 'see' her with his eyes. Simon's tradition, culture and religion had conditioned him to such an extent that he could not 'see' a human being who had been created in God's own image - a precious person with feelings, hopes and dreams - just like his own. Jesus was giving Simon an opportunity to clarify his perception of that woman, and hopefully also that of all people, so that he could begin to lose his misconceptions, which were encouraged by his Jewish male background and his patriarchal religion.

The discussion touched on some other aspects too. The idea that the Pharisees did not really like Jesus and His twelve disciples, encouraged the group to recognise that the Christian faith has often romanticised the stories in the Gospels. We thought about our own South African context and imagined a bunch of fisher folk in Hout Bay - the fishermen who became Jesus' disciples were probably not very different to these folk. It was highlighted that Jesus and the disciples did not seem to have a regular place to stay and that they depended on the generosity of friends and family for their day-to-day necessities. We talked about the family

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<sup>80</sup> Luke 7:36-38 & 50 'One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. (v.50) And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

in Bethany who befriended this band and where we are told they often stopped for a meal. Recognising that we do often paint a much rosier picture about the Gospel stories helped the group face some other aspects of our faith. We thought about Western English propriety and what the common courtesies are in our own South African culture. The discussion drew to a close with comments on what it means to be a 'disciple'.

These two sessions as it were set the stage for the ensuing twenty-four weeks. Week three, which is the subject of the next section, would focus on the terms used to identify much of the work done by feminist scholars.

### 3.1 Feminism, Womanism and Feminist Theology

**a. Feminism** - It was communicated to the group that formal secular feminism has its roots in the eighteenth century CE. Most of the women in the group were surprised to discover that the quests for equal education opportunities for girls and boys happened as early as that. We discussed the history of earlier feminism as well as the changes that took place during the industrial revolution. Women had been drawn into the industrial work-force mainly because of wars and the subsequent absence of an adequate male work-force.

Women's liberation movements were formally established in the twentieth century CE and these groups began challenging society to stop denying women their basic human rights. These groups used war times to their advantage because they could prove, beyond a shadow of doubt, that women were very capable of undertaking any of the tasks usually assigned only to men. It was in the early twentieth century CE that the Suffragettes campaigned for the vote for women and that they began protesting against 'job reservation' for men.

Secular feminist movements also challenged various cultures to start working together, rather than choosing 'separate development' as an option. All the 'other'-isms were also being challenged by the emergence of feminism.

**b. Womanism** - This is a relatively new term and although it has its roots in South American liberation theory, it became a term adopted specifically by African women to distinguish their own authentic quest for liberation from that of the West. Their liberation was not only from male domination but also from white colonialism and the term 'feminism'

was recognised as being distinctly Western. Womanism, like liberation theology, claims that God is for the oppressed and places much emphasis on the Exodus story as the symbol for what needs to happen for Africa and especially for African women.

Womanism also recognises the place of African culture. African womanists plead, on behalf of all African women, for them to be given the opportunity to reclaim their cultural rights and heritage. They seek to re-introduce the place of stories. African culture is located partly in its stories, and womanism endeavours to affirm the place of the matriarch, who is often the tribe's favourite teller of tales. Womanism also challenges Africa to re-look at the place of the tribe, the family, the matriarch and the role of women in general.

**c. Feminist Theology** - This discipline evolved out of South American liberation theology, which challenged colonialism, capitalism and the oppression of the poor by the wealthy. Feminist theology went one step further and challenged the male domination of a patriarchal and hierarchical church structure. This broadened into a theology that addresses and condemns all exploitation and denigration of the 'other'.

Several distinct aspects of feminist theology have developed in recent years. These are related to spirituality, practice, worship, leadership, the way people relate to God and their experience of life in Christ. Feminist theologians continue to search the Scriptures, to do research in theology and culture, and to write books and articles to draw attention to ways of relating that are more inclusive and all embracing. Nancy Ring (1983:150), in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, writes that

the development of both the feminine and the masculine in Christian spirituality is essential if the church is to respond in an appropriate manner to God in Christ.

A feminist spirituality seeks to follow the Jesus who sought out the 'sinners' of His day. Jesus ate with tax collectors and kept company with Zealots, He spoke with women and children loved to be around Him. Pharisees went to listen to Him and paralytics, who were pronounced to be in 'sin', were healed by Him. This Jesus endeavoured to raise ordinary people to the height of His own soul. Some of the basic components for a feminist worldview include a respect for 'other'-ness, equality, mutuality, interdependence and nurturance. By its

nature this kind of thinking changes the construction of human society from a pyramid into a circle.

Feminist theologians suggest that a feminist spirituality would change marriage, change society, change church, and change the very definition of sanctity. There is no doubt that feminist values touch the very core of Christianity, as we know it. As was said of the early church, feminist spirituality too could turn the world upside down. These concepts are challenging but they are, we believe, once again bringing the message of wholeness to a broken world. They address the injustices and prejudices of the patriarchal system and are therefore deemed, by many people - especially in this town - to be a great threat.

As already mentioned in section 2.2.1, Sheila Collins believes that the wholeness that feminists are proposing is 'a wholeness based on a multi-dimensional vision of the world, rather than on the single vision which has dominated Western culture and most theological thought' (Loades 1990:276). She suggests that this kind of wholeness embraces a new dimension in feminist spirituality, which is rooted in women's own experience. It is important, however, for Christian feminists to continue to challenge existing church structures, which still deny full equality and space to women and thereby restrict and dehumanise, not only women, but men too.

The discussion that followed considered the suggestion that the term 'feminist' may need to be revised. When examining its purpose and goals it seems quite clear that feminist theology is about the recovery of the 'feminine' and definitely not about the exclusion of men or the 'masculine' – quite the contrary is true! However, some people feel uncomfortable with the term 'feminist', especially as it is often linked to the radical secular movements with whom not everyone can identify. Some feminist scholars believe that the name should stay because for so many centuries women have had to be content to be called 'brothers', 'sons' and 'men'. A third view calls for a compromise, and be that as it may, the crucial part, as I see it, is that this discipline remains very important for individual Christians and for the church as a whole.

In response to a question, the group discussed what 'discrimination' meant and each person shared any discrimination they had ever experienced in their own life. It was

interesting to note that at this stage most of the women in the group believed that they had never been discriminated against. The discussion, however, helped them to recognise that this was actually not the case. At the conclusion of the meeting the group was asked, in preparation for the next week's discussion, to think about some significant women whose lives have made an impact on the course of history.

### 3.2 *Her-story*<sup>81</sup> - Patriarchy and Its Effects on Women Throughout the Ages

If women want to get in touch with their own roots and traditions, they will have to rewrite the Christian traditions and theology in such a way that these become not only *history* but *her-story* as well. Much of history, both secular and Judeo-Christian, is male dominated and written from a patriarchal perspective. Radical feminists, like Millet, French and Daly, point out that the Christian tradition, both past and present, has victimised women and Schüssler Fiorenza points out that tradition is not only a source of truth but also of untruth, repression and domination. She also refers to the fact that since early Christian beginnings the church's history has been immersed in patriarchy and that women have never played more than a marginal role in Christian theology, even though there is much evidence that

Women's leadership in early Christian communities was exceptional not only by the standards of Judaism or the Greco-Roman world, but also by those of the later Christian church (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:85).

Rebel women who exercised leadership were called heretics, often excommunicated and, in extreme cases, even burned at the stake. Women have been persecuted through the ages for endeavouring to be recognised as equal partners with men as members of the human race. Schüssler Fiorenza believes that the problem is not only that most scholars have been and, in many fields, still are men but also that our very understanding of reality is androcentric<sup>82</sup>. She suggests that

For the Western understanding and linguistic expression of reality, male existence is the standard of human existence (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:155).

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<sup>81</sup> Term coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

<sup>82</sup> Male-centred.

A white, male hand, from a dominating social class, has written much of human history. It is important to keep in mind that the perspective of “the defeated in history” is quite different. In South Africa this has become more apparent in recent years as scholars have begun rewriting history textbooks for schools. Schüssler Fiorenza, however, also reminds us that women were present in history. She therefore disagrees with radical feminists who feel the need to be anti-male or anti-Christian. Her research endeavours to reconstruct *her-story* in such a way that she writes women back into history. Her years of biblical scholarship, her dedicated authorship and her wise insight have all contributed to the emergence of some of the finest works in the pursuit for wholeness for all people from a Christian theological perspective. The following story of a black woman emphasises the need for such research:

Nobody ever helped me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gave me the best place. And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no men could head me! And ain't I a woman? I can work as much and eat as much as any man when I can get it and bear the lash as well. And ain't I a woman? I have born thirteen children and seen most of them sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain't I a woman? (Loades 1990:201).<sup>83</sup>

Sojourner Truth's experience is a strong reminder that the “chivalrous” side of patriarchy has generally been restricted to affluent, white, Western culture. What should the human reaction be to her experience? The Women's and Feminist Movements would probably suggest that she has proved that men and women are equal, or even that women are stronger than men in some instances, such as in bearing children. Women have been part of “the other” from the beginning of human history and women of colour have had to bear the double bind of being female and of belonging to another race. How do we understand this kind of discrimination? Is it possible that fear may be at the root of all discrimination?

Scholars have attempted to ascertain what exactly caused the emergence of patriarchy, but for most part they still speculate as to what the reasons were. Some believe that land ownership and private property are to blame for the move from what is believed to have been a “pre-historic” Matrilineal Society to the Patriarchal Society, with which we are burdened

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<sup>83</sup> Sojourner Truth, quoted in *Feminist Theology - A Reader*, edited by Ann Loades.

today. Marxist Feminists claim that the institution of heterosexual human relationships is an additional and very likely cause of the beginning of male dominance in society. Socialist feminists, however, prefer to rather encompass all the strands of feminism, hoping to bring about a greater degree of harmony in the voice of feminism. What no-one denies, though, is that as civilisation developed, ‘man’ discovered that one of the best ways to control ‘woman’, was to construct myths about her - explain the unexplainable, simplify the complex or rationalise the irrational. Patriarchy defined women’s place in many ways and one such way was through the barring of women from church leadership and restricting them from studying theology. A “theological justification” for such suppression went hand in hand with this exclusion. The “leadership” of the church claimed the authority of Paul without being challenged. Misogynist statements of the church “*fathers*” and later male theologians claim ideological justification for discrimination against women in the Christian Church. Patriarchy very expressly relegated “women’s place” to that of being “in the home”. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:86) suggests that

The elimination of women from ecclesiastical leadership and theology was achieved through woman’s domestication under male authority either in the home or celibate community.

Schüssler Fiorenza’s writings endeavour to demystify cultural and theological constructs of femininity and masculinity that are dualistic and patriarchal. In her book, *Discipleship of Equals* (1993), she writes that for women to become disciples of equal standing with men does not mean to argue for women’s access to and integration into patriarchal structures. Nor does it mean to re-inscribe a white, heterosexist feminine identity. Her vision is to establish the *basileia*<sup>84</sup>, the alternative world of justice and well-being,

intended by the life-giving G-d, in the midst of death-dealing powers of patriarchal oppression and dehumanizing (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:11).

Schüssler Fiorenza believes that theology is both a culturally and historically conditioned endeavour with scriptures that are deeply rooted in patriarchal-sexist culture. I therefore repeat what she suggests, as I mentioned earlier, that if women want to get in touch with their own roots and traditions, they have to rewrite the Christian traditions and theology

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<sup>84</sup> Just Rule / Realm / Reign / Royalty (Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible).

in such a way that they become not only history but *her-story* as well. Radical change is necessary in order to liberate the church if we are to serve people and not oppress them. She addresses what she calls a theology “old boys club” and calls them (usually white, male, middle-class) to be accountable, and to analyse their own praxis in a sexist profession and culture. Realising that the Christian Church is not identical with the “Reign of God”, she stresses that only when theology is on the side of the outcast and oppressed, as Jesus was, can it become incarnational and Christian. Getting to the heart of the issue of “the rule of men over all women”, we discover that

patriarchy is a complex political-economic-legal-system that found its classical expression in Athenian democracy and its systemic articulation in Aristotelian philosophy (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:214).

Sexism, racism and classism are structural components of this system and liberal philosophy has as its political unit “the family” and not the adult human person. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:228) indicates that

The struggles against religious-ecclesial patriarchy are at the heart of societal liberation struggles against sexism, racism, colonialism, militarism, or poverty, and vice versa.

In Mark, chapters three and ten, we read how Jesus viewed ‘the family’ - in the former He is recorded to have said that everyone who did the will of God was a member of His ‘family’ and in the latter Jesus acknowledges that many gave up their families to follow Him and He does not promise them a bed of roses – on the contrary He mentions that although the blessings of God will be a ‘hundredfold’ in the present age, persecution may also be a part of their journey if they followed Him but in the realm of God He offered them, and offers us, eternal life. The commentary in the Access Bible notes that in chapter ten Mark omits ‘fathers’ when he records Jesus listing what they will receive a ‘hundredfold’ after they had sacrificed their own families, homes and lands for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The reason for this, the commentator argues, is that Jesus was leading away from ‘the head of the home’ paradigm of the Old Testament. A relevant cross-reference is that of Matthew 23:9<sup>85</sup> where Jesus said we must call no one on earth ‘father’. The Christian Church, however, seems to have missed that

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<sup>85</sup> Matthew 23:9 ‘And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven.’



point completely. Traditional church structures have been solidly based on the age-old hierarchical and patriarchal ‘family’-structures.

Instead of supporting freedom from bondage, church structures have reinforced domination and oppression. Within the church it is essential to acknowledge that feminism is entangled in patriarchy – we are part of the system – but it is very important to constantly call for *metanoia*<sup>86</sup> from unhelpful structures and practices.

The discussion that flowed out of this topic called forth many internal questions from within the group. For the first time some of these women began to question their acceptance of their roles in life, in their families, in the work-place and in the church. Sharing about some of the influential women who had impacted on their lives, helped the group to focus on some of the characteristics women valued in other women. Popularity did not seem to be a key measure but service was. Almost all the members of the group had named Mother Teresa as a very special woman but most also acknowledged that they could never do what she had done. Some mentioned their mothers and grandmothers and others did suggest names of celebrities who had done much for disadvantaged communities – especially those who cared for children. One thing that was eventually agreed upon by all was that patriarchy had definitely left its mark on life in general.

When Schüssler Fiorenza does reconstruction in church history she does not only look at what is there but she also looks for what is not there. When we begin to do that we participate in the development of all people and we contribute to helping the marginalised in becoming more fully human. Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that when anyone interferes with this kind of development for all people, it constitutes violence.

The following week’s topic would be what Schüssler Fiorenza (1993) calls the ‘*Discipleship of Equals*’ (also the title of one of her books) and the group was asked to think about what they consider the meaning of discipleship is and also how they perceive gender equality.

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<sup>86</sup> Conversion experiences.

### 3.3 *Discipleship of Equals*<sup>87</sup>

According to Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:60) the ‘liberal’ Christian press may at times pay lip service to the women’s movements but more often than not feminism is labelled ‘anti-Christian’ because the feminist critique holds, for a great part, Christianity responsible for rationalising women’s inferior status in our culture. She further states that Christian feminists respond in two ways: Firstly, in politics and strategies, only some advocate a separation from all institutional religion for the sake of the Gospel, justifying their point with Christian and personal history of the church keeping women in submission. Secondly, there are those, who hope for the repentance and radical change of the Christian Church and who ‘affirm their own prophetic roles and critical mission within organised Christianity’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:61). She believes, as I do, that we cannot overlook or cover up the oppression and sin experienced in our Christian heritage. These blots, which include a sexist framework and the use of exclusive language, on the Christian Church need to be branded in order to change them.

Christian feminist theologians seek to

bring to bear feminist analysis and critique in order to set free the traditions of emancipation, equality and genuine human personhood that they have experienced in their Christian heritage (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:61).

Christian feminist scholarship is also attempting to reconceptualise and to transform Christian theology from a feminist perspective. Theology, a culturally and historically conditioned endeavour, is a discipline that interprets and reflects on the revelation of God. Looking at the Scriptures, and how they are expressed in human language, usually does this. Most scholars believe, however, that theology and revelation are so intertwined that it is difficult to adequately distinguish them. At the same time Scripture and theology are rooted in patriarchal-sexist culture and share its biases and prejudices. Critical theology uncovers and criticises Christian traditions and theologies that have stimulated and perpetuated violence, alienation and oppression, by this meaning all oppression and not only that of women. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:61) suggests that Christian faith and life are caught in the middle of

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<sup>87</sup> Term coined by Schüssler Fiorenza.

history and are therefore in constant need of 'prophetic criticism in order not to lose sight of their eschatological vision'. She believes that the Christian community finds itself on the way to a greater and more perfect freedom that was initiated in Jesus Christ. Christian theology serves and supports the Christian community of freedom and love.

Radical change is necessary to put the church on the road to being a fully liberated church. A theology of liberation is needed if the Christian Church is to serve people and not oppress them. The old "all-white-male-middle-class" theology has to go. As Schüssler Fiorenza says, these men are neither poor nor oppressed. In her experience they, "the theology old boys club", generally refuse to discuss feminist theological issues because, as mentioned earlier, she believes they do not want to start changing "at home" and they also do not wish to analyse their own praxis in what has been a sexist profession and culture, thus causing 'unity' between theory and praxis to remain an ideology (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:64).

Since her early beginnings the church's history has been immersed in patriarchy and women have never played more than a marginal role in Christian theology. Even in more recent times, when women enter the theological professions, they function mostly as "tokens" that do not disturb the male consciousness and structures. Women are often relegated to the status of "junior colleagues" or assistants, secretaries, mother figures or sex partners. Rarely are they taken as theological authorities in their own right and if they dare to demand to be treated as equals, they are often labelled 'aggressive, crazy or unscholarly' (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:65).

The church's liberation cannot only be discussed from theological perspectives. The much-needed transformation of hierarchical church leadership also needs to be addressed in order to allow "the true *discipleship of equals*" to emerge once more. Women have to have full access if the church is to become a 'Community of Equals' before God and before the world (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:68). In the denomination to which I belong, the first woman bishop has been in office for almost three years now, and her experience in what is still very much an "all-male ecclesiastical world", has helped me to understand something more of what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1993) was talking about in her book, *Discipleship of Equals*. This bishop speaks of experiencing exclusion in national meetings, mainly through the all-

male language used by her male colleagues. However, her perseverance at reminding them, every time, that she is also present, has slowly brought about a change of heart and all of them are becoming more sensitive in their discussions. They are becoming more inclusive, now that they have been made especially aware of the presence of one woman in the church, in their communications to their Circuits. This has been a witness to our church that has come as a direct result of one District's courage to elect the person who was best suited to the office of bishop.

Although much more could have been said, the discussion on this particular morning needed to be cut short to honour the group's time constraints. Some of the aspects regarding 'equality' and 'discipleship' shared by the group were most interesting. It was also noted that two of the group members could not bring themselves to believe that they could actually be equal to their husbands. Their understanding of the Bible was quite clear that the husband was the 'head of the home'. Those who are in business shared their views that if a woman could do a job normally assigned to a man then she should earn the same salary. They were also very aware of the fact that this does not often happen – especially not in this town. When discussing the roles of women in the church it became very clear that women were marginalised but some of the women felt that this was the way it was supposed to be. The Bible, according to their interpretation, clearly speaks against women taking a lead in church. It seemed, at this stage, that a dividing line was being drawn between what is acceptable in 'society' and what is acceptable in 'church'. Most of the group members were quite happy with women in politics but they were not so sure about women ministers and/or bishops.

The preparation for the following session involved making collages depicting the traditional roles of women and each group member was also asked to bring a symbol, which represented something of what it meant for her to be a woman. As co-ordinator I also asked my husband to make a collage on the traditional roles of men and I made two, one on the traditional roles of women and one on how I would like women to be depicted.

### 3.4 Traditional Roles of Women and Men

Traditionally women have been allowed two key roles. In the domestic sphere it has been the role of “mother” and in the spiritual sphere it has been the role of “nun”. The role of “mother of the nuns” has also been quite acceptable. The role of “priest”, however, is another matter altogether. Although some ground has been won in the Protestant Churches, the Roman Catholic Church still holds the strong view that only men can be priests. It is said that the main reason for this “exclusion” is the fact that Jesus was a man and that all twelve of His disciples were also men. Schüssler Fiorenza poses a hypothesis that it may also be fear of the church becoming feminised if women were ordained into the priesthood, and the church thus becoming second rate and powerless. Although the church preaches “feminine” values, such as love, compassion, nurturance and service, its praxis remains masculine.

After this brief introduction to the traditional roles of women, as perceived by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and before dealing with the remainder of the theory, each person in the group was given the opportunity to talk to their collage during the time allocated for sharing. Everyone participated in this exercise, which resulted in a most enjoyable and constructive get-together. Some of the more direct and noticeable traditional roles of women were depicted in pictures of ‘mothers’, ‘home-makers’, ‘cooks’, ‘house-keepers’, ‘nurse-maids’, ‘wives’, ‘dress-makers’, ‘child-care workers’, ‘teachers of small children’, ‘nurses’ and ‘typists’. It was agreed that women’s main interests, as allowed by society, were their home, their children and their husbands. A woman’s acceptable hobbies, at least in this town, are sewing, knitting and crocheting and it is expected that she should excel in cooking, child-care and home-economics. Her religious activities are usually restricted to attending church and a women’s Bible study, baking for functions, making and serving tea and singing in the choir. Women are usually expected to be involved in social concern projects, like making and serving soup for the poor. It is also a commendation if she is completely self-sacrificial, an obedient wife who is devoted and subservient to her husband and a moral example to her children. When the subject was raised the women hesitantly agreed that a woman’s sexual role is usually expected to be a passive one.

The traditional roles of men, as perceived and depicted by my husband (the ordained minister of this church), included pictures of ‘businessmen’, ‘handymen’, ‘sportsmen’, ‘fathers’, ‘husbands’, ‘scientists’, ‘doctors’, ‘professors’ and ‘bosses’. For men, society condones that men should be interested in cars, money, women, the stock exchange, gardening, their house, TV and the newspaper. Acceptable hobbies for men include most kinds of sport and they are expected to be good at ‘do-it-yourself’ and fixing and/or servicing things. Men’s religious activities (when they are religious) include leadership positions in the church and at home. The extent of men’s involvement in social concern is usually that they give financial donations. It is a commendation if a man is a ‘strong man’s man’ and his sexual prowess is definitely measured in how aggressive and active he is. Men seem to be let off the hook quite quickly if they treat their wives or children badly and their morally unacceptable behaviour is often justified or, in many instances, blamed on their wives.

In the social order, however, women’s roles were adapted to the economic needs of the society rather than society being transformed in the interests of women - and all of humanity. Most people, even today at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, still believe housework in the home is “woman’s work” and that the public sphere still remains “man’s work”.

The theory covered for this section looks specifically at the roles of men and women within the church with some reference to what happens in society. In the concluding paragraph a scenario will be imagined of what the future could look like.

Regardless of whether we discuss the Roman Catholic Church or Protestant denominations, the Church of Christ has for centuries been severely deprived in its ministry. If we merely take “traditional attributes” of males and females into account, it goes without saying that only the one side of human gifts and talents has been used in ministry. In order to minister holistically the church needs all God’s people, men, women and youth, of all races, to express love and compassion to one another. In the act of “excluding” a sector of humanity, a distinct misconception has been formed of what ministry is all about. It has assumed that any one sector, be that gender, age, race or class, has the power to decide that another is unacceptable. This is what has happened in the Christian Church through the system of hierarchical patriarchy, and which needs to be addressed in a way that Schüssler Fiorenza

describes as a “reconceptualisation” of ministry. When women are ordained into ministry, they should **not** be seen as being “allowed in” because that continues the erroneous idea of men having the power to decide. They do not hold any such power. The power belongs to God and God calls women as well as men into ministry.

When Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza enrolled for the same theology course that priests were required to take, it caused some deep theological reflection, as she was the first woman to ever read for such a degree in that institution. It was then that both students and the academia began discovering that interpretation and ecclesiology did not correspond with the actual pastoral praxis of the Roman Catholic Church. At all the ‘Women’s Ordination America’ (since 1975) and at the ‘Women’s Ordination World-wide’ (in 2001) Conferences it has been insisted upon that women be ordained into a **different** church and priestly ministry. Schüssler Fiorenza, right from the beginning of this debate, has called for women’s ordination into the fullness of the priesthood and jurisdictional power of bishops, **before** accepting ordination into the lower ranks of the hierarchy. She maintains that a critical understanding of gender needs to be gained along with a “theology of the eternal feminine”.

A brief discussion followed during which the group members expressed their own ideas about their own roles as women. It was recognised that they were products of their backgrounds and heritage and that their religious beliefs had been formed out of a predominantly conservative NGK<sup>88</sup> theology. Some women, however, did have a belief that God created women to be subservient and one member of the group strongly believes that women are ‘naturally’ weaker and therefore less than equal to men. One of the members stressed that her husband would always be the ‘head of their home’ and that she would not want to challenge him. Yet others did feel that there could be something in a non-hierarchical partnership within marriage and family. It was also mentioned that consulting with children was foreign to most families in this town but one woman had attended a meeting on parenting and there it had been suggested that parents consult with their children about where the family’s holidays should be spent. This woman discussed the idea with her husband and now their family holidays are much more fun for everyone - not only for the parents.

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<sup>88</sup> *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church)

The final collage to be reviewed was kept until the end of the meeting so that an imagined scenario could be painted in the minds of the group members. The collage depicted women and men as ‘proud partners’ and children as persons in their own right. The pictures included symbols of the realisation of some of the dreams these women have expressed. A hot-air balloon for someone who wishes to go up in one, a computer for another who wishes to become computer literate and a 4X4 vehicle for one who wishes to go on a safari through Africa. Slogans were cut out of magazines and the following are some of them: ‘development must be seen holistically’, ‘a delicate balance’, ‘unleashing the power to enrich lives’, ‘food for thought’, ‘friendly persuasion’, ‘building a better world’ and ‘celebrate choices’. Communication and empowerment were seen as two vitally important aspects for women in leadership and a clipping from a church newspaper in which a woman minister was graduating took up a prominent position on the collage. The ultimate dream is to live in a world where each person has full and free access to any position and in which everyone is encouraged to follow his or her calling. When mutual respect is fully exercised, fewer people might feel the need to compete with one another for power over others.

When we consider our Christian heritage we may become very aware of some of the reasons why this mutual respect is not yet a reality and in the following session we dealt with some of the aspects of church history and its influence through the ages.

### 3.5 Our Christian Heritage

Just as the debate about ordination will continue in some denominations for some time, so will the debate about whether women can truly find themselves in the Christian Church (Loades 1990:214).

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, however, part of the solution lies in whether women can reconstruct the *her-story* of the church alongside that of its history, so that women can feel that they too belong. She believes, as I have said before, that we cannot overlook or cover up the oppression and sin experienced in our Christian heritage. These imperfections of the Christian Church, which include a sexist framework and the use of exclusive language, need to be exposed so that they can be changed.



At the beginning of this week's session a time of guided prayer set the tone of the meeting. We recalled our earliest memories in the Christian Church and spent some time in quiet reflection on our childhood images of God and the church. Symbols on the table this week included a Rosary and a Celtic cross to acknowledge the church's roots in Catholicism and the influence of the early Celts.

Each group member was asked to briefly share her story of how she came to be a Christian. We then looked at some of Christina Landman's observations about Afrikaans women's piety and the discussion seemed to recognise (albeit reluctantly for some) that there was an element of truth in her suggestions, at least for those of us with Afrikaans roots. As co-ordinator I shared a little about the work of the Methodist Women's Network and encouraged the members of the group to consider becoming involved in what some concerned Methodist women are doing in this new millennium.

The passage of Scripture came from Luke 13 and the group reflected on Jesus' interaction with the woman who was bent over. An analogy was drawn between her and our experiences and for some of the members this was the first time they had been challenged to put themselves in her position. It was a very appropriate place to stop and ask the group to prepare themselves for the next gathering by thinking about symbols and rituals and their place in worship and in the church in general. The following section covers what was shared at that particular session.

### **3.6 Symbols and Rituals**

As long as the central Christian symbols of faith are expressed in male language and imagery, feminist theologians have to insist that the language and symbolism of God are one-sided and need to be balanced by female imagery and symbolism rooted in women's experience (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:127).

The place of rituals and symbols in worship is being re-affirmed and helpful images of God are being explored. Embracing the non-personal metaphors, as well as those names for God, which are very familiar to us, could prove to be a very helpful exercise. The place of Divine Wisdom is being recognised and it is also acknowledged that images of God, through Spirit-Sophia, affirm the Feminine Divine.

Morley makes a very helpful comment on the use of words and images, in that they do not operate in a vacuum but have concrete effects on their users and hearers:

If, as seems possible, Jesus' use of 'Father' was intended to lead people to greater intimacy with God, then to insist on the continued, exclusive use of the term, even where it effectively prevents intimacy, or indeed is used actively to oppress women, is itself contradictory (Loades 1990:163).

Morley also suggests that religious language cannot but be metaphorical in character. In her opinion it points to the imaginative way to a reality that is, in the end, 'unsayable' (Loades 1990:163). Metaphors offer vivid comparisons, which can often bring about an imaginative "explosion" when two ideas are brought together unexpectedly. But, at the same time, the reader is denied the chance to identify the two things together. For example, God may be called "a Rock", both because 'God is like a rock in important ways, and because it would hardly be possible to *confuse* God with a rock' (Loades 1990:163). The image can be used, and let go, which is how, she believes, we should treat all religious language.

Apart from 'The Rock', the group also discussed the following images used in the Bible to endeavour giving us a clearer understanding of what God is like: 'Mother Hen', 'The Way', 'The Truth', 'The Life', 'The Good Shepherd', 'The Door', 'Living Water', 'Light of the World' and 'The Bread of Life'. It was acknowledged that all these metaphors help us, as human beings, to gain a deeper insight into the nature of God and that not one of these, on its own, could possibly impart the fullness of who God is. Human beings have a need to relate to God in human terms because our understanding is limited by our humanity. God, however, is more than all of our attempts to understand the nature of God.

The group also shared their growth in understanding and their appreciation of ritual these past few months. In the working group some very simple rituals have been introduced and the members of the group have started to find that they both enjoy and need these little rituals to enable them to enter more fully into the time of prayer, sharing and fellowship. The rituals and symbols of the Gospels were discussed and some deeper understanding developed of incidents like Jesus washing the disciples' feet and the woman anointing Jesus' feet. Members of the group realised that in merely the symbolic act a whole sermon had been preached.

It was also discovered that in the account of the Last Supper Jesus used a traditional ritual, known very well to each person present, to change history. When Jesus changed the ‘liturgy’ of the Passover He ‘renewed’ a symbolic ritual. No longer was it going to be the annual traditional Passover that was central to their religion, but from then on Christ’s followers would regularly, some even daily, celebrate Holy Communion as central to their faith. This was an encouragement to everyone in the group because it indicated that in many ways we already had all the symbols and rituals at our disposal. The point, however, was that we seldom make full use of them.

### 3.7 Circles versus Pyramids

If transformation from hierarchical pyramid to that of circular leadership is an envisaged model or form of church leadership, then we need to ask whether Jesus had in fact intended the TWELVE to be the only “apostles”, or at least as the church finally defined the role, only those to whom Christ had appeared. What about the wider circle of people, women and men, who had followed Jesus, like the women who had ministered to Him and who had followed Him all the way from Galilee?<sup>89</sup> What about Mary, the first person to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection?<sup>90</sup> At least she should qualify to be an apostle! There exists also an even wider circle - what about all those whom Jesus touched during His earthly ministry, the ones He healed and restored, the ones He challenged and comforted, the ones He fed and taught? Surely they had their own stories to share and surely they did tell others about what had happened to them?

Schüssler Fiorenza points out that sexist attitudes were entrenched in more than only in ecclesiastical hierarchies, and that political and academic structures needed to address these inequalities too. In the last few decades, especially, ‘androcentrism’ is being exposed more and more ‘as structural evil and personal fault’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:117).

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<sup>89</sup> Mark 15:41 ‘These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.’

<sup>90</sup> Mark 16:9-10 ‘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 weeping.’

It is known that “liberal” professors would no more risk the accusation of sexism than that of racism and that

Feminist analyses of culture and religion have, however, shown that full participation of women in academic life and research will be possible only when the patriarchal and sexist structures of academic institutions are changed (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:123).

She goes on to say that it does not suffice to merely incorporate more women into the academic system. Sexual stereotyping needs to be overcome and the attitudes of males and patriarchal females, both academicians and students, need to change in order to achieve full participation in intellectual work and academic research. Feminist theologians argue for full inclusion of women because they believe theological and ecclesial structures have to be liberated from all forms of racism, sexism and classism. Schüssler Fiorenza believes that

Sexism in theology is not just a personal fault but a structural evil that distorts Christian theology and corrupts the academic integrity of religious studies (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:126).

Theology must reject those traditions that have contributed to the exclusion and oppression of women. In the same way as Christian theology has rejected anti-Judaism it has to also reject all sexist traditions EVEN if they are deeply rooted in Scripture and tradition. The tradition of the church, as expressed in the World Council of Churches' *Decade for Churches in Solidarity with Women*, assumed the position that “the Church” was *here* and that “Women” were *there*. Such a statement endorses the androcentric framing of the church. Women **are** the church and the church is **both** women and men! If the *Decade* achieved nothing else, then let us hope that the church was at least made aware of the fact that women have not experienced the solidarity of the church.

Like Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:247), I too wish that

Rather than abandon Christian faith and community as inherently oppressive to women we seek to reclaim the power of Christian faith and community for the liberation and wholeness of all, women and men.

The theory underlines, briefly, the background to the development of pyramid styles of leadership and it must be confessed that the introduction of circle-style leadership in this church has been met with various responses. The traditional people on the one hand have generally felt irritated at the ‘change’ and some of the more open leaders have on the other

hand felt that it may prove to be a better model. The hope was that the introduction of a ‘visible’ change might stimulate discussion and questions. We had used the opportunity of coming into a new community, which had experienced a time of transition, and trusted that the people would be receptive to this new paradigm.

The feelings of the working group were mixed. Some felt that ‘someone’ had to be ‘in charge’ and others again could see that sharing in the leadership and in the responsibilities of the church and the community could have positive results. In this instance too it is believed that the exposure to the new concept is what is important.

### 3.8 Nature of God

Most available historical literature, both secular and ecclesiastical, would speak of the God of history as “He”, but we know there is evidence of the pre-historic worship of “Goddess”. One thing most human societies have proved, however, is that there is a human need for God. Even in the most rural and primitive of communities, some evidence of worship has been found. People are spiritual beings and a part of the human existence seems to yearn for God.

In the Judaic tradition there are several names for God and as the Jewish religion acclaims a monotheistic God, it is interesting to study the various names they give God. This seems to have been an attempt to address the problem all humans experience when they try to define who God is or what the nature of God is like. It must also be noted that in their tradition the “name” for God is viewed as being too holy to say or even write down, so a tradition developed in which only the consonants were written down.

Jehovah (or Yahweh), is ‘the English rendering of the Hebrew tetragram YHWH’ (1968:905)<sup>91</sup>, which means “The Lord”. The word for “God” is too holy and its Hebrew pronunciation is not known. Scholars believe that the Jews took seriously the third

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<sup>91</sup> Various Editors in *The Living Bible Encyclopedia*.

commandment “Thou shalt not take the name of Jehovah thy God in vain;”<sup>92</sup>. The following quotations list some of the Hebrew names for God and also provide some extra information:

When the vowel points were added to the Hebrew consonantal text, the Massoretes (Jewish scribes) inserted into the Hebrew consonantal text the vowels for Adhonai. The sacred name is derived from the verb “to be”, and so implies that God is eternal (“Before Abraham was, I AM”) and that He is the Absolute, i.e. the Uncaused One. The name “Jehovah” belongs especially to Him when He is dealing with His own, while “God” is used more when dealing with the Gentiles. Jehovah-Jireh means ‘the Lord will provide’; Jehovah-Nissi means ‘the Lord is my banner’; Jehovah-Shalom means ‘the Lord is peace’; Jehovah-Shammah means ‘the Lord is there’; Jehovah-Tsidkenu means ‘the Lord is our righteousness’; Jehozabad means ‘the Lord has bestowed’ and Jehozadak means ‘the Lord is righteous’ (1968:906).<sup>93</sup> The chief god of the Canaanites was El, as the Ras Shamra texts demonstrate. The Hebrews borrowed this word from the Canaanites. El has a plural Elim, occasionally Ellim, in Ugaritic; but the Hebrews needed no plural, though a plural term Elohim, was their regular name for God (appears over 2,500 times in the OT). The origin of Elohim is prehistoric and therefore incapable of direct proof. Elohim is plural in form, but is singular in construction (used with a singular verb or adjective). When applied to the one true God, the plural is due to the Hebrew idiom of a plural of magnitude or majesty. El Shaddai is the name by which, according to Exodus 6:3<sup>94</sup>, God appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is often translated as “Almighty God” or “the Almighty” but also, in the NT, as “Omnipotent” in Revelation 19:6<sup>95</sup> (1968:577 and 611).<sup>96</sup>

The Hindu tradition, on the other hand, has a way of “defining” God by stating what God is not. Although this may sound like a negative way of looking at the “nature” of God, it may in fact also be a helpful way by which one would not be tempted to restrict an understanding of who God is to only one image. In modern day Christianity I believe that the narrow patriarchal concept of who God is has been very damaging, to both the discipline of theology and to people’s understanding of the “nature” and the “personhood” of God. Most Western children, when asked to draw a picture of God, will draw God as an old “man” with a beard or as someone resembling a grandfather, a judge or a king.

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<sup>92</sup> Exodus 20:7 ‘You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.’

<sup>93</sup> Various Editors in *The Living Bible Encyclopedia*.

<sup>94</sup> Exodus 6:3 ‘I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name ‘The Lord’ I did not make myself known to them.’

<sup>95</sup> Revelation 19:6b ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.’

<sup>96</sup> Various Editors in *The Living Bible Encyclopedia*.

Most Western children will also not have been exposed to feminine images of God, even though Jesus used analogies such as the one of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wing.<sup>97</sup> Obviously, as stated in the section on metaphors, God is not a “mother hen” but this also means that God is not a grandfather, nor a father, nor a king, nor a judge, nor any other image we use to try to understand God’s nature. God is more than that – much more than all these images put together - God is God.

The discussion incorporated looking at Wisdom-Sophia and what Proverbs 8 and Luke 7 and 11 tell us about the nature of God. The group talked about God as Trinity and what that means to us as Christian women. The feminine side of God, as believed to be depicted in the Person of the Holy Spirit, was a new concept and gave the group some extra food for thought.

### 3.9 Relating to God

Sara Maitland, in ‘Ways of Relating’, talks about some of the names for God, based on the images of personal relationship (Loades 1990:153). Of all the names she gives, such as father, brother and husband, the most important image seems to be that of “father”. She believes this may be due to what was recorded as an instruction from Jesus – “*When you pray, say Father*”<sup>98</sup>. Originally this image may have been very close to what one would like to express about God – the constantly loving and nurturing qualities of God. Maitland goes on to say that almost at the same time as Europe was becoming industrialised, the focus became stronger on Mary as *mother* and Jesus as *friend*. She believes this happened because as the father’s work and family life became separated, and more and more people became urbanised, the image content changed. The nurturance of God could now be better imaged in a “mother” figure. One of the characteristics she focuses on is that of a mother who “does not pass the buck” but like a good mother passes the responsibility right back. The other image is the obvious one of “birthing” and she relates this image to both creation and re-creation. The point of the new life, which God brought into being through Christ’s death, is stressed and the

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<sup>97</sup> Matthew 23:37b ‘How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’

<sup>98</sup> Matthew 6:6ff ‘But whenever you pray, ... (v.9a) Pray then in this way: Our Father in Heaven, ...’.

similarities between death and birth are graphically drawn. It was on the Cross where His life-blood flowed and where bitter anguish overcame Jesus as He was overwhelmed by desolation, wondering just how much more He could bear. As in childbirth, however, the joy afterwards – *on the third day* for Jesus – was exuberant with a sense of mystery. These experiences of creative birthing, as expressed in Christ's passion and reiterated in the rituals of baptism, can be given a deeper meaning if we can learn to trust the metaphor of God as 'Mother' (Loades 1990:154).

An insight, which is a new one for this group, is that of relating to God as "Child" – the Child who delights in play. As is also discussed in section 2.2.1, Matthew Fox (1983), in his book *Original Blessing*, introduces us to this side of God, which not many people yet appreciate and this insight stimulated a lively discussion. The concept of the 'Christ-Child' of Bethlehem took on a whole new meaning for the members of the group. Jesus did not come as a baby only because He was fully human but also to impart to us the aspect of 'God as Child'.

Fox (1983) goes on to say that the incarnation is a shock because it suggests that God would come in a male form to announce divine compassion and wisdom. These qualities, he argues, are traditionally expected to be found in a woman. He puts forward Eckhart's view that when we say that God is eternal, we are in fact claiming that God is forever young. As shared earlier, for him the sight of an eternally young God is one 'to behold, to meditate on, and to imitate' (Fox 1983:225). According to Jesus, greatness will be found in something the child has,<sup>99</sup> and Fox suggests that the key to becoming childlike, without being childish, is play.

Fox's (1983:225ff) observation bears repeating in which he affirms the role of the human race in the Cosmos – a Cosmos, which is still birthing, 'still expanding and still calling humans to birthing and expansion'. The way he views the "Motherhood of God"<sup>100</sup> has also broadened my outlook on how everything fits together in the Cosmos. I believe Paul,

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<sup>99</sup> See footnote 41.

<sup>100</sup> See Section 2.2.1.



who sees Jesus Christ as the one in whom the whole universe is brought together, confirms this view.<sup>101</sup>

### 3.10 Women in the Parables

Patriarchy, with its emphasis on the rational, has caused many of the rich symbols of the Christian faith to be lost in the cold calculated “masculine” way of thinking and doing. Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that Scripture as well as theology are rooted in a patriarchal-sexist culture and share its biases and prejudices. It is also in the light of this that the stories of women like Esther, Ruth, Deborah and Judith are told. Theirs are narratives of “women in a man’s world” and through most of them the patriarchal tradition has been served. Be that as it may, we do owe a great debt to these women of Scripture for their part in the ‘hermeneutical process of continuity and change’ (Loades 1990:40). One thing we do believe, however, is that when a woman’s story got into the Bible, it was important. The same goes for the parables Jesus told. Most of the stories recorded for us are about men, so when there are parables about women, like the ten bridesmaids, the woman who lost her coin, the widow seeking justice and the few general ones which refer to wives, mothers and daughters, we should take note. The symbols connected to these parables about women tell us a great deal about Jesus and His dealings with women. An exegesis of each of these parables will make an interesting study, but one that will have to be left, at this stage, to future research.

The discussion, however, enabled the women in the group to share something of their experiences of women in the parables. Most of the members in the group acknowledged that they had usually looked at the ‘message’ in the parable in general and not specifically at how Jesus was relating to women or helping others to relate to women. Again it was recognised that it was men, influenced by their own tradition and patriarchal culture, who conveyed to their readers the parables about women.

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<sup>101</sup> Eph. 1:9b-10 ‘... in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.’

### 3.11 Language and Culture

Is the church aware of the fact that children today no longer define “man” as “human being”? This question was posed to the group and most of the members believe that it is time that this question is also put to church leaders. At the same time, because these issues are closely related, we should raise the question of the “gender” of God – as controversial as it may be. Even though it is time to break the model of “God-he”, scholars tend to suggest that “gender” metaphoric language should not be pressed beyond its intent and that both “gender” metaphors should be used and both need also to be contradicted. One can speak of God as Mother, and of God as Father, but it needs to be stated that God is not “he” and God is not “she” - God is God! The language we use to talk about God, to talk to and about others and that, which we use about ourselves, can become a bridge between denominations and also a stepping-stone into the future. When we become forward and outward looking our visions are sharpened, our hopes broadened and our ecumenism might therefore even become reinforced.

All too often our “cultural differences” become our excuse for not engaging at deeper levels with one another. It is true that many of our perspectives will have been formed from difference stances, but we can learn from one another. This view alerts us to those aspects of life, which are cross-cultural constants in women’s experience, such as biological childbearing and nursing. These functions usually give “mothers” prominence in most societies and the responsibility for their survival. In many pre-capitalist societies women were the breadwinners and the traders, and modern Western women must be made aware of this.

Harrison holds a critical view of the world being on the verge of self-destruction and death, because communities have deeply neglected that which is most human and most valuable and the most basic of all the work of love – communication. The work of caring, nurturing and tending the personal bonds of community have always been seen as “women’s work” and discounted as mundane. Those who have believed themselves to be busy with the world’s “master plans” have often not seen that love’s actual work is the deepening and extension of human relations.

The group discussion raised the awareness of the members that all of us are part of some of the very basic ingredients of building community and we had the opportunity to affirm one another and commit ourselves to faithful perseverance and also to encouraging others to recognise their part in sustaining the community. It was also recognised that changes are happening in the political, educational and economic sectors of our land. This, however, made everyone even more aware of the necessity for the changes to take place in the church.

### 3.12 Social Transformation

This get-together was commenced with the text from Romans 12:2b, ‘... be transformed by the renewing of your minds’. We were also reminded of the part in the mission statement of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, which calls all Methodist people to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ for healing and transformation.

Schüssler Fiorenza encourages the rejection of the notion of ministry as loyalty and service to patriarchal structures, and at the same time she encourages the re-conception of ministry as a challenge to these structures. She believes that women represent the servanthood of the church and because of this they often find themselves being exploited, not only by men but also by other women. This emphasised the fact that some women believe that the ‘oppression of women’ is God-ordained. Amazing as it may sound, educated and intelligent women have voiced that opinion in the year 2002.

One cannot fully address the moral and ethical issues pertaining to inequality between the sexes without addressing pornography and its impact on society. Radical feminism speaks out against pornography, of any kind, as oppression against women. Rosemarie Tong (1989:111) writes that

To say that women’s sexuality is for men but that men’s sexuality is not for women is to say something that would probably not occur to the ordinary person on the street. Because radical feminists believe that most people mistake appearances for reality when it comes to sexuality, they challenge the ordinary person’s eyesight. “Look,” says the radical feminist, “and see for yourself who has the upper hand in all heterosexual relationships – it is man.” “For whom does prostitution exist?” “For whom does pornography exist?” “Who rapes whom?” “Who harasses whom?” “Who batters whom?” And so on.

Feminism (especially radical feminists) views pornography as a symptom and a symbol of male-controlled female sexuality. This is a subject of some enormity and much greater research is needed to do justice to the debate. However, it is essential, in this section, to briefly give an overview of the feminist ethical stand regarding pornography. Firstly it is important to understand that there are two kinds or descriptions of pornography, *erotica* (from the Greek *eros*, love or a creative principle) and *thanatica* (from the Greek *thanatos*, death or a destructive principle) (see Tong 1989:113). The first kind, *erotica*, would show sexual relationships between fully consenting adults, whereas the second kind, *thanatica*, portrays and encourages men to treat women as objects – often in abusive situations, such as rape, harassment and woman battering. Tong (1989:113) goes on to say that

If any sexually explicit depictions and descriptions may be legally regulated, feminist anti-pornographers maintain that it is those where the inequalities between coercing, abusing men and coerced, abused women are too blatant to be explained away as freely chosen, sadomasochistic fun and frolic.

The legal debates and discussions are complex and numerous but some of the findings of extensive research into *thanatica* show that if you took out the sex and left the violence one would get an increased violent reaction in a laboratory setting. If, however, one took out the violence and left the sex, nothing happens. Another interesting comment was that if one were able to prove that pornographers intended to communicate women-degrading messages to their audiences, it would be discovered that Anglo-American Law ‘simply has no way to handle cases of group defamation’ (Tong 1989:115). Social transformation, therefore, seriously needs to address the issues involving sexual abuse, violence and the condoning of sex-trade and pornography.

The group discussion confirmed some of the women’s experiences of sexual harassment and subtle abuse as being oppression of them as women. Others had not given this much thought and again the discussion opened up an avenue for further discussion and thought.

It was recognised that social transformation cannot take place in isolation, because society is made up of many facets and all impact upon its construction. Therefore, for example, what is preached in the church and taught in the schools contributes to the formation

of “society”. A country’s laws and moral code of behaviour can often determine what kind of “society” one could expect to find in that country. Leadership too, plays an important role in all aspects of government and other institutions. If there is respect and integrity one would usually expect to find harmony and co-operation, but when there is oppression and exploitation one must expect to find rebellion, protest, and, as we have been made very aware of in recent years, even terrorism.

This session was drawn to a close by acknowledging that personal transformation is probably at the centre of any social transformation. Individuals need to be convinced of the necessity to change before the structures of any major system can be changed. We believe that Jesus Christ came to call people to such a personal transformation. We are challenged, day by day, to leave behind old unhelpful ways of the past and to adopt new and more helpful ways to strive for and reach a level of transformation, which benefits all people and communities.

### **3.13 Women and Choice**

The South African context and cultural heritage, of both the black and white sections of the population, place women in the home and in a subordinate position to her husband and/or father. Women have therefore not become accustomed to exercising choice. Although things have been changing in the economic sector, women’s conditions for employment are not yet what they should be. There is an expectation, in many homes and even in whole communities, that when a woman works outside the home she also has to balance her household chores, the caring for the children, the cooking, cleaning and the laundry with her employment. Some couples do negotiate the sharing of chores but this is not something traditionally accepted in this Free State town.

Related to employment is education and it is true that the opportunities for women in South Africa are improving every year. A remaining hurdle to be overcome is that of certain expectations that some careers are better suited to males and others to females. Women and men should be able to exercise full choice of what career to follow.

Another instance where women often have little choice is in abusive relationships. Such relationships impact directly on female sexuality, not only on the wife in the family but also on the children who witness abuse against their mother. Girls can grow up with an inferiority complex and boys can grow up believing that they too have a right to abuse girls, and later their wives. Presently, wives are at great risk in abusive relationships because, if their husband is being unfaithful sexually, they are extremely vulnerable to being infected with HIV/AIDS. Wives in such relationships do not have a choice about sexual intercourse and they would be forced into it anyway, even if they dared try to refuse. Some psychologists suggest that the increase in the divorce rate might be attributed directly to the fact that more women are speaking out against their abuse and are risking the vulnerability of leaving abusive relationships. It also needs to be stressed that, even in courts of law, rape victims are often made to look and feel as though they were in fact the perpetrators. This constitutes severe abuse.

Choice in childbearing and reproduction is also not yet fully available to all women. Although technology is advanced some women still find themselves bound by their cultural heritage and traditions.

During the group discussion all the members agreed that true liberation would constitute when women as well as men could choose their role in life, be it for a season or permanently. If a woman chooses to give ten or fifteen years of her life to raising a family she should not experience a major difficulty to be integrated back into the economic sector if and when she chooses to do so. Women who choose to make their home and family their career should also be respected and not be viewed as unfulfilled.

### **3.14 God - 'More than that ...'**

Although some of the members of the group were familiar with the different names for God, they found the study of their meanings refreshing and appreciated discovering that, at a deeper level, all the names humans have for God are inadequate. The names, as listed in section 3.8, are helpful as a means to describe what God is like but in every instance one must say that God is more than that!

The discussion took on various directions and one aspect of God, as Christians have come to recognise the nature of God - as seen in the life of Jesus while He was on earth - is that of a loving God. The question of whether a deeply loving God could actually have commanded the people of Israel to commit genocide was troubling to some of the members of the group. The discussion, however, helped everyone to see the value of the context in studying the Bible. The people of Israel lived in a time when that is how they believed God wanted them to act. Today we know better, but the truth of God's commitment to the people of Israel, through the covenant made with Abraham has significant relevance. As we search the Scriptures and trace the dealings of God with the covenant people through the prophets, priests and kings of Israel, we grow in our understanding of God and of the purpose of humankind.

Another image of God is the well-known idea that God cannot be imaged at all, that is in the usual noun-based way. The language concept of God as movement or as verb is perfectly traditional as we see in the God of the Hebrews, who is known as "I AM", a pure verb of being-ness (Loades 1990:156). Loades (1990) believes that women, along with other oppressed groups, need to relate to God as verb, as process, as act, because we see the need for that transformation - we have felt it in our own experience. Two other images that come to mind in this category are those of the "kiss" and the "dance". As Maitland says, 'the kiss only exists in the act of kissing' and 'how can you tell the dancer from the dance?' (Loades 1990:156).

Much has already been said about metaphors being used to describe the nature of God and the inadequacy of human language in defining God has also been acknowledged. All we can be sure of is that no matter what our image of God is, God is more than that.

The discussion time at this session was very special because each person in the group could share an experience of a personal encounter when they had sensed the presence and power of God, and each could affirm the other when we talked about the difficulty in explaining our experience. God is beyond human understanding or description. God is God.

### 3.15 Feminine and Masculine

I have come to understand that *difference* does not have to mean *separation*. This concept may have had something to do with the traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” ways of thinking, in that patriarchy, which is distinctly masculine, believes in separation or exclusion and feminism, which is seen to be distinctly “feminine”, believes in togetherness and inclusion. This helpful insight is true for every aspect of life and not only with regard to Christianity. This realisation also shed light on the ideology of *Apartheid*, which damaged South African society with its separatist legislation. Although the democracy we now have is an improvement on the previous dispensation, it still needs to be said that much of the leadership, in both Government and Church in South Africa, is still based on patriarchal hierarchical structures and these are not helpful for full integration and wholeness for all her citizens.

In section 3.7 we dealt with some of the differences between pyramid and circle styles of leadership and here too we need to mention that traditionally the “masculine” style would probably incorporate ladders and pyramids. Achievement seems to be a strongly masculine trait, especially in Western culture, and it is important that we recognise that many Western women have adopted this style of operating as fervently as men have. One of the reasons for this may be that women have not had much of a choice and if they wanted to ‘compete’ in professional and economic fields they have had to adopt the competitive approach. In the church, however, this should not have been the case but it unfortunately has been and still is. Sometimes, to the church’s shame, competition has been even more rife in the religious sphere than in business.

Tong suggests that the feminine and the masculine are both needed to create the wholeness and beauty of life. As has been quoted before, she believes that

Like a kaleidoscope life can bring together hundreds of chips of varying colours to create a single pattern – only to break it, and to form an even more beautiful one (Tong 1989:237).

This reminds us again that difference can mean variety and fullness rather than separation. Only when we come together as women and men, young and old, black and white, abled and



disabled, will we be in a position to produce the ‘beautiful designs’ God intended for humanity.

The discussion drew to a close with the recognition that everyone had gained from one another’s contributions and a time of prayer, in which we affirmed one another’s difference, concluded the meeting.

### 3.16 Women and the Christian Church

It is interesting to note that the reason behind lay people being “re-discovered” and given positions of leadership, was not so much the appreciation of the capabilities and gifts that the laity could bring to ministry, but rather the shortage of priests that motivated their “creation”. If we profess the *priesthood of all believers*, then all members, on the basis of their baptism and confirmation, must contribute to the building up of the Body of Christ and its Christian mission to the world. To the church’s shame we hear the story of Florence Nightingale. This woman of great courage, strength and ability offered herself to the church for ministry, but they refused her on the grounds of her gender. Fortunately she did not accept that as the last word and persevered in the most devastating of circumstances to make a world of difference in the field of caring for the injured, maimed, sick and dying. Nursing has never been the same since and the present day nurses’ pledge pays tribute to her, the *Lady with the Lamp*. How different would the church have been today had the patriarchal hierarchy accepted Florence Nightingale into the ordained ministry of the church?

Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:30) challenges her readers on the concept of ‘Church’. What do we have in mind when we say “The Church”? Is the church the leadership, hierarchy, bishop, priest, pope, laity or what? As a Roman Catholic, she suggests that a ‘rigid structure demands absolute obedience and rigid discipline, organisational control and uniform behaviour’. According to her, hierarchy will remain until the church truly becomes “the people of God”. She continues to struggle against the Post-Vatican II concept that women are second-class citizens/Christians.

This kind of thinking is a concept that must be abolished. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:31) maintains that the

History of women's emancipation indicates equality is not reached through women's conformity to patriarchal/authoritarian structures, nor through their incorporation into lowest rank of hierarchy. Equality can be reached only in and through a change and transformation of the Constantinian form of church.

Women's Ordination Groups seem to have taken their cues from the moderate Women's Movement at the turn of the last century. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:32,33) argues that

women have real 'liberty' to serve in subordinate positions only after they are able to enter the highest Church Offices. To achieve women's emancipation in particular and that of all laity in general, needs a reconceptualization of church and ministry. For "service" as the definition of ecclesiastical office to cease being a cliché, the autocratic, monarchic understanding and institutionalization of church office must be abolished. Such a transformation would require desacralizing and declericalizing of ecclesial ministry. In this sense, the Vatican II ecclesiology reaffirms NT teaching on the priesthood of all believers.

The historical role of women in the early church needs to be researched in greater depth because the "Jesus Movement" was not an exclusive cultic group but very much an inclusive group who believed in equality for all people. Jesus' inclusive attitude made it possible to invite Gentiles of all nations, as well as the outcasts of their own society. This movement questioned the cultic regulations of its day and transcended Jewish and Hellenistic societal and religious boundaries. The "Baptismal Confession"<sup>102</sup> proclaimed their vision of an inclusive community. They believed that all differences were abolished in the Body of Christ, the church. Women and slaves were not marginal figures in this movement but they exercised leadership as apostles, prophets, evangelists and missionaries. Prophets, Schüssler Fiorenza believes, had the prerogative in the leadership functions at the celebration of the Eucharist.

Women have to have full access if the church is to be truly a community of equals. According to Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:89), the "call to conversion" into this community of equals is three-fold, and the three steps for recovering full apostolicity and catholicity are:

1. *The admission of women to the full leadership of the Church, which requires official recognition and confession of the hierarchy that the Church has wronged women - a radical conversion! This*

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<sup>102</sup> As found in Galatians 3:27-29 – See footnotes 70 and 78.

*cannot be only with respect to salvation, hope and charity, but must be also with regard to ecclesial office and power.*

2. *The transformation of the hierarchical Church. Women have to be given opportunities to serve in whatever capacity they are called - before God and the Church. Ordination of women cannot simply mean their addition and integration into the male clergy, but implies a psychological, structural and theological transformation of the Church. Equal ordination should be the ideal and so the transformation of a celibate priesthood, hierarchical Church and a male-clerical theology is its unconditional prerequisite and consequence.*
3. *A New Christian Sisterhood: Such a sisterhood must not be based on sexual stratification. All Catholic women are either nun- or laywomen. The consecrated virgin – the Nun - represents true Christian perfection! The 'ordination' of some nuns, who evidence a great dependency on Church authority, will lead not only to a further clericalisation and hierarchisation of the Church but also to an unbridgeable theological and metaphysical split between women and women. However, because Catholic feminists have learned from the experiences of ordained women in other Christian churches, and from their own experience in theology and ministry, the Roman Catholic Women's Ordination Movement in the U.S.A. has always insisted that the incorporation of some token women into the patriarchal hierarchy does not suffice (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:259). She cautions, No tokenism please.*

To the church's discredit, many women ministers experience a kind of impotence once they are ordained and they then discover that certain positions are denied them. These women ministers need to be extra vigilant and alert when it comes to subtle innuendo regarding their gender.

Sexist jokes and exclusive language need to be challenged and, in extreme cases, sexual harassment needs to be addressed within the church. Women ministers need support groups of people with whom they can work together on these issues, where they can find strength and encouragement and also where they can be held accountable to their spirituality and ministry. The passage in Luke 13:10-17<sup>103</sup> records Jesus' interaction with the "bent-over

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<sup>103</sup> Luke 13:10-17 'Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment. When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham [and Sarah] whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing.'

woman” and in response to this narrative, Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that the problem is not so much “the ordination of women” but rather that the Gospel of God, that enables women to walk upright, is at stake here.

Some feminists, like Mary Daly, see themselves as being post-Christian. Daly, in particular, felt that she could not stay in the Christian Church, which she believed, was not “true” to her doctrine, as preached by Jesus Christ. These radical feminists propose several ways to free women from the cage of femininity. Developing an androgynous<sup>104</sup> culture is one such way and another is to simply replace male culture with female culture. This latter suggestion justifies the fear, expressed earlier, of reverse sexism within the church. Radical feminists have also proposed various ways to enable women to escape from the sexual domination of men. The question of male domination needs to be addressed when debating women’s ordination because until ministry is no longer defined in terms of sexual stratification, the male/female issue will not be resolved. Rosemarie Tong suggests that we need to be informed, especially by the post-modern feminists, of where women are, and by the socialist feminists, of where women could be. In a fully liberated church women and men will be able to share in ministry alongside one another, and bring about a greater degree of wholeness, which has been sorely lacking in Christian ministry for many years.

The discussion on this particular issue was a little strained as some of the women felt that the passages in the Bible that teach against women in leadership limit their involvement. It was acknowledged that some in-depth study of certain passages and their context was very necessary for the members in this church, so that they could begin to understand the role of women in the church better. This discussion indicated that some of the material covered in previous sessions had not been fully integrated into these women’s experience. Some differed in their opinions and were a little reluctant to share their views with the others and some had, at this stage, already withdrawn from the group.

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<sup>104</sup> Both the strength of traditional male and the compassion of traditional female qualities in one.

### 3.17 God-talk and Inclusive Language

Schüssler Fiorenza (1993) believes that a truly Christian “God-language” has to affirm mutuality, fulfilment, maturity and human potentiality not only in gender but also in class, culture, race and religion, if it is to become catholic and universal. The Christian faith would then enable all kinds of people to affirm themselves as whole human persons, chosen and loved by God and as partaking in divine reality - ‘A Christian spirituality taking on all discrimination’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:95). She believes that we must learn to talk about God as both Father and Mother, as Son and Daughter and as He and She. Unless female God-language is commonly accepted in Christian theology and worship, women will not be able to recognise themselves in the image and likeness of God. New “wineskins” are needed for theology and new structures are needed for academic institutions.

It was acknowledged that many theologians and scholars throughout the ages have found it difficult to find adequate language in which both to address God and to talk about God. Thomas Aquinas too expressed his own difficulty of ‘inadequacy of words’ to describe God. Mother Julian of Norwich spoke of God as Mother and Father, as Lover, Friend and Husband in her attempts to adequately express her experience of God.

As spoken about in other sessions it was once again pointed out that metaphors help us in the way we relate to God. Images, symbols and non-gender terms are very useful ways for human beings to begin formulating an idea of what God is like and also about how we can address God. The way in which John describes Jesus is a helpful way for me because ‘The Word made Flesh’ is in a way a confirmation of ‘The God who spoke and Creation came into being’. This same God, in Jesus Christ, became ‘Flesh’ (human). The Gospel accounts are therefore invaluable as we look at the life of Christ on earth and model some of our descriptions on how Jesus portrayed God to us.

Apart from talking to and about God we also recognised the need to use language that assists us to be inclusive of one another as women and men. The use and meaning of our language point out both the vibrant and changing nature of language as well as the stubbornness of “man” to implement the modifications, which come about through changes of circumstances, events or traditions. All linguists will be able to tell us that some words in

Shakespearean English no longer have the same meaning as when the plays or poems were written. The English language, like any other language, changes as times change. In the same way as language has to change to accommodate new terminology, so too it should adapt to giving up old, useless, and often offensive, terminology. Even though language is “owned” by the dominant ideology of its time, it does not mean it should refuse to acknowledge its limitations.

The United Church of Canada has published a hymnal, *Voices United*, and this beautiful book contains both new and a selection of old hymns, verses and songs that have been re-authored in order to address God without being limited by only one image and to include both human genders in worship. Care has been taken to maintain the original beauty of the poetry and in many instances the meaning of the words have been updated and/or clarified. Such an effort is deeply appreciated and other churches could only benefit by following their example.

### 3.18 Sainthood and Sisterhood

Schüssler Fiorenza expresses her love for the stories of the saints in history/*her-story* in her book, *Discipleship of Equals*. One of the key reasons for this has been that she experienced no discrimination in the calling of all people to sainthood. Women, as well as men, are not defined by their biology and reproductive capabilities, but by their call to discipleship and also to sainthood. In *A Children's Book of Saints* by Williamson (1960), there are sixteen wonderful stories of women, whom God called to sainthood.

This session would have been incomplete if the problem of “The Twelve and the *Discipleship of Equals*” was not addressed. The Vatican II Decree, which states that because the TWELVE were men arguments for the “*discipleship of equals*” are null and void, raises more questions than answers. Schüssler Fiorenza, however, attempts to argue against this decree from a wider perspective than that. She believes that the theological issue is not whether women can be ordained as priests (or appointed as successors of the Twelve) but rather, whether the discipleship of equals will be realized by the *ekklēsia*, the democratic assembly of *all* citizens in the church. As long as such a vision of the *ekklēsia of women* has

not become a reality, apostolic calling engages women and men in the struggle for the transformation of the patriarchal church into the discipleship community of equals (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:116).

The Gospel according to Mark portrays the women as the TRUE disciples of Jesus. If the word “apostle” means “messenger”, and we believe it does, then the women were the first *apostles* because they were the ones to take the news of Christ’s resurrection to the TWELVE.<sup>105</sup> Not only were they the first ones at the tomb on the Sunday morning, but they were also the ones who stayed close by on the Friday, when Jesus needed His friends the most.<sup>106</sup> The Twelve, we are told, ran away for fear of their lives.<sup>107</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza agrees with McFague’s view that only when theology is on the side of the outcast and oppressed, as Jesus was, can it become incarnational and Christian. As a theology, which is rooted in community, feminist theology finds its expression in celebration and liturgy. According to Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:67), feminist theologians maintain that ‘theology has to become communal and holistic again’. She suggests that ways to enhance this process would be to encourage the inclusion of the use of rituals, dance, drama, music, movement and pictures more in religious and daily life. This, she believes, would allow possibilities for the creation of new persons and new structures. She maintains that images and myths provide a worldview and give meaning to life. Because feminist theologians value myths and images particularly, they first have to analyse and demythologise the myths of sexist society and patriarchal religion in order to liberate them.

The first myth Schüssler Fiorenza discusses in her book, *Discipleship of Equals*, is the “Mary-Myth”. According to her, this myth was developed in a male, clerical and ascetic culture and has very little to do with the historical Mary of Nazareth. The myth perpetuates the idea, which we looked at earlier, in section 3.4 that there are only two traditional roles for

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<sup>105</sup> Mark 16:1-7 & 9-11 ‘When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ... (v.7) But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; ... (v.10) She went out and told those who had been with him, ...’.

<sup>106</sup> Mark 15:40-41 ‘There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.’

<sup>107</sup> Mark 14:50-52 ‘All of them deserted him and fled. A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.’

women, that of *Mother and Nun*. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:72) therefore stresses that a “new sisterhood” has to be formed, which is not based on ‘sexual stratification’. She urges all feminist theologians to ‘search for new myths and images to incarnate a new vision of Christian women, and functions as prototypes to be imitated’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:76). She reminds us that all are called to *sainthood* and that our Christian identity lies in our calling and not in our gender.

Although she disagrees, in principle, with the ordination of women into a traditional priesthood designed by and for men, Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:68) has always argued for full and free access to participation and involvement for women in all offices within the church. She maintains that women should first have unlimited access to be elected or appointed to the positions of cardinal and bishop (and even pope) before being willing to be ordained into a ‘lower’ office, as in that of priest.

The discussion was stimulated by some questions as to what would help the church to shift to this new paradigm. Some of the ideas expressed included aspects such as the church becoming more willing to listen to women, greater emphasis being placed on dialogue between feminist and traditionally classical theologians, women theologians speaking out and writing more about their views and experiences, small groups, such as our working group, being established in more churches and individuals taking time to talk to their friends, colleagues and fellow church members. A spirit of excitement was experienced as the members of the group talked about the possibilities, which do exist, even though this group was very small in comparison with the task.

### **3.19 Hope for the True Liberation for all People**

Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:306) speaks a word of hope into the lives of all that are called into ministry in that

Those of us who are called to ministry can no longer understand our work as “service” or as “waiting on someone” but as the praxis of “equality from below” in solidarity with all those who struggle for survival, self-love, and justice. One hopes that in the celebration and in the ritualization of the call to ministry graduates will be empowered to dedicate themselves anew to the vision and practice of equal discipleship in the power of the Spirit.



She sees feminist theological strategies as fulfilling the following three criteria:

1. Feminist strategies for change must be rooted in common systemic analysis.
2. To foster solidarity and collaboration a critical feminist theology of liberation must avoid constructing differing feminist strategies as exclusive options.
3. Feminist theology must seek to articulate a common vision that can inspire diverse movements of liberation.

It is hoped that this common vision would seek to acknowledge that the various strands of feminism constitute strength, but it also recognises that they may also generate certain weaknesses. Different feminist frameworks therefore engender different strategies (see Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:309).

In the church, and especially in this conservative community, it seems important to be very sensitive in the way feminist theology is encouraged. The way in which we participate in retreats, liturgies and rituals, however, should not move us “beyond anger” or encourage us to deny our pain. Rather they should renew our vision, energy and power. As we seek ways to foster ongoing involvement and exposure to feminist theological perspectives, we should also endeavour to keep alive the burning indignation at the destructive powers of patriarchy in women’s lives - an indignation that fuels the courage and faith necessary in the struggle for survival and liberation. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:330) believes that

Only if we keep this holy anger alive will we sustain the courage and love that is necessary to work for the conversion and transformation of the patriarchal church into the discipleship of equals.

In the discussion time it became very clear that most of the women in this working group were anxious about the future. Many leaders in this church had expressed their unhappiness with feminist views and talking about a positive strategy to challenge ‘the church’ made some members of the group feel distinctly uncomfortable. The simple act of putting an inclusive doxology on the overhead for the use at one of the worship services caused an upset with some of the conservative leaders and this has made some of the members of the working group quite sensitive.

### 3.20 A Dream for the Future

Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:12) suggests that

If someone dreams alone, then it remains only a dream. If many dream together, then this is the beginning, the beginning of a new reality. Dream our dream.

This captivates the blessing of the “dream catcher” used in Native American spirituality. The idea that the ‘good dreams’ will be retained and the ‘bad dreams’ will be let through is an encouraging symbol of finding what is ‘good’ and building on those aspects of feminist theological perspectives in order to especially enhance the experience of women in this community. If enough of us catch on to the dream of the *discipleship of equals*, it can become the new reality in our churches and in our communities. This is a dream that needs to be shared, talked about, read about and studied formally by many more people, and especially by many more women. The members of this working group are becoming aware of their need for further study and it is hoped that they will continue to meet, perhaps only once or twice a month rather than once a week, and continue to explore what Scripture has to say about living life to the full as women.

Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:371) writes words of encouragement as she draws her book, *Discipleship of Equals*, to a close in that

The “envisioned” is already initially present in the inclusive table community, in the healing and liberating practices, as well as in the domination-free kinship community of the Jesus movement, which found many followers among the poor, the despised, the ill, the possessed, the outcast, and women of all walks of life.

As Christians, we have all this potentially available. Freeing the church’s real character to emerge is what one of the main goals of feminist theology should be. We acknowledge that our world, and our church, is still ‘one-sided and one-eyed to the extent that it continues to be articulated and envision by white elite men’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:355) but we are encouraged by the scholars and theologians who continue to call for equality for all humanity.

### 3.21 Evaluation and Assessment

It is recognised that nothing is ever final in this life. Human beings make choices every day of their lives and the task of research, such as this, is to enable them to make wise, informed and just decisions. For many years people in South Africa believed that *Apartheid* was merely “the way it was”, until more and more people pointed out how unjust, and un-Christian, the system was. I believe it is now the turn of feminist scholars, activists and theologians to point out how unjust and dehumanising gender discrimination is. The church, and especially the leadership of this local church, needs to hear this message. The true *discipleship of equals* can only become a reality once gender discrimination is no longer practised in the church or seen as her God-given directive.

Reflecting on the past few months does enable me to draw some provisional conclusions as to what the exposure to feminist thought has meant to the members of this working group. On the whole I believe that those who have persevered with the group have been brought to a deeper understanding of God and they have also shared with the group that their relationship with Christ has become stronger. On occasion comments such as ‘this group has meant very much to me’, ‘these meetings have given me renewed hope’, ‘there must be a way that we can share these insights with others’ and ‘this group is my life-line’, have been indicators that the group has indeed met some, if not all, the expectations expressed at the beginning of its journey.

However, pressure from the leadership has definitely affected the general atmosphere of the group. Two regular members withdrew from the group completely and another, although positive right at the beginning, lost interest and stopped coming very soon after its commencement. Out of the original eight only five continued to meet until the end of the proposed period. At one of the meetings, near the end of the programme, the openness that had developed between the members encouraged some to talk frankly about some of their feelings and fears. It was felt that there was one particular male leader on the church executive who needed to control everything that happened in the church. This person is probably also one of the wealthiest men in the town and so he is used to getting his own way in his business and in his home. It was an open discussion, which unfortunately left the group

feeling quite vulnerable and unable to think of a clear way forward or of what specifically they could do about the situation.

This group provided a forum for two divorced women where they could speak freely of their experiences, pain and fears and where the other women could listen and encourage them. The one who, at the inception of the group, had expressed a hope that she would be able to move from the point of hatred for 'men' is at a place where she is more willing to forgive, but at the same time she is also able to value herself as created in the image of God. Another member of the group had experienced aggression from a male superior at her work and she has found the courage to not be intimidated and to hold her own in a difficult situation. A normally fairly quiet member of the group had asserted herself in a general conversation with colleagues in which someone had derided women. When she shared with the group how she had confronted the person, her fellow group members could rejoice with her because it had certainly seemed out of character for her, but we all recognised how she had grown in her appreciation of women and their value in society and in the church.

Some of the most important insights would include the realisation that Christianity, as Jesus came to impart it to His followers, is about *discipleship of equals* and not about male dominance and patriarchal hierarchy. However, theology is so steeped in patriarchy that some of the greatest truths have become hidden. Feminist Christian theology, we came to believe, is endeavouring to restore these truths to their rightful place once more.

An evaluation, which we believe impacts on all aspects of life, be it in the home, the community or in the church, is that social transformation cannot happen in isolation. Decisions, which are made in certain situations, do affect other people and the organisations they represent. This gives feminist theologians and women's movements hope for the future. Clear strategies and joint efforts can be the beginnings of a whole new dispensation of equality for all, and the realisation of a true *discipleship of equals* in the Christian Church.

### 3.22 Linking Theory to Experience

As is clear from the methodology used throughout this chapter, some of the experiences of the group members were described in each sub-section, which reflected that

particular week's discussion. It was endeavoured, where possible, to link the theory to some of their experiences as the members shared these. However, some of the sessions were more academic than others and so links were not possible because the members had not yet experienced the effects of these theories. On other topics some of the experiences of the group were only shared some weeks later, some during the formal interviews or others were expressed in responses to some of the questionnaires, which will be discussed in the chapter four.

On the whole it became very clear that feminist theological perspectives were completely foreign to the members in the group and that their experiences most often hovered at the very edge of exposure to these concepts. Many of them would only understand a concept after talking at some length outside the usual meeting time and others are still grappling with some of the theories. Some of the ideas proposed by both Christina Landman and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have been hugely threatening to some and others have found them merely interesting.

Some of the women have started reading some articles and basic books on feminist perspectives and this has also stimulated discussion and helped to bring a clearer understanding of the theories presented. It is also recognised that one of the women may have merely wanted to be a rebel when she joined the group. After going through a difficult divorce she did not seem to have much at stake, but she has recently come to a point where she is taking responsibility for her newfound knowledge. She has bought a book by an author who does not adopt a feminist perspective and she has started doing her own critical analysis. This was an exciting discovery when one week she shared with the group what she had been doing since the last time they had met. In her own way she had started linking the theory with her own experience.

Although it did not happen all the time it did from time to time happen that the members of the group recognised themselves in the theory being presented. At the outset, in the initial questionnaire, some women indicated that they had never experienced any discrimination. That statement, I believe, has been reversed for each one of them. The theory

has enlightened them and, hopefully, they will begin to be able to make the connections between the theory and their own experiences themselves.

### 3.23 Observations

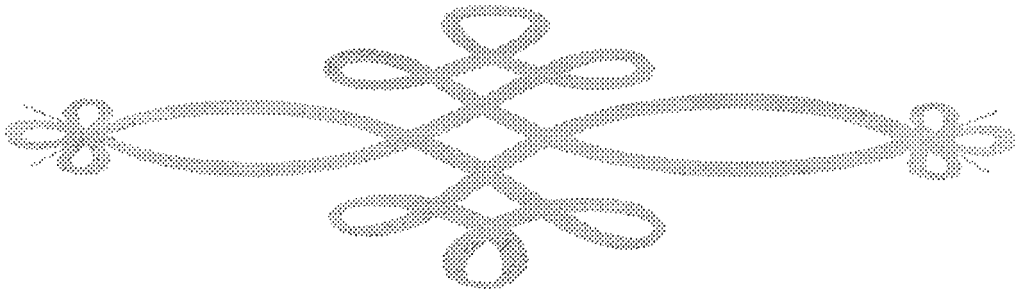
It is quite extraordinary to what extent I discovered that the comments by Christina Landman were accurate in the spirituality of those of the group with a strict Afrikaans background. I found her insight very helpful and it prepared me for some of the reactions, not so much from women within the group but more so from Afrikaans women from outside of the group, who were critical of this research. These women had declined the invitation to be part of the group but felt it necessary to express their opinions regardless, often in a most unhelpful way. It forms part of the general observations to mention that many of the people in this town seem to be energised by talking about others. This discovery was enormously disconcerting for us soon after we arrived here and so it was valuable to read an editorial in the local newspaper, which challenged the people of this town, and particularly Christian people who regularly attend church, to think twice before they discuss others and more especially before they place them in a poor light by gossiping and/or spreading often untrue rumours about them.

A constructive evaluation holds out the hope, expressed by the group members themselves, that change can take place in our community. When reflecting on a hope expressed in the research proposal for this project, it needs to be acknowledged that this small working group has not yet achieved the hoped-for goal of becoming a strong voice within this church. We do not despair but trust that what has begun will continue. If an achievable goal, of inviting even one new member to join the group every year, can be realised, this group could eventually become the strong voice envisioned in the year 2002.

An observation, which I believe affects us deeply, is that South African feminist theologians are at an advantage because they have had to address the issues of *Apartheid* in the past few decades in our land and so they are, or certainly should be, familiar with liberation theology and terms. It would seem to be a natural flow from liberation to feminist theology and our hope lies in gender equality becoming an issue of utmost importance for

future deliberation and implementation within our country. In discussion with one of the women in our group it became quite clear that even though some people within the church are opposing feminist perspectives, the process has begun and the discipline is here to stay. In the same way as *Apartheid* had to go, gender inequality also has to go. It is not an option but a reality that will not go away, even if some people still choose to ignore it. Hopefully the church will become more and more alert to the call of God to treat all people with a respect and a sense of dignity with which they have been created.

These observations are merely provisional, as they have been documented right throughout the research period. The final observations, as discussed in the various sections of chapter 4 and also in section 6.0 will endeavour to evaluate the growth, which has taken place since each provisional observation was documented. The purpose, therefore, of this section was to summarise some of the major points that stood out during the weekly discussions.



#### Transition from the theoretical to the empirical aspects of this research project:

At this point it seems appropriate to affirm again the main purpose of this research project. As stated on page 6, the foremost aim has been to expose a small group of women to the call of feminist theological perspectives. The first three chapters have dealt with the necessary introductions, the theoretical overview and the themes for the weekly discussions.

The focus now sharply turns towards the experience of the *Anaphaino* spirituality group. Chapter four, therefore, will seek to describe each part of the group's experience, highlight the information gathered through questionnaires and interviews and deal with observations and assessments. Detailed accounts will follow and various comments will be offered in response to personal and group interactions during the research period. It is hoped that the theory relates well to the empirical aspect of the research and that the links are clear.

# Chapter Four :

## A Qualitative Empirical Approach

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This chapter introduces the members of the working group, whose experiences form the basis of this research project. The observations, analyses, insights and discoveries expressed in this chapter have been gathered and documented throughout the research period and they convey some of the general attitudes of people in this town but on the whole they reflect the individual experiences of the members in the group and of those who volunteered to be interviewed for this research project.

### 4.0 Presenting the Working Group

A group of eight women met together at the initial introductory meeting of a working group, whose purpose would be to explore feminist theological perspectives in a small Eastern Free State town. These women committed themselves to journey with the project co-ordinator for twenty-four weeks and to share their beliefs, feelings, experiences and hopes as openly and as honestly as possible with the rest of the group. They were assured that their identities would be protected which further encouraged their frank responses to challenging questions.

Although their real names have not been used, for the purpose of this discussion each member of the group has been given another name, by which they will be known in this research paper. Of the eight women who accepted the invitation three of them come from a strict Afrikaans background. Two of these women still speak Afrikaans in their homes even though they are members of the English-speaking Methodist Church in this small town. Four of the five English-speaking women are married to Afrikaans men and only one is married to an English-speaking man and her family is the only one who speaks only English in their home. Of the three Afrikaans women two were married to English-speaking men although one of them is now divorced.

The first one presented then is Gladys. She originally comes from a big city in the Free State and she is one of the English-speaking members of the group, the one who is also



married to an English-speaking man. She has a firm commitment to Christ and she hopes to discover something more about the roles of women in society and how God relates to women. Next we meet Lynn, an English-speaking woman who is married to an ultra-conservative Afrikaans-speaking man and they speak both languages in their home. She is an intelligent woman who has fully bought into the interpretation of the Bible, which suggests that God has created women as being subordinate to men. The third woman we meet is Wanda and although she was very positive about joining the group, after several apologies, she just stopped coming. She is also an English-speaking woman who is married to an Afrikaans-speaking man. The fourth member will be known to us as Susan and although English-speaking now she has a Dutch background and is married to an Afrikaans-speaking husband. They too speak both languages in their home. She has a sincere wish to grow spiritually and recognises that her Continental heritage has enabled her to have a fairly open mind to new ideas. Next we meet Martha, an Afrikaans-speaking woman who has recently been divorced from an English-speaking man. She is struggling with many issues in her life and she is the one who expressed a hope that she could get to a point where she no longer 'hates men'. She also strongly believes that God ordained it that women should be 'lesser beings'. Another Afrikaans-speaking member is Lulu and she too has gone through a divorce. She was married to an Afrikaans-speaking man. Lulu is a seeker who attends many camps and retreats hoping to grow in her spiritual experience of God. Her acceptance of the invitation to join this group may have been an act of rebellion more than a deep desire to be exposed to feminist perspectives. One of the more mature women in the group is Enid, who is English-speaking and married to a man from an Afrikaans-speaking background although they speak English in their home. Finally I introduce myself, the co-ordinator of the working group. I shall use the shortened form of my real name, Jenny, when referring to some of my own contributions to the group. Although we now speak English in our home, I do come from an Afrikaans-speaking family but married an English-speaking man thirty years ago. My commitment to wholeness for all people motivated me to embark on this research project in a town, in which people generally adopt a conservative patriarchal perspective when looking at most things.

As shared in section 3.0 most of the women's expectations were positive and at the commencement of the project the fellowship was filled with keen anticipation. As soon as the second meeting, however, some of the challenges of feminist thought began to stick their necks out. Lynn's husband, who is definitely the head of his home, may not have fully appreciated some of the aspects of what she was learning at the group because she sent apologies to the next two meetings. At the get-together where the group discussed the traditional roles of women and men a full contingent was present and it seemed as if everyone felt secure and on safe ground, at least until Jenny presented a collage on what a more ideal situation for all people may look like.

Gladys' young daughter had participated in the making of her collage and she joined her mother for the first part of the session. It was a delightful experience to hear this young girl describe what the collage was depicting. Her presence was an expression of hope for the future because she would probably benefit most by the groundwork that the group was preparing. One thing seemed sure and that was that the group definitely had a purpose to fulfil. More will be said in section 4.5 about the open meetings, to which husbands and others would be invited but for now the discussion will move into the co-ordinator's initial assessments of where each of the members of the group stood with regard to their attitudes to feminist perspectives.

## **4.1 Initial Assessments**

Although the questionnaires will only be analysed in section 4.8, some of the responses to the first questionnaires will be used to guide the co-ordinator in this first assessment of the positions held by the members of the group.

The only person who did not complete the initial questionnaire was Wanda and so this assessment of her position has been formulated on general observations during informal encounters with her. Her commitment to the church seems to depend largely on her personal circumstances. She is a dedicated teacher and often everything else, including her family commitments, seem to be placed second because of her dedication to her responsibilities at school. At first it seemed very strange that she missed a meeting but after a few apologies it

became clear that her priorities were definitely not with this working group. After the fourth apology she finally indicated that it might be best that she not join the group after all.

Lynn, however, was definitely committed and at the beginning of the group's journey it seemed as if she would only miss when her daughter had an important appointment in a city about two hours' drive away. Her answers to the initial questionnaire were balanced and she showed a keen interest in developing her understanding of God and of people created equally in the sight of God. As the topics became more challenging, however, she too sent more frequent apologies. Eventually, after the first open meeting<sup>108</sup>, at which her husband asked a pointed question on the 'Motherhood' of God, she withdrew completely from the group. It is suspected that she was acting on the directive of her husband and not from a personal conviction, but this is mere speculation on the part of the co-ordinator of the group. It is also the opinion of the co-ordinator that this woman has a very sharp mind and that she is conscious of the fact that her husband may not be as bright as she is. Being 'obedient' to her husband is therefore her way of keeping the peace and harmony in their home. Her choice is respected even though a hope is expressed that she too will continue to explore feminist perspectives, even if it is just through a regular visit to the library.

Gladys is probably the member of the group whom the co-ordinator misread the most. Her enthusiasm and commitment seemed contagious and the promise of a great friendship was in the air. Her initial questionnaire did indicate that she did not understand discrimination and it seemed as if she might not be aware of what feminist theology entailed but these things were not unusual because all the women in the group needed to be informed to either a greater or lesser degree. It was therefore quite a shock when after the first open meeting she came to see the co-ordinator (me) and expressed her unhappiness with some of the views expressed in the working group. Although each member had, at the commencement of the programme, been given a complete outline of topics<sup>109</sup> to be discussed, it seemed as if Gladys was accusing the co-ordinator of inviting people to join a group under false pretences.

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<sup>108</sup> See Section 4.5.

<sup>109</sup> See Appendix 5.

Her comment was that she had understood that the group was going to discuss the role of women in the church and not whether God has feminine qualities. As she could not accept that God could ever be called 'Mother' she also withdrew from the group. After studying Christina Landman's (1994) book on *The Piety of Afrikaans Women*, it was surprising to discover that one of the English-speaking women was even more conservative in her spirituality than the traditionally Afrikaans women. It is assumed that a portion of the responsibility for Gladys' withdrawal from the group was also due to the influence of her narrowly conservative husband.

The assessment of Susan is that of a consistently faithful and even-tempered person. She has been committed to the group and has participated to the full in every way possible. Her initial questionnaire also indicated a need for more information but on the whole her attitude has been that of one who is open to grow in her understanding of God and of humanity. Her delight in everything she discovers speaks of true childlikeness in the best sense of the word. Her support and friendship is spontaneous and there is a warmth, which supersedes any of the suspicion that has unfortunately been part of the group's experience.

Martha, on the other hand is a mixture of commitment and scepticism. At one of the meetings, straight after the controversial first open meeting, she stated that she was only present because she had made a commitment and emphasised through her non-participation that she was not there because she wanted to be part of the group. Her honesty is respected and it is hoped that even though her motives have been mixed, that her experience in the long term will prove to be beneficial to her as a person in her own right. In a personal conversation with the co-ordinator it became clear that she had had an incomplete idea of what the research project was about. After the words of a hymn had been changed on the overhead projector to be more inclusive, she confronted the co-ordinator (me), who was preaching on that particular Sunday, and said that she now realised that I was serious about feminist theology. It had seemed therefore that Martha had understood that this was just some idle academic project rather than a serious spiritual quest for equality and wholeness for all people. The relationship between her and the group had become slightly strained since that conversation but apart from

a few genuine apologies, when she was going to be away, she has remained committed to the group.

Lulu's commitment to the group is as sound as is possible for her with her work commitments, which demand some of her Saturday mornings. Although fairly open it is acknowledged that her strong views are not easily swayed. It is this member of the group, however, who showed the initiative of comparing two authors' different perspectives of stories about the same women in the Bible. Her Afrikaans background shows strongly in her responses to the initial questionnaire and her answers also indicate a need for more information, which would follow in the weeks to come. Lulu's commitment to the group has been solid and she makes it her business to catch up on aspects, which she has had to miss due to her work commitments in the theatre at the hospital. Her support has been tangible and she has an optimistic approach to life and to people in general.

Enid is one of the more dependable, mature and reliable members of the group. Her quiet participation has been an inspiration to most of the members when they have been feeling under pressure. Although experiencing work-related difficulties herself, she has been a constant encouragement to others. Her initial responses to the first questionnaire were mature and balanced. Her views of equality were by far the most liberal in this conservative community and that may be due to the fact that she has a responsible managerial position in a very busy company.

The co-ordinator, who endeavours to be objective, is deeply committed to sharing with these women something of her insights into what wholeness for all humanity could in turn mean for the emancipation of women and all marginalised groups. She has had to acknowledge, however, that one can only offer something to another. They have the freedom to accept or reject the offer. The group's reaction to some of the very challenging concepts has not been surprising but the outright rejection of unexamined ideas by some has been. The whole discipline of feminist theology calls for openness to a new paradigm. It needs to be acknowledged that for some people, and even a few members in this group, this is still premature and hugely threatening.

Some personal comments are relevant, I believe, to underline something of what has happened to me personally during these past few months. Statements made to my husband, who is the ordained minister of this local church, such as ‘keep your feminist wife in check’ are totally unacceptable and they cause me to feel anger at a system, which condones such disrespect in relating to any person. The recognition of having value by being addressed personally has been denied me and the traditional denigration of a woman into obscurity continues to thrive in this church. This is exactly what I believe we are protesting against.

These are some of the initial assessments of the people with whom I would be working on this research project and also some of the attitudes of people in the church. This chapter will continue to discuss the growth and development of these women’s attitudes and endeavour to further assess other aspects as the research progresses. The tension between openness and resistance will constantly be monitored and referred to regularly as each person’s experiences are analysed and perceived by the co-ordinator.

## 4.2 Recovery of Symbols and Rituals

This research project has been viewed as a multi-faceted exercise. Its main priority is to facilitate the exposure to Christian feminist spirituality for a small group of white women in a conservative Free State town. Although this is probably the most important aspect with regard to the documented research, it is not the only focus of the co-ordinator. What Denzin (1989:83) describes as a ‘thick description’<sup>110</sup> of people’s experiences is what is being attempted in this research. It is believed that these aspects, referred to by Denzin, of the experiences of the members in the group would only surface once trust has been built between the women and also through the introduction of a new structure with which they can identify and also feel comfortable.

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<sup>110</sup> “A ‘thick description’ does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history (*her-story*\*) into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard.” (\*My own insert) [Quoted by Mouton (2001)]

Scholars have discovered and pointed out that Western culture, and so too the Christian faith, has largely lost or at least severely neglected the place of symbols and rituals. Christian feminist theology, however, has helped us to re-introduce the place of these very helpful tools by which we are encouraged in our focus on God, others and ourselves.

Right from the very first gathering of the working group the name selected for the group, *Anaphaino*<sup>111</sup>, was introduced and separate letters, spelling out the name, were placed on the table along with symbols, specifically chosen for that particular meeting. As previously discussed, in section 3.0, the women were introduced to using the place of symbols in their own spiritual experience as well as in the group each week. Everyone was encouraged to bring a significant symbol to all the meetings.

The regular symbols were an open Bible, a burning candle and a cross. These three symbols were chosen to remind the group that everything we did and talked about were based on the Christian Scriptures, the candle flame reminded us that Christ is the Light of the World and the Cross depicted the traditional Christian symbol.

After the ritual breakfast, usually consisting of muesli and yoghurt and something to drink, the group would gather around a central table. At the beginning of each meeting a prayer would be offered, either in silence or a time of shared prayers or led by the co-ordinator of the group. The letters of the group's name would be shared out – not in the same sequence each week - so the members took turns at different times, as we built the name, to talk about their experiences, feelings or items of interest. This also provided a time of light relief as getting the spelling right often evoked plenty of laughter from the group.

When the letters were placed on the table each person could add their symbol to the table and tell the group what it meant to her or simply what it symbolised in general. A few times during the research period some special birthday celebrations were held, everyone was asked to bring some flowers to the *Spring* meeting and a basket of flowers was arranged and after the meeting it was taken to an elderly person who had been recovering from illness. Most times, however, the ritual was simple and it merely facilitated, in a structured way, that

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<sup>111</sup> See footnote 4.

everyone had an opportunity to talk a little about her week. There were times when someone would only place her letters on the table and decline to share and that was also respected.

Comments have been frequent, especially towards the end of the research period, that the little rituals we performed each week and the emphasis we have placed on various symbols have brought a whole new dimension into the spiritual experience of some of the women in the group. Not everyone has shared that this has been special for them but those who have discovered the value of ritual and symbolism now seem to pay more attention to their world. During *Autumn* the changing colours of the leaves often played a significant role in some of the women's experience and we had beautifully coloured leaves on our table more than once. At the *Spring* meeting blossoms symbolised the exuberance each one felt at the promise of *Summer* and during *Winter* the stark bare trees, outside the window, were a reminder of the period of rest that we often neglect in our own spiritual lives. The recovery of the place of the *Seasons* became quite significant for all of us. In modern times most Western people no longer live their lives according to the natural seasons of the year. People seldom eat seasonally anymore and most of us do not even know which vegetables or fruit are 'in season' when we go shopping. Cold storage and instant meals influence our life-styles more than nature does. Feminist theology introduces us again to some of our roots. We are encouraged to ask ourselves what our bodies need and also to reflect on what we nurture our spirits with.

The final ritual, which will bring the research period to a close, will include a time when the group members may read blessings to one another. Members of the group will be asked to write something appropriate for each member of the group, which will be included in the final evaluation - see Appendix 4 - and which they will read to the group during the closing ceremony. The hope is expressed that these experiences will remain with each one and that their yearning for spiritual awakening will continue to be strengthened.



### 4.3 *The Ten Thousand Gates* <sup>112</sup>

Hopkins and Anderson (1992:72) use the metaphor of ‘ten thousand gates’ to write about the experiences of our ‘spiritual unfolding’. They also use the beautiful analogy of a ‘sacred garden’, which we enter at different times and through a variety of ‘gates’ in order to search for ‘what is personally real and true’. *The Feminine Face of God* explores the ‘spiritual unfolding’ of several women and their experiences enrich our own. Hopkins and Anderson (1992:72) suggest that

Going through a gate or doorway is a metaphor of immense power, perhaps because it reminds us of how we enter this life. Exiled from the safety of the womb by a hidden timing, sent on a journey through the straits of the birth canal, our passage is fraught with dangers. We can get stuck beneath the pubic bone or strangled by the umbilical cord and never reach the light.

They explore this analogy at length and make a few comparisons between birth and the rigid perceptions of spiritual re-birth that is encouraged by the church. They suggest that the often-quoted verses<sup>113</sup> in which Jesus is recorded to have said that it is the narrow gate that leads to life and the wide road that leads to perdition, give patriarchal religious tradition licence to insist that there is only one way to God.

They continue to explore this significant analogy and introduce us to a ‘mother’s perspective’ in the birth of her child. They believe that

From the mother’s perspective, the gate is as wide as it needs to be. Many arrivals, each one unique and precious, can enter the world through it. And she knows that her gate is only one of many, not only from her experience, but from the intuition that sometimes comes to women during labor and delivery of the unbroken continuity of all those who have given birth from the beginning of time.

Thus two perspectives are potentially available to each one of us: the child’s view that the opening to the sacred is singular and narrow, and the mother’s perspective that the sacred is manifold and wide. If only one possibility is presented to us, however, we may never recognize and value the other. In particular, if we have been taught only the view point of the child, we may deny the experience of the mother, that there are many, many gates to the sacred and they are as wide as we need them to be (Hopkins and Anderson 1992:73).

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<sup>112</sup> Using a title from one of the chapters in *The Feminine Face of God* by Hopkins and Anderson (1992).

<sup>113</sup> Matthew 7:13-14 ‘Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.’

The experiences of most of the women in the working group probably tend to be more in line with what they suggest is like that of the ‘child’. For some even a glimpse of another ‘way’ presented a serious threat to their rigid outlook and understanding of the Christian ‘Way’. At times the manner in which Jesus related to women was discussed in the group but for some of the members, their own inflexible understanding prevented them from recognising any new perspective in the story.

Hopkins and Anderson (1992) also share the insights of a midwife who had delivered more than fifty babies before she fell pregnant herself. The way they describe her experience helps us to value our own journey of discovery. They write that

Giving birth can be an initiation into adulthood as a woman goes through the trials of pain and fear to know the measure of her own courage and strength. It can be a time of intense bonding with a husband and child. And it can also be a time that brings one into a profound sense of sisterhood (Hopkins and Anderson 1992:76).

Some women, during childbirth, experience a sense of kinship with the other millions of women throughout the world who have gone through the same experience as they are having. Many women find it very difficult to describe their feelings afterwards. For some it is a multi-dimensional experience, as it was for one of the women interviewed by Hopkins and Anderson. This woman tried to share her experience with them and they tell us that

“Embodied revelation,” she calls it. “Something I do not have words for happened during that instant of transition,” she told us. “The self that was familiar seemed to descend into a warm, dark pool and dissolve, and in that moment there was a knowing of the sacred through my body. I participated in the miracle of creation and it shifted my consciousness. It changed me.” (Hopkins and Anderson 1992:77)

This powerful analogy has been reflected upon specifically because through this research project it is hoped that a small group of women have been brought into something of a ‘new birth’ experience.

## 4.4 Practical Participation

The introduction, right from the beginning, of sharing in simple rituals every week has encouraged everyone to participate to some extent in every meeting. The participation varied

from week to week. Some weeks members were asked to do some reading preparation, other weeks they were expected to take some time for reflection and on occasion they were asked to complete questionnaires, make collages, collect symbols or bring flowers.

On the whole every member participated fairly regularly in all the activities planned during the twenty-four weeks of the research. Breakfasts were shared regularly, which facilitated informal talking, sharing and fellowship, and a mid-winter celebration dinner took place at which spouses and friends were warmly welcomed.

It is recognised that had the group shown greater readiness and spiritual maturity many more rituals and events might have been planned. However, it had been agreed that this group would move at the pace of the women and although the co-ordinator made every effort to do that, it is recognised that some of the basic theories were even too threatening for the three women who withdrew from the group. It is hoped that more practical participation will be embarked upon if this group agrees to continue on this journey.

## **4.5 Open Meetings**

The first of two open meetings took place in mid-July. Invitations were extended to all spouses of members and to any other people, women and men, to join us for dinner at an open meeting of the working group's mid-winter celebration. Twenty-five people were present and at first it seemed as if everyone enjoyed being and eating together. All except one of the husbands of group members were present. After dinner we shared in a time of discussion where the aims of the working group were outlined and then we opened the floor for questions.

Here I continue with the account, which was begun in section 2.1.2, of the interaction between a leader and the group. A particular male church leader's attitude to the feminist spirituality working group has not been positive. I believe his experience, and his reaction to the challenges that feminist perspectives present to him and in his wife, who is referred to as Lynn in section 4.0 and who was at this stage merely a nominal member of the group, is representative of many men in this community. I consider it essential to mention that this particular man has his own business and that he is probably one of the wealthier men in the

town. His wife did initially accept the invitation to join the working group and although she had only come a few times, her initial questionnaire indicated that she was willing to explore this aspect in her Christian understanding of both God and people.

Her husband, who is the leader in question, had also accepted the invitation to the mid-winter celebration dinner at which any interested folk, women and men, were welcomed. Unfortunately he had come with something on his mind, which he had not discussed with me, or with my husband, before the time. What exactly his motive was is difficult to determine but he successfully managed to derail a very pleasant function.

The previous minister of this local church, who had left the Methodist Church a year ago, had given as one of his reasons for resigning, that the Methodist Church was going to start calling God 'Mother'. The leader, during the open time of questions and discussion, directed a question at my husband (not at me, who was co-ordinating the discussion) inquiring whether this was in fact the case. It needs to be noted, however, that in response to the previous minister's resignation a letter, outlining the Methodist Church's position, was written to the leadership of this church. This man's question needs therefore to be considered in terms of his apparent mistrust of the statement made by the Connexional Executive Secretary. My husband's reply, however, was a sound one, referring to the many names for God and pointing out that God is outside of gender but at the same time has both female and male characteristics. A huge debate followed with the initial pleasant atmosphere of the evening being totally ruined. No matter what anyone said after that 'we (my husband and I) had stepped over the line'.

According to this man, God is 'Father' and that's the way it would always be for him and also for many of the people in this town. I was sorry that the topic had been raised prematurely because the group had not yet been introduced to 'God-talk and Inclusive Language', which had been scheduled to be discussed towards the latter part of the year. I had deliberated painstakingly over the issue and had decided that many of the other aspects of feminist theology would help to prepare the group members for the introduction to the radical concept of God as 'Mother'. This male leader successfully hijacked my careful preparation and I was angry that he had not come to speak to either my husband or to me personally but

rather chose to confront us with the issue in public. Needless to say his wife subsequently withdrew from the group completely, giving what I deem to be a weak excuse, that of being too busy.

The second of the two open meetings took place as usual on a Saturday morning for breakfast. In contrast to the terrific turnout of twenty-five people at the mid-winter celebration dinner, only two husbands and one friend risked coming to the breakfast. Eight of us shared in our usual simple breakfast and the men were welcomed as we went through our usual ritual of building our name and talking about significant events during the past week. The men were included and they too shared something of what their experiences had been during the preceding week. The topic of the day was *Circles versus Pyramids*<sup>114</sup> and the discussion was fairly short. The visitors all serve on the Leaders' Meeting of the church and they were already familiar with some of the theory, as it had been outlined at the first official Leaders' Meeting of the year where circle-style leadership had been introduced.

The purpose of this meeting had been simple and the fellowship experienced was amicable. It needs to be mentioned though that everyone was aware of the impact that the first open meeting had had on the spirituality working group and that the numbers at this particular meeting were less than half of what they were at the first open meeting. The faithful group members were not too perturbed about that because we were fulfilling the task we had set out to accomplish. This kind of affirmation certainly did encourage the rest of the group to continue meeting.

## 4.6 Honesty, Support and Positive Attitudes

A small group, meeting together regularly for twenty-five weeks, cannot but impact on the lives of those with whom one meets. In this small group the experiences of most of the women confirm this.

At the commencement of the research an appeal was made to the group that they endeavour to be as open and honest as possible. This has certainly been the case with most of

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<sup>114</sup> See section 3.7.

the members. As specified earlier in section 4.1, there have been times when some of the members of the group have chosen not to participate but on the whole their attitudes have been supportive even though they have not always been positive.

Something, which has also been discussed earlier, in section 3.23, is the scourge of gossip, which seems to hang over this community. Although what people talk about is not necessarily dishonest or untrue, the habit of discussing people behind their backs often turns nasty and causes pain and discomfort for those who are the topic of such conversation. At times it has been necessary to address such rumours in the group or at least one-on-one with the people who are involved. This has also caused some discomfort for me but once that passed the relationships between us have strengthened.

One practical way in which it was attempted to bring to the people's attention that gossip is damaging and definitely not acceptable behaviour for those wanting to show the love of God to others, was to paste the clipping from the local newspaper concerning gossip in this town on the church notice board. Although no one seems to have said anything about it, people do stand around the notice board after worship services and hopefully they read the articles while they drink their tea.

It would have been good to be able to state that this group has experienced the general support of the congregation and the leadership of this church, but that has unfortunately not been the case. However, some of the group members themselves have offered measures of support to one another and to me. Towards the end of the research period two of the members of the group went on a Christian leadership programme for three days and this gave others in the group an opportunity to affirm them for who they are and to support them with their prayers and practical expressions of love. It was also good to support one of the women, known as Gladys in this project, who had left the group after the first open meeting. After the short course she came to see me and although she continues to agree with her husband, she wanted to indicate to me that a level of reconciliation has taken place in her heart. The relationship cannot yet be where it was some months ago but it is good to be able to report that a positive step forward had been taken.

Three of the group members have unguardedly expressed their positive attitudes towards the group and what the challenges have meant to them. It is recognised that the theory covered in this project constitutes the very basics of feminist thought and so the positive attitudes of these three women are indicators of something that may indeed still come to pass in the future in this community. If three women are willing to continue this exploration this group might still hold onto the vision of becoming a strong voice within the church community in this town.

It would be amiss of me if I did not also discuss my own experience with regard to this section of the project. I have endeavoured as far as possible to be completely open with the members of this group. It is true that I planned the topics for discussion carefully in order to introduce some of the more radical concepts only after dealing with a certain level of the foundation material. Honesty was easy but discernment proved far more difficult. I discovered from time to time that some of the concepts were almost too complicated to impart and clearly more preparation was needed before this group could fully comprehend all of it. It was necessary to accept that some of the seeds would not be able to germinate immediately.

I tried to offer support wherever I could but I need to confess that at times this proved delicate. My position in the church put me in a difficult position and I had to be sensitive to my husband, who often had to bear the brunt of people's complaints. Although my husband supports what I am doing and his beliefs are very much in line with what I am endeavouring to teach this group, his ministry was being affected. We needed to recognise that tradition required that people speak to me through my husband. This was something, which was foreign to us, but something we could not ignore. I do pay a special tribute to my husband as he has done his utmost to support the project and to speak on behalf of the group (and me) to those people who have come to him with their objections.

My attitude, on the whole, has remained positive because I have a firm belief that feminist theological perspectives help us to come as close as we can humanly get to what I believe Christ came to teach and call people to. The difficulties encountered have made life uncomfortable for me but I have been able to make good use of the 'life-lines' offered to me by women friends outside this town, who are like-minded and who themselves are exploring

feminist perspectives. The strength I drew from e-mail contacts and telephone conversations inspired me to persevere and continue with the original disciplined approach to this project.

One major event, which I believe came at exactly the right time, was a retreat with like-minded women in Johannesburg. The retreat director could quite objectively point me in a direction that could help me to hear God more clearly as I grappled with the situation in this town and church community.

The next sub-section will relate some of the little breakthroughs that have happened for members of the working group and these provided bright glimmers of hope and affirmations that God was indeed at work during this research period.

#### **4.6.0 Breakthrough Narratives**

Acknowledging that feminist perspectives were a completely new way of looking at the Bible and at how God relates to people sets the tone of the following stories. The member, who is known as Susan in this project, is usually a fairly quiet woman but at one meeting she was bursting to share her experience with the rest of the members. She is a teacher and during that particular week she and several of her colleagues from her school had travelled together to a meeting. En route they had engaged in light conversation until one of her female colleagues quite innocently made a statement that women were not able to fulfil certain criteria for leadership positions because of their gender. Susan, almost to her own surprise, immediately reacted to such a statement and claimed that nothing should stand in any woman's way because we had all been created with equal ability and talent to those of men. The rest of the group had apparently been quite taken aback with her firm, and most uncharacteristic, response but this started a stimulating discussion and facilitated opportunities for some of the other women to also speak out in favour of women.

Brief mention has already been made of the second breakthrough in section 4.1 but it bears repeating here. Lulu, as she is known in this project, is a keen participant in the working group and in her response to one of the questions in one of the questionnaires, which will be analysed in section 4.8.0, she indicated a willingness to read at least one book on feminist spirituality, as long as the English was not too difficult. This Afrikaans-speaking woman was



unaware that Professor Christina Landman from UNISA wrote in both English and Afrikaans. It was a pleasure to present her with a book, in Afrikaans, during the formal interview<sup>115</sup> and witness her surprise and delight. Each week since then she has shared what these stories have meant to her. The breakthrough, however, that has happened is that quite on her own initiative Lulu has bought another book, written by a traditionally conservative author who has written stories about the same women in the Bible as the one I had given her by Christina Landman. On her own she has begun to do a critical analysis of these two books. She has been able to recognise how they differ in their approaches and also how reading both books has enabled her to make an informed evaluation of the stories of these women.

I believe that the member, who is known as Martha in this project, has also discovered some insights during the weeks of meeting together but I am of the opinion that her personal difficulties have prevented her from sharing some of these with the group. Although it was a confrontational incident<sup>116</sup> when she had told me that she had finally grasped the fact that I was indeed serious about feminist theology, I believe it was a turning point in her attitude towards the working group. She no longer viewed it only as an idle academic exercise in which she was merely helping me out by being part of the research, quite on the contrary I believe she then began taking some of the theory more seriously and it is my fervent hope that she will continue to work with her own perceptions and continue to meet with the group.

It has been exciting to witness these minor breakthroughs and evaluate them in conjunction with the great obstacles these women face every day. It is my firm belief that the Spirit of God is indeed moving in the lives of these women and enabling a new and deeper understanding of who God is to emerge for all the members.

## **4.7 Resistance, Criticism and Alienation**

I imagine it is quite understandable that this section is being approached with a certain amount of apprehension and reluctance. As would be evident in much of the evaluation already expressed in this paper, observations tend to suggest that a large proportion of the

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<sup>115</sup> See section 4.9.0.

<sup>116</sup> See section 4.1.

people in this town are not in favour of equality for women, let alone other marginalised groups of people. It is therefore only with a concerted effort that I strive to remain objective as I attempt to deal with this section.

Feminist scholars have indicated, in various books and articles, that the most resistance to feminist perspectives often comes from women and this also seems to be true in the Eastern Free State. I firmly believe that this may largely be due to ignorance but it continues to play a very big role in the resistance to feminist thought of many women. People in general, in this town, tend to stay in their traditional groove and they fiercely resist any ideas, which may even slightly resemble that of change. Some of the men in this local church, however, seem to want to know what feminist theology entails but many of the women have prejudged before even asking any questions.

I believe that a fear of change<sup>117</sup> also plays a role in both the passive resistance and what has been expressed by mainly the leaders in this local church. One of the Society Stewards<sup>118</sup> actually said to me that the people in this town are too conservative and that they do not want to change. The problem remains, however, that the Christian faith is about calling people to repentance. Repentance is about turning around, changing, starting over or whatever term describes a new beginning. Reflecting on the theory covered in this thesis does confirm that some of the material is radical and for this I do not apologise. It also serves as a reminder that much, if not all, of the material is absolutely compatible with what I believe Jesus did teach, or had He been on earth today, would have taught.

Constructive criticism is probably one of the most helpful tools anyone could hope for and in exploring feminist theological perspectives this could definitely also be the case. It is therefore a great pity that those opposed to some of the challenges presented by these concepts, are unwilling to enter into a debate or even offer constructive criticism. The worst kind of criticism that has been experienced has been that the members, and the co-ordinator, of the spirituality working group have been discussed behind their backs. This kind of gossip is not only destructive but it also can lead nowhere.

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<sup>117</sup> See section 2.1.2.

<sup>118</sup> Member of the Church Executive Committee.

Where open debate could lead to understanding on both sides and alternative methods for raising people's awareness could be discussed, gossip usually perpetuates false perceptions and encourages others to remain closed to any of the merits the subject of the gossip, or the people being discussed, may have. Whereas open debate often facilitates reconciliation, gossip most often fosters alienation. The greatest difficulty in dealing with gossip is that no one takes responsibility for the rumours and when someone does pass the gossip on to the group it touches, they usually cannot or choose not to tell where it originated. One of the usual replies to the question, 'who said so?' is often 'people say that ...' and so it often tends to be very difficult to break a false rumour and even when it seems clear where it stems from, it is mighty confrontational to go directly to that person with such an accusation.

One of the members of the working group, one of those who withdrew after the controversial open meeting, was questioned about what she did and what she had learnt at the feminist spirituality group, when she visited a doctor who is also a member of this local church. Because they have known each other for a long time this should probably not seem like a problem but it is an indication that people in this church are suspicious and/or wary of feminist perspectives. This doctor has not had the courage or the inclination to speak to me about any of his questions about the group but his wife is the one, referred to in section 2.4.1, who quite categorically stated that in her tradition young people are not consulted when decisions, even those that specifically affect the youth, need to be made. With regard to the conflict, which arose directly out of her and some of the leaders' decisions, the youth leader in this local church has subsequently resigned. Although this might be written off as being just one more isolated incident, I believe it is a symptom of a deep-seated problem in this church. Feminist theological perspectives seek to offer a new paradigm for ministry, one that values all people irrespective of their age, gender, ability, position, wealth or status.

It would seem as if the leadership of this local church, and to some extent even the leadership of the wider Methodist Church of Southern Africa, needs to examine its tendency to be exclusive in its witness and ministry. Women, children, the elderly, black and poor people are all part of the whole Body of Christ, not only part of the portion that white males might

agree to allow them to be a part of. I do not believe that was what Jesus ever intended to happen in the church.

As related in section 2.1.1, I have personally experienced a certain level of alienation in this local church because I am the one who is attempting to ‘change things’. My candidature for the ordained ministry has in itself challenged those who resist women in the ministry. The spirituality group, even though the purpose of the group was clearly stated at its inception and the Leaders’ Meeting was informed that this group would work with me as part of this research, has received what I perceive as undeserved and rather negative criticism. Although maintaining a brave front, especially with those people who are supporting and accepting, the journey with this small working group has not been easy. It may be ascribed to intuition but I certainly sense that my husband’s position has been jeopardised by my firm beliefs in feminist perspectives. Again it needs to be stated that had I not embarked on this particular project this year the situation may have turned out to be very different. It is nevertheless the case that the discussions around the original invitation, extended to my husband to remain in this Society<sup>119</sup> for five years, has caused so much tension that he has decided to relieve the leaders of their obligation and to only complete the two years for which his appointment to this Circuit<sup>120</sup> initially had been.

It is acknowledged, at this stage of the project, that the issue of exploring feminist perspectives has become the scapegoat behind which some of the leaders are engaging in their own power struggles. Resistance, criticism and alienation, however, have not completely gained the upper hand. For some members of the group, and more especially for me, the presence of these elements has indicated that there is a real need for change in this community and especially in this local church.

#### **4.7.0 One Gate Too Many**

The ‘fear of change’, as was discussed fully in section 2.1.2, was met head-on at the discussion time of the working group’s mid-winter celebration dinner. A week later one of the

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<sup>119</sup> Similar to a Parish.

<sup>120</sup> Similar to a small Diocese.

working group members, known as Gladys in this project, made an appointment to come and see me. She is an intelligent woman, who teaches juniors by profession, and I believed her to have a deep commitment to growing in Christ and to re-looking at her own image of herself as a woman. We had begun working on a friendship, which I sincerely valued. When she arrived for our appointment I could see that she was obviously distressed and that she found it difficult to talk. Eventually, through her sobs, she blurted out that both she and her husband could not agree with us and that calling God anything other than 'Father' would be totally unacceptable to them. We talked a while during which I affirmed her as a person and assured her that holding different points of view is part of being human. Before she left I prayed with her, we agreed to differ and to remain 'friends' but the parting was strained and our relationship has not been the same since. The fear of change here also resulted in the severing of a new and fragile friendship. She had indicated then that she would need some time away from the group but about a week later she indicated, via her questionnaire whereon she had ticked the box 'Not a Member of *Anaphaino*', that she would definitely no longer be coming to any of the group's weekly meetings.

This woman's experience, and her response to the challenge of feminist perspectives, is probably representative of the attitudes, beliefs and values of all the women who declined the invitation to explore feminist theological perspectives with us, and also of many others in this town. I believe it has bearing on the research to indicate, at this point, that although the weekly discussion programme had been prepared with careful thought, it came to light during the process that those who joined the group heard the words that were being spoken but did often not have the slightest idea what they entailed or even meant. So Gladys, who was so deeply distraught by the thought that God could possibly be called 'Mother', felt justified in her belief that I, the co-ordinator of the spirituality group, had offended her. The group, which she had thought was only going to explore 'the roles of women in the church', dared suggest that God has a feminine side. It was the appointment with her, which alerted me to the fact that although I had been completely open and honest with each person when they were being invited to join the research project, Gladys, and probably others too, heard only what they wanted to hear or what they could comprehend. It has already been said that most of the

women knew very little, if anything, about feminist theology and so it goes without saying that they did not know what to expect. I did not believe that it would benefit the process if I had spelled out, right at the beginning of the project, that one of the aspects we would explore would be the feminine side of God. Most people need some preparation to begin, or to even be willing, to explore this concept. Everyone was given a programme for the year<sup>121</sup> and anyone could have asked me what the terms ‘God-talk and Inclusive Language’, which was scheduled for the end of September, entailed. If that had happened I would gladly have spoken to them about it but the discussion of this issue was unfortunately precipitated by one of the male leaders in this local church at *Anaphaino*’s first open meeting<sup>122</sup>.

Although, as Hopkins and Anderson (1992) suggest, there are many gates into our ‘sacred garden’, for some people the very idea of an unknown ‘gate’ is very frightening. Gladys had been brave to accept the invitation to explore some ‘unknown gates’ and unfortunately the concept, which explores ‘God as Mother’, proved for her to be ‘one gate too many’.

## 4.8 Questionnaires

Research such as this depends heavily on the formal responses of the people with whom one is working. Four questionnaires were prepared for this project and each set will be discussed separately. At times it would be necessary to refer to either earlier or later responses but on the whole each set assesses the progress during the research period, except for the very first questionnaire, which helps to indicate at which point in their spirituality, and in their understanding of feminist perspectives, members joined the group. Although most of the research will concentrate on the experiences of the members of *Anaphaino*, the views of others in the wider community, who have expressed their willingness to complete questionnaires, will be examined in section 4.8.1. Some of these people were also happy to be interviewed and these observations will be evaluated and documented in section 4.9.1.

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<sup>121</sup> See Appendix 5.

<sup>122</sup> See section 4.5.

#### 4.8.0 Group Members

Along with the letter of introduction to *Anaphaino*, the spirituality working group<sup>123</sup> for this research project, the initial questionnaire was given to each member. These were assessed during the first week after the introductory session and some misconceptions were addressed at subsequent meetings in response to the members' answers to the first questionnaire. At times, when the relevant theory was being discussed, reference would be made to questionnaires that would at times bring further clarity to initially confusing concepts, words or even symbols.

The first questionnaire had also been used to assess the views of people who were willing to participate in the research for my honours degree (2001) in 'social transformation from a feminist theological perspective'. As this questionnaire proved very useful, the same questionnaire has also been used to assess the positions of the women who joined this group.

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<sup>123</sup> See Appendix 2.

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE No 1

Please tick ✓ the appropriate block and give brief reasons for your answer.

Gender: Female ☐ Male ☐ Age: Over 50 ☐ Under 50 ☐  
Married ☐ Single ☐ Clergy Person ☐ Lay Person ☐

Question 1. Would you be happy to be called 'A Feminist' ? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 2. Do you attend Church regularly? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 3. Are you a leader in your Community / Church? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 4. Do you agree with Women's Ordination? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 5. You do believe in 'Equality' for both sexes? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 6. Does 'Non-Hierarchical Partnering' appeal to you? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 7. Have you experienced any form of discrimination? YES ☐ NO ☐

Explain: .....

Question 8. Who was the more dominant person in your family? Father ☐ Mother ☐

Reason: .....

Question 9. Should women have access to ALL positions of leadership? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 10. Should girl children be treated differently to boys? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

(Thank you for participating in this research project!)



Assessing the general comprehension of the working group, regarding feminist theological perspectives, was facilitated through this first questionnaire. Of the original eight responses to the invitation seven women returned their forms at the first get-together and as this empirical research is specifically focused on this small group the analyses are being done by exception rather than by comparison.

Three of the seven women were happy to be called 'feminists' and all of them attend church regularly. Four women acknowledged their leadership roles in the church and although two indicated that they were 'servants' and not 'leaders' they both do exercise some leadership in the church. Four women indicated that non-hierarchical partnering appealed to them and three believe that the husband is the 'head of the home'. Four women indicated that they had never experienced any form of discrimination, which alerted me to the fact that they may not understand the term. Some women chose not to answer the question as to whether women should have access to all positions of leadership and only two believe that boys and girls should be treated similarly.

Some of the comments regarding discrimination included statements such as 'being looked down on because she spoke another language' and 'denied access to play in the school band because she was a girl'. It became fairly clear, after checking with the group whether they understood what discrimination meant, that some of the women have accepted their role as 'lesser beings' to such an extent that they themselves have never felt discriminated against. When challenged on some very ordinary aspects of life one woman even shared that she believed that it is woman's nature to be subservient.

The hope is expressed that subsequent questionnaires will show that some of these initial comments will change as these women's perspectives grow and as their horizons become a little wider.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE No 2

Please tick ✓ the appropriate block and give brief reasons for your answer.

Gender: Female ☐ Male ☐ Age: Over 50 ☐ Under 50 ☐  
 Status: Married ☐ Single ☐ Clergy Person ☐ Lay Person ☐  
 Member of *Anaphaino* ☐ Not a Member of *Anaphaino* ☐

\* Please use the reverse side of the page for more space - please number the questions clearly ...

Question 1. Would you say that your understanding of the term 'Feminist Christian Theology' has changed in the last few months? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 2. Would you now be happy to be called 'a Feminist'? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 3. Do you believe your Church practises Gal 3:28? YES ☐ NO ☐  
 ('In Christ there is neither male nor female / Jew nor Greek / slave nor free...')

Reason: .....

Question 4. Has your view of yourself changed in the last 6 months? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 5. Have your beliefs been challenged by the '*Anaphaino*' Spirituality Group? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 6. Are you willing to explore new concepts of God? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 7. Have you experienced any criticism or alienation because you belong to (or support) a 'feminist spirituality group'? YES ☐ NO ☐

Explain: .....

Question 8. Are you able to talk about any new discoveries with your spouse and/or family? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 9. Have your attitudes towards women in positions of leadership changed during the past few months? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 10. Have you been motivated to read more about feminist spirituality? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

(Thank you for participating in this research project!)

Although five women stated that their perception of feminist theology had changed in the first three months, still only three were willing to be known as ‘feminists’ at this stage. Four women believed that the church actually practises Galatians 3:28<sup>124</sup>, which I believe indicates that their perception of gender equality tends to be spiritualised. Four women stated that they had not been motivated to read more about feminist spirituality, which was quite surprising. Four of the women also felt that they had not experienced any criticism because of belonging to the group. Such statements do raise the question of whether they merely ignore the criticism or whether they do not fully identify with the group and therefore feel that any criticism is only being levelled at the co-ordinator and not at them.

Only one member of the group had the courage to say that she was unwilling to explore new concepts of God. Although the others indicated that they were in fact willing to do so, my observation tends to suggest that this is only true when it excludes the feminine aspects of who God is.

It also seems appropriate, at this stage, to mention that one of the women, who indicated that her beliefs had neither been challenged by *Anaphaino* nor had they changed since joining the group, still decided to withdraw from the group when it became clear that the group would explore the “Motherhood” of God.

A number of inconsistencies, such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph, have been detected in the analysis of this questionnaire. I ascribe this to the fact that these women may have an idea that their answers have to be ‘Christian’, which in their spiritual tradition usually means saying what you believe the other person wants to hear. Although this is a personal hunch, my observations throughout the research period have seemed, on a number of occasions, to confirm this assumption.

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<sup>124</sup> That in Christ there is neither male nor female - See footnote 27.

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE No 3

Please tick ✓ the appropriate block and answer questions as fully as possible.

Gender: Female ☐ Male ☐ Age: Over 50 ☐ Under 50 ☐  
Status: Married ☐ Single ☐ Clergy Person ☐ Lay Person ☐  
Member of *Anaphaino* ☐ Not a Member of *Anaphaino* ☐

\* Please set aside a big block of time for this questionnaire - you will probably need to use some of your own paper as space on this sheet may be inadequate ...

Question 1. How would you describe your relationship with God?  
Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor ☐

Reason: .....  
.....  
.....

Question 2. Would you be happy to record your testimony here? YES ☐ NO ☐  
Explain: .....  
.....  
.....

Question 3. Would you describe your life as deeply fulfilling? YES ☐ NO ☐  
Reason: .....  
.....  
.....

Question 4. Do you have a 'spiritual companion'? YES ☐ NO ☐  
Reason: .....  
.....  
.....

Question 5. Does the '*Anaphaino*' Spirituality Group meet any of your needs?  
YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Question 6. Are you able to adequately express emotions regarding your spirituality and experience of God? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....  
.....

.....

Question 7. Have you ever participated in any formal or informal Bible Study course for which you have a certificate? YES ☐ NO ☐

Explain: .....

Question 8. a) Would you be interested in studying the Bible and Theology - either as a beginner or as ongoing learning? YES ☐ NO ☐

b) Have you ever sensed a call from God to preach? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reasons:.....

.....

Question 9. Would you be willing to read one book on feminist spirituality during the next three months? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

.....

Question 10. Are you willing to be interviewed during September? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

.....

Strict confidentiality will be maintained but your name would be appreciated for interviewing purposes.

Name: ..... Suitable Date and Time: .....

*(Thank you for participating in this research project!)*

The third questionnaire attempted to narrow down the responses of the group to their personal experience of God and the development of their own spirituality. On the whole each member of the group perceives her relationship with God as 'good', with the only exception being the woman who withdrew from the group and she views her relationship with God as 'excellent'. Their comments indicated that most of the members are committed to working on their spiritual development and apart from the one who has a belief that she does not need 'anything more' the majority of the women have remained open to new ideas about God.

Most of the members have a spiritual companion with whom they share their discoveries and work through their spiritual growth. It was, however, quite surprising to discover that although only two members (the co-ordinator and a recently appointed Bible study leader) of the group had ever participated in any extensive formal study of the Bible, none of the others indicated a desire to do so. Most of them, except the one who had recently become a leader of a Bible study group, were very happy to merely continue participating in low-key informal Bible study and fellowship groups. One of the hopes expressed in the research design was that this group would get to the place where they recognise the need for some formal study of not only Scripture but also of ecclesiastical history (*her-story*) and feminist theology. It therefore does not seem as if such a course will be supported, at least their responses do not yet, at this stage, indicate such a willingness to study.

The responses to the question of whether *Anaphaino* has met any of the members' needs were on the whole fairly similar. Most of the women enjoyed getting together with other women and this need was indeed met. Some of the women expressed that the material covered 'did not affect them very much'. This has again alerted me to the fact that women in this town have fully accepted their traditional role within a patriarchal framework, to the extent that they cannot even recognise how they are being limited.

In response to whether the members would be prepared to read at least one book on feminist spirituality the comments indicated a hesitancy to read academic books, which are written in 'difficult English'. It was a delight to introduce the Afrikaans-speaking women to the South African author, Christina Landman, who writes in Afrikaans and English and many

of whose books are available from our local public library. Her books are written in lay language and her style is easy whilst her insight remains sharp and challenging.

One of the women<sup>125</sup>, who had recently gone through a divorce, and who stated that she was persevering with the group only because she had committed herself to doing so, has probably been the most honest in her responses to this questionnaire. She was able to state clearly that her life is not fulfilling and that there was definitely something missing. Although she maintains a 'formal' relationship with God and more recently has even accepted the responsibility to lead a weekly Bible Study in the church, she confessed that she does not experience the love of God as real for her. She also acknowledged that the group was not addressing the issues she was particularly struggling with. In her sceptical way, however, she did mention that what she has heard has at times been helpful, even if only in an indirect way. She also indicated a reluctance to be interviewed because she wants to reserve the right not to answer any or all of the questions. I suspect this may have been due to the language difficulty, her being Afrikaans-speaking. However, in her case an exception was made and the interview questions<sup>126</sup> were given to her in the form of a questionnaire and she was at liberty to complete it, responding only to the questions she wished to, and to return the form in her own time.

The spiritual concept of equality, which is discussed fully in section 4.8.1, caused a constant level of what may be termed 'miscommunication' between us in the working group. As was mentioned earlier<sup>127</sup>, one of the members discovered that I was serious about inclusive language when I changed the words of the doxology on the overhead computer at the church. In her mind 'man' or 'brothers' meant 'woman' and 'sisters' too. Her perception is that God is male and therefore women should be happy to be referred to as male too – that's how God ordained things to be – her version and interpretation of the Bible says so. This woman is also the only other member in the group who has studied a formal course through a conservative 'Bible College'. Her attitudes and perceptions had been confirmed and almost cast in stone by this higher theological and all-male authority. It is recognised with deep respect that her courage to risk this journey into feminist exploration has been, for her, at great

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<sup>125</sup> See section 4.1.

<sup>126</sup> See section 4.9.

<sup>127</sup> See section 4.1.

cost. The hope remains that her efforts will be rewarded with an even deeper understanding of God and a yearning to discover more about herself, others and still more about God.

Three women indicated that they were not willing to be interviewed, without giving any reasons. Some people, however, in the wider community were willing and their responses are analysed and documented in section 4.9.1.

An overall observation, when analysing this third questionnaire, was that these women might not yet have the necessary skills to assess their own feelings. Their often trite answers made it very difficult to reconcile that which they wrote down with that which I had observed from their behaviour and participation in the group. It is recognised that some comments may even be expressed subconsciously because many women have been conditioned all their lives to 'please others'. This, however, did mean that many of the genuine feelings, beliefs, attitudes and experiences of these women seldom surfaced. Even in the formal interviews, as will be discussed fully in two later sections (4.9.0 and 4.9.1), most of the women said what I think they believed I wanted to hear. It may be helpful to mention that for most Afrikaans-speaking women, and in some instances this may even be the case for English South African women too, the roles of the 'minister' and the 'minister's wife' are deeply revered. There seems to be an unspoken rule that one cannot offend the minister or his wife (in their tradition a minister never had a 'husband'). This attitude of 'reverence' is still very much a reality in this town and as I have been, to them at least, 'a minister's wife', much of what has been said to me these past nine months needs to be weighed up very carefully, and continuously tested and contrasted with other formal and informal observations.



RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE No 4

Final Evaluation and Reflection

Please tick ✓ the appropriate block and give brief reasons for your answer.

Gender: Female ☐ Male ☐ Age: Over 50 ☐ Under 50 ☐  
Married ☐ Single ☐ Clergy Person ☐ Lay Person ☐  
Question 1. Has *Anaphaino* stimulated your spirituality? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 2. What did you appreciate most about the group?

.....

Question 3. What did you appreciate least about the group?

.....

Question 4. Would you consider continuing to explore feminist spirituality?  
YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 5. If so, would you enjoy working through a book? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 6. Do you have any other suggestions? YES ☐ NO ☐

Explain: .....

Question 7. Would you like to be part of a mixed gender group? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 8. How frequently would you like such a group to meet?

Reason: .....

Question 9. Do you know of people who would join such a group? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

Question 10. Would you enjoy participating more in leading worship? YES ☐ NO ☐

Reason: .....

*(Thank you for participating in this research project!)*

The final evaluation of any project is probably viewed as a standard of whether it has worked or not. I must confess that I was a little reluctant to open these questionnaires because I was not quite sure what I would find. However, the honesty and openness of the group members, at this final stage of the project astounded me. It was as if something inside me declared that 'the process has worked'. All I did was facilitate the discussions and the rest had to be left to God, whom I believe works through the process.

Comments like 'my horizons have been broadened', 'my intellect has been challenged', 'I have been spiritually strengthened', 'passages of Scripture have been clarified', 'I now read the Bible with ardent attention and try to see what it actually says', 'the safety of this small group and the awareness of symbolism have been outstanding', have been most encouraging. Members have appreciated the support of the group and those, who have persevered until the end, have experienced a growing and deeper love for one another. The enthusiasm and trust the group has shared have been highly valued aspects as the members consciously sought to break the habit of gossip in this community. Something that each one did not appreciate about the group was the fact that some of the members withdrew early, 'without seeing the full picture', and also that not everyone was always able to be present.

Only one member indicated that she would not be interested in continuing to explore feminist perspectives in theology and most of the others opted for a monthly or twice monthly meeting in the New Year. All of these women were partial to the idea of working through a book and two of the reasons given were 'to gain even deeper insights into these matters' and 'a hope to obtain new insights by reading works by feminist theologians'. There was an even response to meeting in a mixed gender group. It is acknowledged that there are advantages and disadvantages to both. At the final get-together<sup>128</sup>, the practical suggestions would be discussed and plans for the following year would be put in place.

It was agreed that general and specific invitations would be extended to people in our community to join such a feminist spirituality group. At the final meeting the group members would consider whether '*Anaphaino*' would remain the name of the group.

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<sup>128</sup> See Appendix 4.

Some of the members believe that lay people should play a more active role in leading worship and this is viewed as very helpful information to pass on to worship leaders in this local church. Others, however, are happy to participate in the pew or in the worship/music group.

On a lighter note, it was mentioned that one of the great difficulties during this research period, was having to get up early enough to be at a breakfast meeting at 07h00 on a Saturday morning. All the members have opted for a more reasonable hour of the day and they have also requested whether a mid-week day could be considered instead of a Saturday.

#### **4.8.1 Wider Community**

A belief is expressed that gathering information from people outside the working group, through the same questionnaires, increased the general overview of how people in this area think and feel. Most of the people approached live in this town but a few do live in neighbouring towns, all of which are in the Eastern Free State.

Here too the analysis will be done by exception rather than by statistical comparison. The questionnaires will be assessed in general and not, as was the case in section 4.8.0, after each specific questionnaire.

The wider community was asked only to complete questionnaires 2 and 3 because numbers 1 and 4 were specifically designed for the *Anaphaino* working group. Even in numbers 2 and 3 these participants would at times have had to respond that a specific question did not apply to them. For this reason only the relevant questions will be assessed in this section.

Two of these participants were male clergy persons, both of whom are sympathetic and supportive of the feminist theological cause. Their positive and constructive responses are highly valued as these brought a sense of balance to the exercise as a whole. It needs to be stated that although both are living in the area now, they have both lived in many parts of South Africa and have also visited many parts of the world, sometimes for significant lengths of time. They are both well-read and conversant with feminist theological perspectives. One of these men is my husband and the other is a recently retired minister, who lives in a

neighbouring small town. Their encouraging support and genuine interest in this research project have been of great comfort to me and their experience and willingness to be consulted highly appreciated.

Two of the other participants are local preachers<sup>129</sup> and those remaining are women who were unable to participate in the working group because of previous commitments on a Saturday morning.

Although this research has neither sought to make many comparisons nor has it endeavoured to find the common denominators in people's experiences, something, which has been observed fairly consistently, is that equality is usually 'spiritualised' by most of the women in this area. Even the female local preacher from a nearby town, in contrast with the two male ministers, believes that the church practises Galatians 3:28-29.<sup>130</sup> In many of these women's minds all people are equal, but ONLY in the sight of God. This seems to indicate that when we die, at the end of this life, then we shall all be equal because it is then that we shall all stand before God. This attitude seems to justify, at least for some people, the years of *Apartheid* in this land. The Nationalist-Afrikaans government was probably responsible for instilling, or maintaining, this mindset in the spirituality of South African people. Racism was practised because people were seen to not really be equal in status; not physically, practically or culturally, and most definitely not in this life.

Although everyone in the wider community, who completed a questionnaire, indicated their willingness to explore new concepts of God, one woman did stipulate the condition that such concepts should not be forced upon her. This may have been a subtle attempt of directing a comment at me, to not actively continue to pursue feminist theological perspectives in this community. Such comments, via the questionnaires, have been plentiful. It is once again an indication of the difficulty many women have to be honest, with themselves, with me and/or for the sake of this research. I stress again that I believe this happens subconsciously. On one occasion, when I checked out whether a person actually thought and believed what I had observed, she was quite taken aback that I had perceived her attitude in that light.

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<sup>129</sup> Term for lay preachers, in the Methodist Church, who have completed some theological studies.

<sup>130</sup> See section 3.0 and footnotes 27 and 70.

The outcome, however, was not an open constructive debate but rather a desperate attempt on her side to 'fix things up' in order that I would not think badly of her. My strong reassurance that her beliefs and attitudes were valuable for the research, no matter what they were, did not seem to help her. Harmony, peace and little discomfort seemed the only criteria for her and this too alerted me to the fact that women often accept their oppression for the sake of 'peace'.

The retired minister, who has participated in the questionnaires, is a widower and I wish to pay a special tribute to his late wife, who died of cancer earlier this year. During the first three months of this research period she was a constant source of encouragement to me. In his questionnaire he too was able to pay tribute to her because he acknowledged her encouragement of him to read up on feminist spirituality. This gives me hope for the future, knowing that women who discover greater depths in their quest for wholeness can in turn pass on some of their discoveries to their male partners and others.

On the whole most of the people who completed the questionnaires indicated a willingness to read something about feminist spirituality 'in the next three months'. However, the female local preacher did not. Methodist local preachers are required, according to the Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church, to read widely and regularly and to keep themselves informed about what the current trends in spirituality and theology are. This unwillingness, in my opinion, to even make a personal evaluation of the feminist discipline seems very shortsighted and detrimental to the potential growth of those who will listen to her preach and teach.

As fully discussed in section 2.1.2, it bears repeating that the fear of change is a very real element in the experience of most people in this part of the Free State. It is true that many people would probably not recognise it as such and that they would rather be adamant that all they want is for things to stay just as they are because that's the way it should be. The challenges of feminist perspectives therefore face a wide range of obstacles, those seen and those as yet unperceived.

## 4.9 Interviews

The hope had been held out that during the formal interviews, especially after having had time to build relationships with some of the women, that it would have been possible to penetrate some of the ancient barriers imposed on South African people by their spiritual, political and cultural heritage. This unfortunately has only happened on isolated occasions. It was extremely difficult to remain absolutely objective during the interviews, and to resist not 'putting words in their mouths' when clarifying a point or stimulating their thinking. At times, on concluding an interview, the interviewee expressed a desire to talk further about some or other aspect of the research, but during the interview it was endeavoured to stick only to the questions at hand.

As part of the introduction to this section it would be fair to say that throughout this research period the position of the people in this area has been kept in mind. The fact that this community has been exposed to neither feminist thought nor almost any teaching on true liberation has put these people at a disadvantage. The thought 'there, but for the grace of God, go I,' is something I have been reminded of throughout this exercise.

The failure of the church, through her clergy, to bring the Gospel, in the fullest sense of the word, to these people has been very evident in this research project.

## Interview Questions:

1. What is your most precious memory about being a Christian?
2. What do you appreciate about being a member of the Church?
3. What has your own experience revealed to you about the Church?
4. What has your experience of the Church revealed to you about God?
5. What aspects of the Church would you like to change?
6. What has your own experience revealed to you about things in the Bible?
7. What are some of the teachings of Jesus you find difficult to practise?
8. What are some of your own personal spiritual discoveries?
9. In what way do you think the Church treats women differently to men?
10. What do you think will help the Church to put Gal. 3:28 into practice?  
(*In Christ there is no longer any distinction between female and male.*)

### 4.9.0 Group Members

The formal interviews were scheduled during the last month of the research period. In many respects this exercise was a positive one for the simple reason that it afforded individuals a specific block of time to think and talk about their beliefs and experiences. The one-on-one interaction also facilitated quite a lot of clarifying of some misconceptions, even at this late stage in the process. Some women had been coming to the weekly meetings for twenty weeks without checking out the accuracy of their perceptions. It also provided each person with an uninterrupted time, which seldom happens for anyone. Some expressed their appreciation for this individual attention and, without exception, the visits with each of the women in the group turned out to be both a serious look at spirituality and also a light time of fellowship afterwards.

Here too, as was the methodology used for assessing the questionnaires, answers to the questions will be analysed by exception. Although one of the women preferred to treat her 'interview' in the same as she did a 'questionnaire', her responses will be dealt with in this section, just as if she had also been interviewed.

The interview questions had been designed in order to facilitate the sharing of faith stories. I believe that the journey into feminist perspectives requires of us to tell our own spiritual stories and to recognise some of the unhelpful ways of relating to God and to others, which may have limited our spiritual growth. This quest for wholeness also leads us into learning from one another and to becoming more open to God's Spirit-Sophia for new revelations in our experience of God and in our understanding of Scripture. When, through the interviews, I caught glimpses of this happening for some of the women, the experience was exhilarating.

When the members of the group shared some of their precious memories, those related specifically to being Christians, most of them became animated. Some incidences mentioned were very ordinary whereas others were profound but all of the memories had special significance for each participant. Answered prayers features in quite a few women's responses, some with dramatic consequences. One believed that God had directed her path after her divorce and through a dream had answered her very specific prayers as to where she should live and which church she should join. The stained glass window of this particular church, which she had never before seen, featured so vividly in her dream that when she attended a service there, on the invitation of a friend, she went ice cold as she walked into the church. When she related the story she was still filled with awe at what had happened for her.

For one member the foundations she received in Sunday School were precious to her. A neighbour, who had been a Sunday School teacher, had taken her every week and for that she was very grateful. Friendship and support featured strongly in every person's response as something she appreciated about being a member of the Church of Christ.

The contextual questions, numbers 3, 4 and 6, which I had hoped would evoke how people's experiences have revealed things to them about the Christian Church, God and the Bible were not understood very well. In almost every case I was asked to explain what the



question meant. Even after seriously attempting to draw out the person's real feelings, most of the responses were what I believe they felt they 'should' say. This was especially true about their responses to question 4. There seemed to exist a perception that one cannot say anything negative about God, even if one's experience of the church presented one with a distorted view of God. This just did not happen. The responses skirted all around the periphery of what was really at the heart of the question. At times I was tempted to probe deeper but my initial commitment not to 'put words in their mouths' prevented me, at this stage, from exploring certain avenues. The hope is expressed that in time to come these women would be led into discovering a greater level of openness and honesty in their personal relationships with God. On the whole their view of the Bible was that it was a 'textbook' to live by and their reverence for Scripture was very clear. Most of them still have great difficulty in accepting a feminist interpretation of Scripture and in this area too, hope is expressed that ongoing exploration in the future would offer more information and opportunities to these women to explore the depths of Scripture and fully value its liberating truth. Only one woman risked saying that the Bible teaches that all people can change. Another member referred to role models for women, like Abigail <sup>131</sup>, who were clearly not submissive stereotypes. She acknowledged, however, that she finds it difficult to be like them in this conservative society.

The interviews went very well when members were asked what they would like to change about the church. It seemed a little less personal and caused lots of laughter, which probably provided some light relief in the middle of a fairly serious time of talking together. Most responses included that they would like the people in the local church to become more committed. A whole range of things, covering aspects of leadership, worship, music, buildings, youth and community ministries were mentioned and I believe this was a healthy exercise. If nothing else this question had facilitated a discussion of the local church's structures and of her ministries.

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<sup>131</sup> See 1 Samuel 25:3ff. '(v.3) Now the name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife, Abigail. The woman was clever and beautiful, but the man was surly and mean; ... (v.25) My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; ... (v.32) David said to Abigail, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! (v.33) Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today from bloodguilt and from avenging myself by my own hand! ..." '.

Forgiveness, loving people one does not particularly like, patience and a serving attitude were among the qualities, which Jesus had taught, the women of the group listed as finding very difficult to put into practice in their own lives. The next question, however, helped them to balance their inabilities with their spiritual discoveries. Most of the women had encountered very real spiritual experiences in their Christian lives and it has been a privilege to listen to some of their personal discoveries, especially those they experienced during this research period. One woman shared what the recovery of symbolism has meant for her. As she now reads Scripture, symbols seem to be more prominent because she has become accustomed to looking for them. In her everyday life she has begun to notice the ordinary things around her and on her birthday she placed a few significant symbols on her dining-room table and shared with all her friends what these have meant to her. This discovery, I believe, gives this community enormous hope for the future.

One of the aspects, mentioned by almost all the members of the group, is that the love of God is at the centre of our experience of faith. If this love finds full expression in this community, we might have all the more reason to believe that people could change, and when people change, communities change. In this, I believe, lies our hope for the future.

#### **4.9.1 Wider Community**

The contact with people outside the working group provided a balanced outlook on this part of the research. The two male clergy persons were open and honest and shared their experiences willingly. It was quite humbling to 'sit at the feet' of the retired minister and listen to his wisdom. It was also a privilege to discover that questions, such as these, had not often been asked of him. His affirmation throughout this research project has been highly valued. He expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on his own experiences and trusted that they were valuable for the research project and also for those who might benefit by reading this work.

Both clergy persons expressed their deep desire to see real change come about in the church. Both of them are involved in teaching and training programmes for upliftment and empowerment for people from all walks of life. Their example is one worth emulating. One

of the ways in which the retired minister believes the church denigrates women is in perpetuating the assumption that women's gifts are limited to those of hospitality. I thought this was very well put, much kinder than saying women should always 'pour the tea'.

One of the clergymen expressed his difficulty in putting the teaching of Jesus, to 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,'<sup>132</sup> into practice. The other found it difficult to be tolerant and patient with people, who exercised leadership in the local church, but who were unaware of their own spiritual immaturity and those who expressed an unwillingness to change.

Two of the women outside the working group strongly believe that Paul, in his letter to the Galatians (chapter 3 v.28)<sup>133</sup>, meant that people are only equal in a spiritual sense. Their answers to most of the questions were very 'pious' and they had great difficulty in just being themselves. It is not easy to assess whether this was because of my role as 'minister's wife' or whether they are conditioned to only say 'religious' things in relation to anything to do with 'church'. In both cases they stated clearly that they did not feel oppressed and that they felt this local church was very open to women participating in worship - as long as women do not lead because that is forbidden in the Bible. One of these women is married to one of the wealthiest medical specialists in this town and I believe that her answers flow out of her very comfortable life-style. Nothing does stand in her way when it comes to things money can buy or status in the community. Her attitude to 'the poor' remains patronising and giving handouts probably appeases her conscience. There seems, at least not at this stage, to be no awareness that a commitment to empowerment projects for this disadvantaged community would be more beneficial than packets of second-hand clothing for poor children. This observation is made in humility and with the sincere hope that through careful ministry people, like this woman, would themselves be empowered into a greater awareness of their responsibility in using their resources and an acknowledgement that they are in actual fact merely stewards of God's gifts.

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<sup>132</sup> Matthew 5:44 'But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,'.

<sup>133</sup> See footnotes 27 & 70.

One of the women, who has a senior training position in her secular employment, did recognise that women are not given senior positions in the church. She made a statement that if secular companies can appoint women to senior positions then surely the church should too. This comment was, however, at variance with her perception of women, in general, as subservient and obedient wives who respect the authority of their husbands. I believe that her view represents the views of many women in this area. It also evokes my sympathy because their difficulty is being acknowledged when they try to integrate church and society. This kind of conflict perpetuates all kinds of dualisms and, the one that has already been mentioned, is the idea that equality is a spiritual matter and not a physical, emotional and intellectual matter here on earth.

In conclusion it is noteworthy to mention that the one-on-one interviews with people, even with those who strongly oppose feminism, were positive experiences. I believe it gave people an opportunity to meet with me for a considerable length of time. It was clear that of those whom I interviewed, few had talked at great length to anyone about their own spiritual experiences. I am indeed grateful that through this research project I was able to facilitate such an experience.

## **4.10 Overall Assessment**

The initial apprehension, and almost trepidation, with which this research was embarked upon was probably unnecessary. The material covered was indeed completely new for each person in the working group and that did cause some misunderstandings and did, as mentioned under each theme in chapter three, at times delay the discussions. However, on the whole this research project has accomplished what it set out to do. I believe the experiences of the women in the group, and those of many of the people in this Eastern Free State area, have demonstrated something of the effects of patriarchal domination in church and society. It has been fairly clear that fear plays a significant role in many people's resistance to feminist theological perspectives. Observations have also shown that cultural, political and social heritage influences people's faith. Feminist theology was a completely foreign discipline to almost all the people in this area and the majority of the Christians, with whom I have been in

contact, have an Afrikaans background and their beliefs have been shaped by a dominant NGK<sup>134</sup> tradition, which had largely been influenced by conservative Kuiperism.

The members of the working group have seen changes taking place in their own attitudes and their experiences have stimulated further interest. At the meeting when the group discussed 'a dream for the future', one perceptive member risked sharing that most of the time she was not even aware that women, and other marginalised groups, are being oppressed. Her insight is acclaimed as a small victory for the research. I believe that it is only when people come to such insight by themselves that true change begins to take place. This woman also risked sharing, in response to the question whether she would consider continuing to explore feminist spirituality, that in future, as she becomes aware of issues, she would no longer remain silent.

The difficulties described in sections 4.5, 4.7 and in sub-section 4.7.0 are realities and this research would not be balanced if it did not reflect the fierce resistance to change of the leadership and some of the members of this community. These difficulties have in turn been a catalyst for the members of the working group. When the leadership articulated their resistance to feminist perspectives and incidences happened, which threatened the group, each member of the working group did some personal reflection and most came to the conclusion that the resistance was being expressed mainly due to ignorance.

The responses to the final evaluation questionnaire indicate that each person, including the only one who has indicated that she will not be a member of a group, such as this one, next year believes her spirituality has been strengthened and that she has grown in her view of God and of herself.

Inclusive language and God-talk remain aspects for future discussion as not everyone in the group has been convinced that God could possibly have feminine traits. This, however, has been put in a balanced perspective. Most of the members could hear these theories and start reflecting personally on some passages of Scripture. Some have reserved their opinions where others have said that God could never be anything else but 'Father' to them. It was acknowledged that these views do not alter the overall aspect of true liberation for all people.

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<sup>134</sup> See footnote 74.

The questionnaires and interviews formed a valuable aspect of the research and I wish to acknowledge the contributions of each person. Without them this research would not have been possible. The final section of this chapter will briefly deal with some comments, ideas and suggestions for the future.

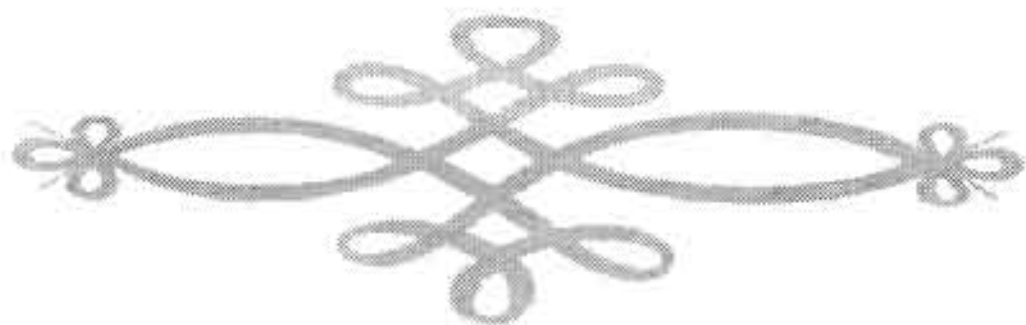
## 4.11 Comments and Suggestions for the Future

Specific suggestions for the future of this working group entail a commitment to ongoing study, reading and discussion. The willingness, and even requests that the group continues, are indications that what has begun in this community has come to stay. As learnt from the final evaluation questionnaire only one member has opted for not remaining part of the group and all the others would like to work through a book. I believe this would be a challenge but one that could bear much fruit. Christina Landman's (1999) book, *The Piety of South African Women*, might be something that appeals to the members of the group and others who will be invited to join the group next year. It is envisaged that a good starting point should be to read a South African author's work. Landman has a very good understanding of conservative Afrikaans spirituality and her insight with regard to its influence on South African women is highly respected.

It may be valuable, for those who wish to participate in such a workshop, to present a programme on the feminine aspect of the Divine. It may alleviate the fears some people have and it may also serve to stimulate greater interest, especially in this local church, in exploring different perspectives of God. Such a workshop, if it receives support, would probably be planned after working through at least one book with a small group.

The next chapter will deal briefly with aspects of spirituality in general, which I believe will be necessary topics for discussion, in any future group that continues to explore feminist theology and spirituality. This chapter has been designed to follow the assessment of the empirical research, in order to address some of the gaps in these people's spiritual experience, which have been observed and identified during the nine months of this research project.

A personal comment I wish to make is that I acknowledge how difficult some of the academic language of Schüssler Fiorenza has been for the Afrikaans-speaking women in the group. I would endeavour to make future workshops and meetings more 'user-friendly' and attempt to relate to members of the group at a level where they are more comfortable.



# Chapter Five : Spirituality

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## 5.0 Preamble

It has been envisaged that this, the penultimate chapter of this project, would address some of the observed gaps in the experiences of the participants in this research. The eight aspects chosen are only some of the areas and these may be, according to my perceptions, the more obvious ones to comment on. They are by no means the only areas that need more in-depth research but they are the ones identified to be relevant for these people, in this area and at this particular time.

This chapter, as proposed at the beginning of this research, has also been set aside specifically to gauge any levels of growth or change in attitudes, beliefs and practices amongst the women of the working group<sup>135</sup>. Although, at times, I shall attempt to examine specifically the spirituality of the women in the working group, most of the comments will focus on the wider community's experience. For research, of this kind, to have a deeper relevance it is deemed imperative to include such observations and assessments in this chapter. Again it is stressed that all evaluations are offered only after weighing up the observations made through the formal collection of data against that, which has been discerned through the informal interaction with people. These observations are therefore a mixture of what has been written down by participants and my opinion, as observed in their attitudes, body language, facial expressions and tone of voice.

The first aspect of these people's spirituality, wherein I perceive some limitations, is in their beliefs, which we look at in the next section.

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<sup>135</sup> See section 5.10.



## 5.1 Beliefs

In many people's minds belief and spirituality are one and the same. I would like to make a distinction between these two concepts, in the same way as the dictionary does. A change in attitude may often affect one's belief but one's spirituality, or commitment to 'holy living', may not necessarily be affected by such a change.

In this section the beliefs of the community, which seem to limit their relationship with God and with other people, is briefly being addressed. The belief that equality is intended to be merely a 'spiritual' reality is something that I sense restricts this community in their attitudes and dealings with all marginalised groups of people.

A belief in the unexamined and supreme authority of white males in their work-place, homes and in their church, prevents people, both men and women, from discovering the greater intended wholeness and the significance of mutual submission<sup>136</sup> in the Christian faith.

The belief that young people do not yet have a role to play in decision-making in the home or in the church has a detrimental affect on the development of the youth and also prevents this community from discovering the true value in viewing 'God as Child'.

The belief, which will be discussed a little more fully in section 5.6, that black people worship their ancestors, poses a severe limit on the development of inter-racial and cross-cultural fellowship and worship.

The belief that women have been created by God to be lesser human beings both denigrates God's creation and prevents people from the discovery that God, too, has both feminine and masculine traits.

The following section continues to explore how people's attitudes often become their stumbling blocks and what some of the causes are of people holding some of these attitudes.

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<sup>136</sup> Ephesians 5:21 'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.'

## 5.2 Attitudes

The initial attitudes of many of the women in the working group were that women had little choice in the matter. They had resigned themselves to being taken for granted or even to being abused. Attitudes of martyrdom were observed amongst some of the women and attitudes of supreme male-authority were prevalent amongst some of the men and women.

Statements that portrayed degrading attitudes towards ‘the poor’, ‘the blacks’, ‘the disadvantaged’ or any other group, which may pose a threat, were sometimes prefaced with a comment such as, ‘I’m not a racist, but ...’. These attitudes limit the people’s discovery of what difference and diversity in relationships could mean. Attitudes of superiority also prevent people from fully understanding what servanthood means. Attitudes towards women, which view them as servants, housekeepers or even only as sexual partners, limit those who hold these attitudes to fully discover God’s intention of wholeness for all of humanity.

A lack of openness to new attitudes prevents people from growing. It has been observed, throughout these past few months, that the majority of people in this town are closed to any new ideas.

Conservative attitudes towards religion, although pious in their appearance, have also caused much pain and heartache in this community. Some people’s rigid attitudes towards divorcees, homosexuals, alcoholics, drug-abusers, beggars and others who have ‘fallen’ have quite unashamedly been what I would term ‘non-Christian’. The love of Christ, proclaimed by the church, is probably also viewed as a ‘spiritual’ love and not something tangible or that which motivates people into social action.

Some of the women in the working group have attitudes towards themselves, which I believe need to be changed. Self-awareness and development programmes, which could help to improve their self-image, are needed in this community.

In this local church there exists an attitude of selfishness, or at least an inward-looking spirit, which I believe should change and become more mission-oriented. An attitude of care and ministry would add value to the purpose of this local church. The leadership of this local church is being challenged on this very issue and there is hope for the future.

The practices of people in this area form the topic of the next section and whilst mentioning that many of these aspects of spirituality dovetail with one another, the value of discussing some of the specifics is nonetheless acknowledged.

### **5.3 Practices**

Regular spiritual practices, by the average Christian person in this community, are probably limited to worshipping on Sundays. Some people, a small proportion of the membership, do belong to a mid-week Bible Study or Fellowship Group and a few people participate in the leading of music for worship.

Some of the identified ‘missing links’ in Christian practice in this community include the practices of silence, retreat, creativity, training and development, empowerment, listening and still others. The introduction to some of these practices has been met with a poor response or a sense of lethargy or apprehension.

Some progress has been made in the area of worship, in which traditional Lenten practices have been introduced and Advent practices are being planned. Circle leadership has been practised throughout the year, in the leadership of this local church, and a creative spirituality course was held over a twelve-week period.

Personal spiritual disciplines have been difficult to assess because most people have not yet been prepared to share their practices at any great length. It seems evident, however, that many people do read their Bible everyday and follow a short devotional guide. This practice could definitely be used as a springboard for further study and development of spiritual maturity.

The section dealing with exclusivism will be dealt with from the perspective of the community as a whole and not only from this local church’s viewpoint.

## 5.4 Inclusivism versus Exclusivism

On reflection it would seem that every aspect of spirituality needs to address this ancient attitude towards 'the other'. This, I would suggest, is indeed the case. When any group is excluded it is usually done because of an assumption of power over or as the result of an attitude of superiority.

The English language, as has been reflected in much of religious, political, social and legal documentation, completely excluded the use of the female gender. This practice was accepted for centuries, so much so that many women, especially in this community, do not even think that there is anything amiss in it. One woman declared that God ordained it that women too should accept to be known as 'men', 'brethren' or other generically male terms for humanity. Her argument for this belief was very clear in her mind because that is how the Bible is written. When some women insist on being referred to as 'women' or 'she', they are being labelled as radical feminists. Openness to inclusive language is not yet a reality in this town, even though the secular world is being prescribed to by legislation.

Some of the leaders of this local church have actively resisted two changes, the one being of the words of a hymn to be inclusive of women and men, and the other the addition of a new doxology, which is more inclusive in the language used to address God. The words of the hymn on the overhead computer have been changed back to read 'he' and 'brother' and only the old doxology is being sung when I am not preaching.

Exclusivism, however, is about much more than language. The life-styles of people in this white and predominantly Afrikaans-speaking community speak of a kind of exclusivism that is almost oblivious of anything outside of itself. The heritage of *Apartheid*, still fresh in many of these people's minds and mindsets, shows that they still believe that groups should live separately. Their patronising attitudes to black and poor people and their lack of sensitivity in their racist humour endorses that a change of heart has not yet taken place for many of the people in this community. These attitudes and beliefs are therefore very much part of this local church's practice because the people are the church.

Oppression or exploitation of ‘the other’, as perceived in class, race, creed, nationality, age, ability, gender or in any other tendency towards grouping people, needs to be challenged whenever it is recognised. It is acknowledged, however, that this kind of exercise needs to be approached with sensitivity and with patience. That it needs to be done though is not an option.

Such a discipline, I believe, will flow over into the spiritual growth of individuals as well as that of a community, and this will be explored in the next section.

## 5.5 Spiritual Growth

A description of spiritual growth would probably differ from person to person. A definition of spiritual growth I would wish to offer includes aspects such personal discoveries, a wider understanding of the nature of God and a more tolerant acceptance of others. It would certainly incorporate a broader understanding of Scripture and an attempt to do contextualisation and reconceptualisation of both the Bible and of the Christian Church.

The gaps identified, in this community, include aspects such as a willingness (or perhaps ignorance) to remain in the same spiritual position as their *forefathers* had been for the last three-hundred years. In all sincerity it should be mentioned that this might indeed be unawareness rather than a conscious choice. It is hoped that with increased opportunities to impart information to these people, some of these insights will dawn on them.

Another serious block to spiritual growth is the lack of commitment to mission. Any growth that does take place in this local church often is internal and/or inward growth. The church is financially very sound, but giving very little back to the community. And, when it does give, it seems to be spending money mainly on social events for the people within the local church or on entertaining the fringe members. The small country Societies<sup>137</sup> that are struggling financially are ignored most of the time, and it is only when they are perceived to be causing a financial drain on the stronger central Society, that anyone gives them a second thought and then it is usually a critical one.

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<sup>137</sup> Similar to Parishes.

Power, status, position and competition seem to be main stumbling blocks to spiritual growth in this local church community. This kind of struggle is also not only evident amongst the men but it has spilled over into some of the women's circles too. I believe that gossip feeds this kind of conflict and it has proved to be hugely destructive and most unhelpful to any aspect of ministry in this local church.

Rigid exclusivism, when it comes to Christianity, is also responsible for great blocks to spiritual growth. The narrow attitudes of many people that determine, on God's behalf who can be saved, is something this community will soon have to deal with in our new plural South African Society. This aspect of spiritual growth introduces one of the key stumbling blocks to spiritual 'ecumenism' in Africa, as the next section will show.

## 5.6 Western Spirituality contrasted with African Religious Zeal

If I have heard it once, I have heard it said a thousand times, that African black people worship their ancestors. Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes convincingly about the place of the ancestors in black people's experience and understanding of religion and faith. She maintains that

In Africa, where one's forebears retain an ongoing interest in one's affairs and continue to be involved long after they have departed to join their forebears; precedence has a strong hold on the regulations of ethical life. Is Jesus our ancestor, the quintessence of a life of faith? If so, then one begins to formulate Christology in terms of mediation and of participation in the divine-human axis that links humanity to divinity (Oduyoye 1988:38-39).

She supports her debate with reference to African black people's powerful belief in the spirit world. She relates how evil is a reality in Africa and that it is often 'embodied in persons as well as unleashed on people by spiritual forces' (Oduyoye 1988:38). She believes that

God created not only the palpable world but living spirits whom we do not see but whose presence we certainly feel and who, we believe, definitely impinge on our lives for good. They are the servants of God, a sort of intricate administrative and executive service managing God's business in God's *oikos*<sup>138</sup> (Oduyoye 1988:38).

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<sup>138</sup> House or dwelling, in the sense of God's household.

African black people's traditional religion therefore has an ethical base which most of the early Western Christian missionaries missed. The contextualisation of the Christian religion for Africa has been an essential journey towards an authentic faith for black African people. The African Independent Churches recognised that their heritage was being lost and they broke away long ago in order to regain their own heritage and retain what I believe is a balance between African Traditional Religion and the Christian Faith.

Western spirituality, as is found in many English-speaking and predominantly white communities throughout the world, often tends to be rigid, conservative and exclusive. Even though a liberal viewpoint of the Christian religion has existed for many years, the percentage of Western Christianity that embraces an open perspective and way of thinking remains fairly small. Conservative Christian communities often exclude even other Christians, whose views differ or are more liberal, from those of their own conservative group. This has in fact happened for us in this Free State town. As mentioned in section 2.1.1, the pastors' forum, which is made up mainly of conservative Afrikaans denominations and 'Christian Centre' breakaway groups, has excluded my minister-husband on the grounds of his openness to Roman Catholicism and people of other faiths.

A major difference between Western and African spirituality is evident in their expressions of worship. The traditional African way of worship is accompanied with drumming and dancing whereas Western worship is decorous and often even dreary.

We have evidence of changes in what has been known as 'charismatic' worship in many Western Christian communities, where drama, dance, musical instruments and other expressions of worship are becoming common practice. These manifestations are appearing in some mainline denominations but on the whole African black people have an exuberance, which seems to be absent in most Western communities.

Taking a serious look at traditional African spirituality also helps to make one aware of other cultures and also of others' faiths. The next two sections briefly outline what some of the limitations are in the attitudes of the people in this town towards people of another culture, who express their belief in God differently to the way they themselves do.

## 5.7 Cross-Cultural Integration

The first lack of cross-cultural integration, which comes to mind, of the people in this community, is that this local church is part of what is referred to as a 'Geographic Circuit,'<sup>139</sup> which means the 'black' and 'white' congregations are managed by the same Circuit Executive Committee. This also means that these various Societies are expected to meet together regularly and at times even worship together. When such meetings and worship services are planned the attendance from the 'white' sector of the Circuit is minimal. There might be several reasons for this but a strong suspicion exists that traditionally conservative theology is to blame. Much of the discussion that precedes this section has touched on some of the other gaps in spirituality, which share the blame.

The complete lack of integrated liturgies is another aspect of cross-cultural ministry that needs to be addressed in this local church. It does not seem as if white Afrikaans-speaking people generally think about meeting the needs of black people when it comes to worship. At an integrated service, even though there were probably one-tenth white and nine-tenths black people present, only one hymn was sung in the vernacular of the black people present. If, however, the service had been planned by any of the local leaders, all the hymns would probably have been in English.

It is noteworthy, I believe, to mention that all probationer ministers in Phase I now have to do one year of cross-cultural training in a Circuit where they work with people from a different culture to that of their own. It is hoped that this exposure might help them gain experience in imparting cross-cultural values to their future congregation members.

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<sup>139</sup> Diocese, which is divided according to geographic location and not by racial identity.



## 5.8 Inter-Faith Awareness

Although in some ways similar to the previous section, inter-faith exposure poses a more serious threat to many conservative Christian people. This has certainly been my experience in this community. A new mosque is being erected in the centre of this Eastern Free State town and this has caused great concern and even a fear of Islam in the minds of some of the people.

It was this expansion of Islam, which indirectly caused the forced withdrawal of my husband from the ‘Christian pastors’ forum’. They wanted to denounce the work of the Muslims in the community and when my husband could not agree with the wording of the press release they wanted to place in the local newspaper, they branded him as ‘not being a Christian minister’.

My inter-faith experience in the city, where I ministered before coming to this small town, taught me much about respecting people of other faiths. This respect does not detract from my deep commitment to Jesus Christ, quite on the contrary. I believe that mutual respect for one another’s faith is a mark of greater maturity and one that witnesses more sharply to the love of God than exclusion does.

It is my belief that educating, informing and discipling this community is what it is going to take to get people to the point of acknowledging that other people have a God-given right to choose how to worship and relate to God. Witnessing for Christ should never belittle or degrade anyone’s belief or faith in God, as they perceive God. Even Jesus Christ Himself never did that. His interaction with people from other cultures and/or other faiths was always deeply respectful.<sup>140</sup> In these two references to a Canaanite woman and a Roman centurion, Jesus acclaimed them for their great faith. It might be good for us to take note and treat all people with greater sensitivity.

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<sup>140</sup> Matthew 15:22ff. ‘(v.28) Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as your wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.’ and Matthew 8:5ff. ‘(v.10) When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.’

It has also been part of my experience that people of other faiths often have a greater level of compassion for those who have less and who suffer much. Working with others on an inter-faith AIDS challenge reminded me of the great capacity to care of Jewish, Muslim and Hindu people. It was sad to acknowledge that all many of the Christian groups had done was form committees, where many of the other faith groups had already established clinics and community centres. We can definitely learn from one another.

As already implied, I do not believe my Christian commitment needs to be compromised when I serve on an inter-faith commission. My spiritual formation will be challenged and my relationship with God becomes more finely tuned when I become more sensitive to others and to my own beliefs and practices. The next section of this chapter deals with how formal spiritual formation can take place or be encouraged to mature.

## **5.9 Formal Spiritual Formation**

In this chapter, where some of the identified missing links have been discussed, it probably seems natural that the kind of formal spiritual formation suggested here would somehow embrace a feminist theological perspective. As feminist thought has formed the main standard by which the gaps in these people's spirituality have been identified, or often found wanting, the hope is indeed expressed that the criteria of wholeness for all people would be considered here.

It was mentioned earlier, in section 2.1.1, that some of the women who joined the working group lacked some of the basic formation in their Christian spirituality. During the research period it became clear that to a certain extent this was a distinct advantage because their formal spiritual formation could now be done from a feminist theological perspective. In each person's case, however, they might have some perceptions of God, of the church and of people that may not be entirely helpful and it is recognised that it would take time and effort to bring about some of the necessary changes in their attitudes and beliefs.

How they perceive God influences how they perceive themselves and their relationship with God influences their relationships with other people. It may therefore be essential to encourage people to examine their view of God. As Christian ministers we have a great

privilege and, I believe, a responsibility to teach people about God. When people grow in their perception of God one has begun to broaden their concept of spirituality and they in turn begin to take greater responsibility for their own development.

Sound Bible Study programmes and regular teaching on aspects of Ecclesiastical History and Doctrine are all-important components of formal spiritual formation. Catechism should not end at confirmation but post-confirmation training should be part of all Christian people's spiritual formation. Workshops on leadership, worship, personal devotions, preaching and teaching should all be part of every church's regular calendar. Feminist theological perspectives should form part of every aspect of life, in the church and outside it. It should become a part of life, both formal and informal.

## 5.10 Summary

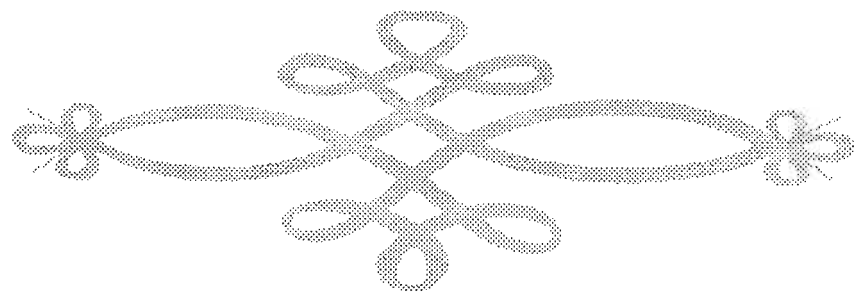
Writing a general summary on a chapter, such as this one, requires a special kind of objectivity and an ability to identify the aspects that seem absent in people's experience of God. The hope is expressed that a balanced view of the experiences of the members of the working group has been presented throughout and that, although their experiences have indicated a lack of feminist awareness, their commitment and dedication to exploring new concepts of God have been imparted adequately.

Each aspect of spirituality, dealt with in this chapter, has focused on what has generally been omitted in people's spiritual formation and experience of God. On reflection, I believe, it is also important to note that the women who persevered with the working group have become strengthened in their spirituality. As the weeks went by and new information was constantly being imparted to them, the women became more and more aware of some of the 'missing links' in their own spirituality. Although not all the topics, covered in this chapter, were addressed and the discussions did also not include direct reference to many of these aspects of spirituality, some of them were touched on. This chapter, however, would most definitely form part of 'the hope for the future' discussions, at the final session of the working group but more especially in the formation of the new or 'second-stage' spirituality group. It is also acknowledged that not all these aspects of spirituality could be dealt with at once. Again a

commitment to a slow journeying together is what is called for. As events and opportunities present themselves, people need to be encouraged and made aware of what is taking place within their own experience and within that of the church community in general.

Although some of the women in the working group may have started out on this journey with fear and trepidation, all of those who gathered for the session on ‘The Dream ...’ expressed their appreciation for what this journey has meant to them. Each one of them has become aware of some of the gaps in her own spirituality and this realisation, more than anything else, has been a stimulating factor in their desire for ongoing exploration and discovery.

It is therefore possible to attempt the final conclusions in this next, the concluding chapter of this research project, again with excitement and a keen sense of anticipation.



# Chapter Six :

## Final Conclusions

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### 6.0 General Overview

It does not seem possible to do justice to almost a year's work in just over two hundred pages. However, the climax of this project, as reflected in the final evaluation questionnaire, almost does that on its own. Everything discussed, explored, pursued or struggled through has become part of what I view as a successful journey into wholeness. Are there still many unopened doors? Absolutely, but the hope for the future now lies in a small group of women's greater willingness than ever before to explore, discover and pursue avenues of spirituality.

The positive culmination of any research project holds out hope for those who come afterwards. To them I give a word of encouragement to persevere against all the obstacles that may come their way. This project reflects an apprehensive beginning, a period of intense struggle and even a momentary consideration of abandonment, it contains moments of regret and disappointment and some of these pages have been written through the blur of tears. All these emotional experiences have contributed to an extensively intellectual challenge and to the intensive spiritual stimulation that this research has been. Not one part of this work has been worthless. Even the mistakes have been valuable because they have taught others, and me, something more of human nature and, very especially, something more about relating to God and to one another.

This research has added another dimension to an incomplete autobiographical sketch, it has brought us to a point where it needs to be acknowledged that some of the objectives have not only been reached but even more than envisaged originally has taken place, and most of the aims have been achieved. A small group of women in the Eastern Free State have been exposed to gender inequality and they are committed to continue exploring the critical questions of male domination and the effects of patriarchy in church and society. Many of

these women's individual expectations have been fulfilled but more so, some new ones have been stimulated through their more recent discoveries about themselves, others and about God.

This research has reviewed the Dutch spiritual heritage of Afrikaans women and challenged the survival of the severely outdated local brand of Calvinism in South Africa. As someone who was born into an Afrikaans-speaking family I have shared my story in the hope that my experiences will, to some extent, resonate with those, especially the ones related here, of the women who have worked with me on this project. Fear and guilt were examined extensively and especially some of the aspects of the fear of change have been referred to throughout the project.

Various forms of feminism and theological liberation movements have been discussed and their origins and purposes evaluated. Particular attention was given to the question of Afrikaans feminism and a conclusion was reached that Afrikaans-speaking people, women and men, are growing in their awareness of equality. This is happening in the educational, political, social and religious sectors of South African society. The impact of African and other Third World feminisms was evaluated and it was recognised that most cultures, throughout the world, have for centuries existed and operated within a patriarchal and male dominant system. It was also recognised that many European colonial empires exerted pressure on the missionary efforts of the Christian Church and Christianity was therefore seen to be synonymous with colonial oppression and exploitation.

Some theories regarding alternative expressions of theology and a greater awareness and understanding of wholeness for all people were examined. The issue of developing an authentic Christology presented a challenge to those in theological academic institutions as well as to those who are developing their own personal understanding of the Christ/a of God. Observations indicated that the majority of white and mainly Afrikaans-speaking women in the Eastern Free State were not open to suggestions, which may cause ripples in their very comfortable life-styles.

The twenty-four weekly discussions exposed a small group of women to various aspects of feminist theological thought and practice. The recovery of symbolism and emphasis on ritual played an important part in this regular exercise. Practical participation

was regularly encouraged, open meetings with spouses and interested people were held and a worship service for National Women's Day was planned and led by the working group for this research project. Members of the group were encouraged to read wider than the material presented each week at the group meetings. The women were reminded, countless times, that feminist theology is a discipline and a quest for wholeness for all people regardless of their identity, gender, status, race, age or any other mark that might separate them from one's own. They were also reminded that feminist theology, much like the liberation theology that eventually succeeded in helping to break down the system of *Apartheid*, is a reality that will not go away.

The main purpose of this project was the endeavour to regularly engage, through an intensive empirical programme, with a small group of women in an Eastern Free State town. These women, known to us by pseudonyms, were introduced and their responses to various questionnaires and interviews were assessed and evaluated. At times some of their and others' responses have been recorded verbatim for the purpose of this project. At other times observations and reflections of group and open meetings are expressed and commented on. Openness and support for this research were juxtaposed with resistance and criticism and both sides of the coin were aired and examined.

Where possible, views of those within the small working group have been balanced with those from the wider community. This exercise has enabled me to evaluate whether merely providing more information has stimulated a deeper understanding and also whether that aspect has facilitated growth. The answers to the questions in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> questionnaires indicate that those within the working group responded with more insight to some of the issues than those who had not been exposed to some of the information shared at the weekly meetings of the group.

The support and encouragement by two male ministers were deeply appreciated and the balance between lay and clergy perspectives was acknowledged as important in any research of this kind. The growing awareness of growth taking place in the lives of the members of the working group was often nothing more than a glimmer but the overall evaluation, at the penultimate meeting of the working group, was almost overwhelming. The

hope for the future is now more than a mere 'hope'; it has become a reality. The quest for wholeness will continue in this community and others will be invited and encouraged to join this small group of brave and excited women.

Even whilst riding on the crest of the wave of an exciting breakthrough, it is acknowledged that this research project has identified many areas of need in the spirituality of people in this town. Some of these needs, or gaps as they have been called in this project, include people's general beliefs, their attitudes, exclusive practices and their fear of black African spirituality and/or of other faiths. Some indications for formal spiritual formation have been suggested and the growth in the spirituality of the women in the working group has been monitored.

One small realisation by one Afrikaans-speaking member of the working group, that they may not even be aware of being oppressed, is perceived as a major breakthrough. The greatest value of her comment is due to the fact that it came spontaneously from her, not from a book or from the co-ordinator of the group. The other women in the group listened attentively to her and their reaction stimulated a lively discussion.

The hope is expressed that these women are thinking deeply about God, about the Bible and about themselves and that their own discoveries are going to spill over into other groups, both secular ones and within the local church, where they are active. The insights gained by these women have influenced this research and therefore contributed much to some of the new insights I have gained by working with them. These insights will be shared in the next section.

## 6.1 Insights Gained

As quoted earlier, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001:242) summarises her contribution to *Talitha cum! – Theologies of African Women*, by writing that

There is a vulnerability that does not empower but simply adds to the oppression of women. We need the power of God to transform this and work for its elimination. We may be able to articulate the true meaning of power by following the model of Jesus Christ. We may even be able to demonstrate how this transformed power works, but to transform the mentality of those who lord it over others, we depend on the power of the Holy Spirit.



Oduyoye's statement, in which she declares our dependence on the power of God's Holy Spirit-Sophia, resonates strongly with a renewed insight for me this past year. This is not something that is completely new because time and again I have been reminded of this very truth. I begin here, however, because I wish to build all other insights gained around this most central insight to this research.

Feminist theological perspectives, I believe, are ongoing revelations from God. When research opens up passages of Scripture, which have largely been misunderstood or misinterpreted for centuries, then I suggest that God's Holy Spirit is at work in those scholars' minds and reasoning. When feminist theologians commit themselves to many years of intense study, research and deliberation with others, then I expect God to speak through the books they write and through other aspects of their work.

In preparation for this research and throughout this research period I have read and consulted many sources. Although I have not used direct quotes from all the resources listed in the bibliographical reference list, which is appended to this dissertation, all of them have in some way or another influenced my thinking. I have read as widely as possible and I have discovered many synchronicities along the way. I believe that when one author suggested an idea, and another later confirmed the same idea, that God was at work in the books and articles I was consulting. New insights have been gained in creation and creative spirituality, I have been led further along the road in contemplative spirituality and I have also attended a retreat on rediscovering the 'Wild Woman' within. These have been some of the personal growth points for me this past year and once again I need to declare that the discipline of study has served to remind me how much more there is to learn, discover and experience.

Working with a small group of women for twenty-four weeks has had a profound effect on me. Some of the insights I have gained through this exercise could not have been achieved in any other way. I therefore, at this point in the research, can affirm that the qualitative research paradigm has a definite place in working with people. Regular contact with a few women caused something almost inexplicable to happen. Relationships were formed and trust was built up, which I sense that very little will be able to shake. An insight, which took months before it was recognised and actually only came through in the twenty-

third week, was that the process could be trusted. Only at this stage was it possible to believe some of the comments, uttered by scholars who had embarked on this kind of research before me. It is therefore very tempting for me, like it must have been for them, to offer encouragement to those who may read this work before embarking on similar research of their own. “Trust the process, but most of all, risk the journey.”

An insight, which was given to me quite specifically, came from the wife of the retired minister in a neighbouring town in this area. As mentioned earlier, she died of cancer before the culmination of this project. Her encouragement of me was carefully packaged with the caution that it was not what we endeavoured to teach others, but how we attempted to put it across that mattered more. Her wisdom has been my constant companion, especially during the very difficult period of experiencing criticism and alienation from the leaders in this local church. The commitment to finding ways to show love to those who misunderstand or disagree with me was not easy but it was recognised that it was the only way forward. Just this week my husband mentioned to me that the leader, who had caused the uproar about ‘Mother-God’, told him that he had bought a book on feminist theology. I do not yet know who the author of this book is but the mere fact that he shows, in even the slightest way, a willingness to explore what feminist theology entails, has confirmed for me that love overcomes hate.

Although there are many more insights, gained through this research, I wish to conclude this section with an insight into what Schüssler Fiorenza refers to as ‘a new sisterhood’. When a small group of women meet together regularly such a sisterhood is formed. This group will continue to endeavour to be inclusive and the only reason the members will all be female is so that women can relate to one another on a similar level and support one another when open and mixed gender meetings are planned. It is in a group, such as this, that I believe one feels safe and can be encouraged to risk more and also to gain more.

Insights gained are also fairly closely linked to aspects for future research because it is very often the case that during the research the new insights spark off a thought for future research. The next section briefly lists some of these aspects with the hope that the quest for

wholeness for all people will be continued as these and many other topics are researched and developed.

## 6.2 Aspects Identified for Further Research

Several aspects, mentioned throughout the research period, have had to be glossed over or merely referred to and these would hopefully form relevant topics for future research, with specific reference to the quest for wholeness for all people. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of any project and one, such as this, is no exception. To even attempt to deal with every facet of feminist theology would have been an impossible task and therefore the following suggestions are put forward for ongoing research:

1. How to motivate people to educate themselves through study and reading.
2. Examining the exploitation of domestic workers and its relation to racism.
3. The effects of violence in modern society on spiritual experiences.
4. The loss of the art of 'play'.
5. Relating to God as 'Child'
6. Consumerism in the third millennium.
7. The roles of men in the church and how their liberation is linked to that of the liberation of women and all marginalised groups of people.
8. Women in the parables of Jesus.
9. An in-depth study on the language we use for God.
10. How to deal with alienation in a conservative community.
11. A study on the impact of women's movements on feminist theology.
12. Linking the liberation from *Apartheid* to that of women's liberation.
13. The role of the youth and their perception of feminist theology.
14. Examining alternative role models for women in the Bible.

These suggestions have flowed out of some of the discussions and observations during this research period and it is acknowledged that these are only fourteen topics on an unwritten list of many others that could assist to inform communities of the need for social transformation in both church and society.

Although not listed, the lack of cross-cultural and inter-faith integration of spirituality in this community would probably be good additions to the list. The only reason for not including these aspects on the list is that there are some less controversial but vitally important aspects, which I believe need to be dealt with first.

## 6.3 Wrapping Up

The overview has briefly covered much of the purpose, which this research project set out to accomplish. The hope, expressed in the research proposal for this project, that this small working group will grow into a strong voice within this local church, has not yet become a reality. However, this hope remains because the group has opted to continue to explore life-affirming attitudes. It is believed that when others, especially those within the leadership of this local church, perceive that this group did not die when the research was drawn to a close, that their voice would indeed grow stronger.

After originally indicating that they were not really interested in formally studying the Bible, two of the members have now committed themselves to participating in a thirty-four week Bible Study programme next year. I believe this confirms that a desire for more formal biblical education has been awakened in these women as part of the development of their spirituality.

At this point I also deem it necessary to mention that I had almost fallen into an obvious trap. Although it was clearly stated in the research proposal that success or failure of this research would not be measured according to whether the group members were positively disposed to feminist thought or not, the tendency to view resistance as failure has crept into my perception. I believe that, at times, this personal inclination will be noticeable and it is ascribed to the common assumption, which still affects me too, that anything negative is perceived as either wrong or a failure. I do, however, also assert that serious attempts were made to remain as objective as possible when discussing some of the criticism levelled at us from the outside and the subsequent withdrawal of two of the members from the group.

I believe that the overall value of this research has been in the discoveries shared by the women as they have met together and talked around new concepts of God and struggled through some new understandings or aspects of faith. Although deeply committed to wholeness for all people, I acknowledge that the people, who have opposed this project and have criticised the feminist approach to theology, have contributed equally to the analyses and evaluations throughout the months of this research.

As is the case in almost everything else in this life we too have the advantage that the final chapter of this research has not yet been written. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993:353), in the closing chapter of *Discipleship of Equals*, shares with us the following quote:

I know that Spirituality when it comes together in all the Indigenous people ... will make one big circle. ... Spirituality is not just held by Indigenous people. I believe that Anglo people have that too. ... If they could just find that – backtrack far enough to find out where the breakdown happened. Then I think, that they could join the Circle, if they wanted ... if they wanted it enough. I think that's the only way we can seek justice and find justice. Through Spirituality.

- Geneva Platero, Diné Navajo<sup>141</sup>

I must believe that this is true for Afrikaans people too. If they, and more especially the people in this local church and local community, could carefully and critically examine their heritage, as we have endeavoured to do during this research period, many more will come to the realisation that there could indeed be hope for all South African people. This hope would be manifest in their willingness to grow in their understanding of one another, in their view of God and in their tolerance of people of all races and also those of other faiths.

All that remains to be said, at this final stage, is that the dream continues to be held before the women in this town, especially those who have commenced on this journey into wholeness. The constant hope, however, that all people, in church and society, will be given the opportunity to experience the fullness of life<sup>142</sup>, as offered in Jesus Christ, remains a goal worthy of pursuing. Landman (1999:87) suggests that

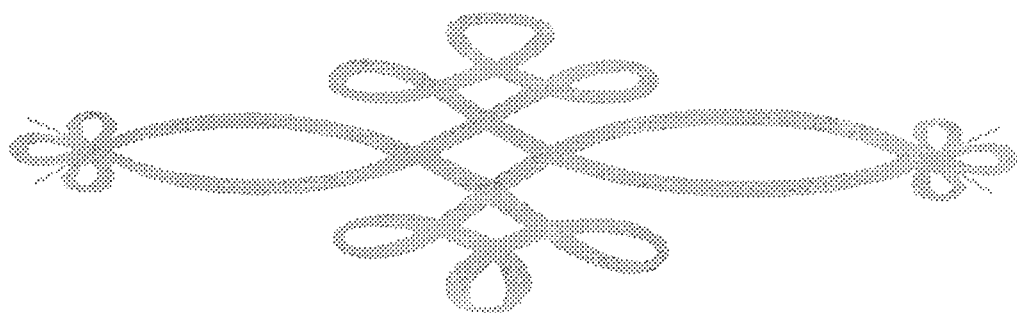
A liberative piety emphasises that Christ has already saved us by giving us a new life and thus by empowering us to change the attitudes as well as the structures which inflict hurt on people, such as hierarchies in which men dominate women, and power games in which people of different races dominate others.

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<sup>141</sup> "To Tell the Truth: an Interview with Geneva Platero by Rosalinda Catitonaui Ramirez," *Common Ground* 6 (1992:46).

<sup>142</sup> John 10:10 - See footnote 40.

Such a liberative spirituality would continue to be the goal of this small group of women, who have set their sights high and who have committed themselves to sharing their insights with others. Together we bravely overcome all our fears, take on the hierarchical structures of at least this local church and together we proclaim that what Christ came to share and call people to is not about domination or oppression but about life, and life in all its fullness.



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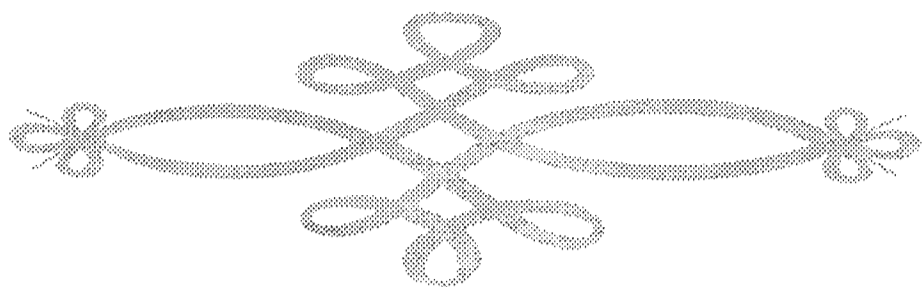
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## INVITATION



11 March 2002

8 Koedoe Crescent  
**LA PROVENCE**  
 9701 Bethlehem  
 ☎ (058) 303-0635

Dear .....

I am writing to invite you to join a breakfast group, which will meet weekly from April to October this year. At the moment I think a Saturday morning will probably be a good time for most of us - strictly from 07h00 to 08h30!

Those who accept will become a working group with me and the following aspects will form part of the purpose of the group:-

1. Spiritual growth and a deepening of our understanding of God.
2. Exploring and developing Feminist Theology, as a discipline, which strives toward wholeness for all of humankind.
3. Sharing our experiences with one another and keeping one another accountable for and to our commitments to God and to one another.
4. Willingness to be interviewed for my Masters Thesis and completing regular questionnaires from time to time. (*Names will be changed to protect identities and the strictest confidentiality is to be maintained by all.*)

The key resource we shall use, along with Holy Scripture, is a book by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, entitled ***In Memory of Her***. This author is Professor of Divinity at Harvard University in the USA and she was the first woman president of the Society of Biblical Literature in 1987. This is a highly academic work and so I'll be teaching excerpts from it and using her book mainly as a reference.

If you would like to be part of this group, please give it some prayerful consideration and let me know soon because we commence directly after the school holidays. On your acceptance I'll give you some preparation for our first session. Our breakfasts will be simple - yoghurt, muesli plus either juice, tea or coffee. It's the fellowship that will be important! We'll meet at the manse and before your families can even miss you, you will already be back home.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Blessings



## WELCOME LETTER

Appendix 2

8 Koedoe Crescent

La Provence

9701 Bethlehem

☎ (058) 303-0635

9 April 2002

Dear .....

Our breakfast Spirituality Group, Anaphaino (meaning 'discovery' in Greek), commences this coming Saturday morning, 13 April 2002, at 07h00. Thank you for your positive response. I trust that we will discover much as we journey together in the weeks that follow.

Please set aside some time to prepare yourself for our first get-together. Although I anticipate us having great fellowship, that will only make up part of the time we spend together. At the introduction we'll take some time getting to know one another and also share our personal expectations of the group with one another. It would be helpful to make a file or have a little journal for this particular group. As time passes we shall from time to time go back and monitor our 'discoveries' and therefore too, our development towards wholeness in Christ our Saviour.

Two recommended Scripture Passages as prepared reading:

(Paraphrased from *The Access Bible* - The New Revised Standard Version)

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in God's own likeness, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

*Genesis 1:26-28*

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of us are one in Christ Jesus. And if we belong to Christ, then we are offspring of Abraham [and Sarah], heirs according to God's promise.

*Galatians 3:23-29*

Reflect upon these two passages and write down some ideas, questions, insights or comments in your journal. For example, does anything NEW strike you in either (or both) of these two familiar passages? Compare the translation used here with that of one of your own Bibles and see if you can find any significant differences. What does it mean for YOU to have been created in God's own image? What do you think Paul meant when he told the Galatians that there is no longer male and female in Christ Jesus? Please complete the initial questionnaire and bring it along with you on Saturday.

Looking forward to a great experience,

FINAL LETTER



8 Koedoe Crescent  
 LA PROVENCE  
 9701 Bethlehem  
 ☎ (058) 303-0635

11 October 2002

Dear .....

It is with mixed feelings that I write this final note to everyone who has persevered with *Anaphaino* until the conclusion of my research.

In person I have already tried to express my gratitude to each of you for your participation and I do so now again - in writing! Quite amazingly we only have two topics left and I shall deal with both of these on Saturday, 12<sup>th</sup> October. On the 19<sup>th</sup> you can sleep late as I shall be in Durban for the whole of next week - hopefully having the thesis assessed before I embark on the final editing.

On Saturday, 26<sup>th</sup> October, we'll have a 'Closing Ceremony' and a tea party! At this last meeting each one of you can bring some eats and I'll provide the tea and coffee. We'll meet at 09h00 and end with tea. Hope this suits everyone.

**Two final tasks please:** The one is to complete the enclosed final questionnaire, which I would appreciate back on Saturday or the latest Sunday morning - I leave for Durban after lunch! The very last task I trust will be a pleasure for each of us. Please write a short 'message', 'poem', 'song', or whatever you like, to each person in the group. It would be good if you could bring two copies of these because I am sure each person would like to keep theirs and I'll be including these as an appendix to the thesis.

Blessings and thanks again for the gift of yourself to us all,

26 October 2002

Appendix 4

## Final Evaluation and Planning for the Future

“Women on fire! Women on fire for Jesus ...  
 Can we aim higher? Yes, we can go forward for Jesus ...  
 We are all one in Jesus Christ, before God all equal,  
 Yet each unique and special ...  
 Thank you to our Jenny for leading us and opening new horizons,  
 She has been to us, very special.” *(Participant in Working Group : 2002)*

The final meeting of the *Anaphaino* Spirituality Working Group for 2002 took place in the form of a celebration tea on Saturday, 26 October at 09h00. The only absent member had had a family commitment on this particular morning and she apologised for having to miss her final meeting with the group. The four members of the group who were present were those who had opted for the continuance of the group in 2003. The spirit of celebration was therefore tangible. As part of the preparation for the final meeting each one had been asked to bring an affirmation for each of the other members of the group. The poem, quoted above as an introduction to this appendix, was written for me by one of the members and the following affirmations were given and received by the participants as they built our name on the table:

“Your faith is always an inspiration to me. You always trust God so fully. In you we see the light of Jesus. Thank you for your love and support through this time we have spent together. I really appreciate it. With love ...”

“Your wise words and comments always inspire me. What you say is to the point and short, but very true. The love of Jesus is in your smile. Thank you for your friendship. With love ...”

“Your friendship, joy and love are very special to me. Your concern for all other people is an inspiration to me. I think you are very brave and I love the way you manage to shine Jesus’ love even through difficult times. With love ...”

“Thank you for all the Saturday ‘discoveries’ which we have shared together. This has been a very special time and I will always treasure the trust and friendship which has grown out of these meetings. With love ...”

“Psalm 143:8b – Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.”

“Psalm 146:2 – I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.”

“Psalm 1:2a & 3a – But [your] delight is in the law of the Lord, ... [You] are like [a tree] planted by streams of water, ...”

“Thank you so much for inviting me to join the *Anaphaino* group. It has introduced me to many new insights and ideas – not always so comfortable – but I do feel that I now have a better understanding of who God is and what ‘He’ wants all people to be. Thank you for the gentle way of explaining the Scriptures

to us week by week and for all the love and support which I have received from you. May God bless you as you go forward and open people's minds to accept 'different' ideas. With love, ..."

"A friend who listens well. A woman who is willing to explore the depths of relationships with God and with others. May our journeys be linked forever."

"A friend whose experiences resonate with mine. A woman with whom I can identify and who is also exploring mid-life spirituality. May we discover many more truths together."

"A sensitive woman with a deep commitment to God. Someone with strong convictions."

"Someone who is willing to explore the depths of who God is. A committed woman with a clear vision."

"A willing friend with whom to walk along this journey and a woman who enthusiastically meets new possibilities. May we discover and celebrate many more things together."

"A woman who tries to persevere even when things get difficult. Someone who is willing to ask sceptical questions and who honestly shares her 'heavy' feelings with the group."

The symbols, which were placed in a circle on the table, represented each person who had participated in the working group for this research project. The Bible had been opened at Mark 14:1-9<sup>143</sup> (the story of the woman who anointed Jesus) and this passage was read at the beginning of the formal part of the 'meeting'. The customary symbols included the open Bible, reminding us that what we were pursuing was based on Scripture, a burning candle, symbolising the Light of Christ and a tiny cross, which had been placed in the centre of the circle of symbols for each member, representing our Christian heritage. This cross was also representative of the church and of this local church's minister (the cross belongs to my husband) and it served as a reminder of his faithful support and encouragement throughout this project. His vital support also represents his ministry to the men in our community, which he hopes will in turn also awaken in them a desire to pursue wholeness for all people.

The various symbols for each participant were a tiny brass bell for Enid, the mature member of the group who 'rings true', a little nurse's lamp for Lulu who is a dedicated theatre sister, a lavender 'everlasting' flower, which had been brought by Gladys earlier in the year as one of her own symbols, and the colour was now representing our 'mourning' because she had left the group mid-way through when some of the issues became too threatening for her.

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<sup>143</sup> See footnote number 79.



A little stone statuette of a 'mother and child' symbolised dedicated motherhood for Lynn, who had also left the group, a little graduate bear symbolised Susan's commitment to teaching and her hope for each of her pupils to succeed academically and a treble clef brooch was Martha's symbol because she was the musician in the group. A gift from a Canadian friend in the form of a little carved mother loon with a chick on her back - hidden between her wings – was the symbol I chose for myself on this day. It symbolised my search for God as 'Mother' and I saw myself as the 'chick' hidden between God's wings for protection and warmth. The prayer time which followed was deeply meaningful, sincere and quite emotional. Some of the women, especially after receiving the affirmations from the other members of the group, became intensely aware of what this group had actually meant to them. Their prayers were more direct and specific than I could recall had been the case on any other occasion.

After sharing in the blessing the group adjourned for tea and scrumptious eats, brought along by everyone. The excitement of the women in the anticipation of inviting others to join the group in the New Year was thrilling to witness. The only plans the group made were that they definitely wanted to continue on this journey. They liked the idea very much that the group starts up in the New Year with reading a book by a South African author. We agreed that the book would be *The Piety of South African Women*, by Professor Christina Landman (1999). It was suggested that the group, which hopefully would have a few new members, would decide at the beginning of next year whether the group's name would remain the same.

Although the effects of patriarchy are still very evident, these no longer have the final word on the experiences of the women who persevered with *Anaphaino* until the end of the project. Patriarchal views will no longer limit their view of God nor will they dominate how these women see and relate to other people.

I therefore conclude with one of my favourite quotes in which Schüssler Fiorenza's (1993:12) suggests that

If someone dreams alone, then it remains only a dream. If many dream together, then this is the beginning, the beginning of a new reality. Dream our dream.



## 'ANAPHAINO'

Appendix 5

SUGGESTED PROGRAMME : APRIL - OCTOBER 2002

*Start with Breakfast at 07h00 and usually meeting at the manse*

Key : Galatians 3:28

**April**

- 13<sup>th</sup> - Introduction and Expectations
- 20<sup>th</sup> - Exploring Mark 14:1-9
- 27<sup>th</sup> - Discussion on terms: "Feminism, Womanism and Feminist Theology"

**May**

- 4<sup>th</sup> - Family Camp (No meeting)
- 11<sup>th</sup> - 'Her-story' - Patriarchy and its effects on women through the ages
- 18<sup>th</sup> - Graduation (No meeting)
- 25<sup>th</sup> - Discipleship of Equals

**June**

- 1<sup>st</sup> - Synod (No meeting)
- 8<sup>th</sup> - Traditional Roles of Women and Men
- 15<sup>th</sup> - Our Christian Heritage
- 22<sup>nd</sup> - Symbols and Rituals
- 29<sup>th</sup> - Circles versus Pyramids

**July**

- 6<sup>th</sup> - Nature of God
- 13<sup>th</sup> - Relating to God
- 20<sup>th</sup> - Women in the Parables
- 27<sup>th</sup> - Mid-Winter Celebration (*Partners Welcome*) at the Manse at 19h00

**August**

- 3<sup>rd</sup> - Language and Culture
- 10<sup>th</sup> - Planning for Women's Day Celebration Service at the Church
- 17<sup>th</sup> - Social Transformation
- 24<sup>th</sup> - Women and Choice
- 31<sup>st</sup> - God : 'More than that ...'

**September**

- 7<sup>th</sup> - Spring Meeting - *Partners Welcome* to join our discussions!
- 14<sup>th</sup> - Feminine and Masculine
- 21<sup>st</sup> - Women and the Christian Church
- 28<sup>th</sup> - God-talk and Inclusive Language

**October**

- 5<sup>th</sup> - Sainthood and Sisterhood
- 12<sup>th</sup> - Hope for the True Liberation for all people
- 19<sup>th</sup> - The Dream ...
- 26<sup>th</sup> - Evaluation, Assessment and Planning for the Future

# Index to Selected Key Themes

<p><b>Abuse:</b> 10,62,64,66,115,117,185.</p> <p><b>African Theology:</b> 60,61,62,63,64.</p> <p><b>Afrikaans Feminism:</b> 39,51,56,81,197.</p> <p><b>Ageism:</b> 55,81.</p> <p><b>AIDS:</b> 117,192.</p> <p><b>Androcentric:</b> 70,92,107.</p> <p><b>Apartheid:</b> 20,65,119,130,133,134,171,187,198,202.</p> <p><b>Birthing:</b> 45,46,110,111.</p> <p><b>Black Consciousness:</b> 57.</p> <p><b>Capitalism:</b> 90.</p> <p><b>Career:</b> 7,40,41,116,117.</p> <p><b>Celibacy:</b> 94,122.</p> <p><b>Child:</b> 13,21,41,45,46,55,66,69,90,93,96,100,101,102,103,109,110,111,113,116,117,144,145,154,159,178,212,216.</p> <p><b>Childbearing:</b> 87,111,113,117,145.</p> <p><b>Childrearing:</b> 41.</p> <p><b>Childhood:</b> 1,21,31,37,45,46,50,104.</p> <p><b>Classism:</b> 1,39,40,41,42,52,55,57,81,93,95,98,101,107,120,124,187.</p> <p><b>Colonialism:</b> 7,57,59,60,81,89,90,95,197.</p> <p><b>Conservative:</b> 2,10,12,17,19,21,29,31,33,50,56,80,102,128,136,139,140,141,152,153,166,176,180,181,185,190,191,202.</p> <p><b>Control:</b> 25,27,35,94,115,120,130.</p> <p><b>Creation:</b> 14,29,45,61,68,70,82,86,110,120,124,126,145,184,200.</p> <p><b>Difference:</b> 18,30,41,42,47,51,55,71,72,77,86,113,119,120,121,185,190,212.</p> <p><b>Discrimination:</b> 6,41,59,64,91,92,93,94,124,125,130,132,138,159,160.</p> <p><b>Domestic:</b> 24,94,100,202.</p> <p><b>Dominance:</b> 2,3,7,10,16,19,30,35,36,37,39,43,52,54,59,62,66,70,72,73,76,81,87,89,90,91,92,93,94,96,123,125,129,131,159,179,180,196,197,204,205,216.</p> <p><b>Dualism:</b> 50,58,60,61,78,79,179.</p> <p><b>Education:</b> 1,20,31,39,40,65,81,89,114,116,192,197,202,203.</p>	<p><b>Emancipation:</b> 53,65,97,121,140.</p> <p><b>Equality:</b> 2,5,6,10,11,13,33,38,40,41,42,43,47,48,53,56,66,71,90,91,96,97,99,114,121,127,129,131,133,134,139,140,153,159,162,166,171,179,184,196,197.</p> <p><b>Ethics:</b> 47,78,114,115,189,190.</p> <p><b>Exploitation:</b> 10,24,27,34,48,54,57,58,64,67,90,114,116,187,197,202.</p> <p><b>Family:</b> 1,20,21,31,37,38,45,50,88,90,95,96,102,110,117,135,136,137,159,161,197,214,217.</p> <p><b>Father:</b> 1,14,17,18,20,34,37,44,52,76,94,95,101,110,116,159,188.</p> <p><b>Feminine:</b> 8,27,29,40,52,53,68,74,82,90,91,94,100,102,104,110,119,139,144,156,157,162,180,181,184,217.</p> <p><b>Feminism:</b> 3,5,7,12,15,24,32,38,39,41,42,51,54,55,56,59,67,77,78,81,82,85,89,94,96,97,114,115,119,128,179,197,217.</p> <p><b>Female:</b> 15,16,26,30,35,36,41,59,67,68,74,79,86,93,101,104,107,115,116,117,123,124,147,151,159,161,163,168,171,172,174,187,201,212.</p> <p><b>Gender:</b> 2,5,6,10,11,13,20,33,65,96,101,102,113,120,122,124,125,127,128,130,133,134,147,151,154,159,161,162,163,168,169,187,196,198,201.</p> <p><b>God as Child:</b> 53,111,184,202.</p> <p><b>God as Father:</b> 45,53,70,77,95,105,109,110,113,124,147,156,180.</p> <p><b>God as Mother:</b> 45,46,53,105,110,111,113,124,138,157,162,216.</p> <p><b>Gynaecology:</b> 40.</p> <p><b>Heterosexuality:</b> 40,42,94,114.</p> <p><b>HIV:</b> 117.</p> <p><b>Housework:</b> 101.</p> <p><b>Ideology:</b> 16,18,57,98,119,125.</p> <p><b>Images:</b> 27,28,30,34,35,36,38,44,54,55,69,70,76,77,78,79,88,104,105,109,110,118,124,125,126,127,131,156,185,212.</p>
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