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# **A Magnificent Tapestry of Women:**

## **‘Women and Ministry Conferences’ and the developing Woman-Church Movement in Aotearoa 1980 – 1994.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts in History at Massey University

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1999

The title “A magnificent tapestry of women” is a quote by Marcellin in *Women and church shaping the future. 4<sup>th</sup> National feminist theology conference. Conference musings.*

## ABSTRACT

For many Pakeha Christian women the past 20 years have been a time of evaluating the Christian church and their personal beliefs in light of developing feminist dogma and theology. Such evaluation has inevitably brought about the desire for change. Some women have stayed within the church to encourage change from within the structure. Others have worked on the fringes in a search for a faith affirming of women, while still others have left the church convinced of its inherent patriarchy. Loose networks of women have established themselves throughout the country to discuss, challenge, and draw strength from one another as they have struggled for change. Their emphasis has been placed on developing an inclusive, holistic faith, affirming of women and free from patriarchy. This I have labelled *woman-church*. This thesis focuses on the emerging theology and emergent trends in the spiritual practice of *woman-church*. Four conferences were held throughout the country from 1981–1994. The significance of these conferences is also discussed. The texts from the conferences, along with material from the interviews of twenty-one women are used to draw out emergent themes. This thesis is not intended to be a complete history of *woman-church*. Rather I aim to create a flavour for what has been happening in this area of pakeha women's spirituality, particularly over the time span of the conferences.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The sense of rejoicing is immense as I finally submit this thesis. It has had an incredibly long gestation period and an even longer labour! I know that there will be a lot of people celebrating with me at its completion. None-the-least of these would be Dr. Peter Lineham, my supervisor. I wish to offer him my sincerest thanks for "hanging in there" with me from beginning to end and for his guidance, insight, experience and encouragement. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Barry Macdonald and Dr. James Watson for battling red tape on my behalf, and Professor Kerry Howe, for his sage advice, "don't do a thesis part-time!" – I wish I had listened! To the support staff, Lyn Coates and Mary-Lou Dickson thanks for the forms and letters typed, the keys found, and all the questions answered.

My deepest thanks go to those women who allowed themselves to be interviewed. I feel humbled that you shared your stories with me, a stranger. I also want to thank the women in *woman-church* for their example of strength and determination in the search for life-sustaining faith. To Rosemary Neave of the Women's Resource Centre I say a special thanks, for the books sent, questions answered, resources found and for a constant supply of encouragement.

Now to those nearest and dearest to me. To my husband, Mark, my typist, scribe, proofreader, critic.....nothing I write will adequately express my appreciation for your support. You are amazing. Thank You! Special thanks to Charlotte for still having two sleeps a day! To family and friends thank you for your support and your willingness to have your ears chewed. Did you have a choice? To my very dear friends Adele and Chris thanks for a constant supply of love, support and encouragement. To my bevy of babysitters thank you. Last but not least I wish to acknowledge and thank the "Author" and "Perfecter" of my faith for the journey travelled and the lessons learned.

Ruth Low



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## INTRODUCTION

As the words of the Aretha Franklin song say, *Sisters are doing it for themselves*. In this case the “it” is religion. Women, especially in the western world, are assessing past and present allegiance to the Christian Church and the relevance of its teachings to their spiritual lives. Many pakeha women of Aotearoa New Zealand<sup>1</sup> are involved in this evaluation. These women seek to reshape religious beliefs and practices into a holistic spirituality that affirms women, acknowledges women’s ‘herstory’ and their spiritual knowledge and experience. For the last twenty years or so pockets of women throughout Aotearoa have been meeting together developing a theology and practice that acknowledges them as women. Over the years, these ‘pockets’ have networked to create a loose *movement* of women pushing the boundaries of traditional Christian doctrine. Strongly influencing this *movement* is feminist ideology and a developing feminist theology. In this thesis this *movement* will be referred to as *woman-church*. The term is not original. American feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has encouraged the use of the term in reference to “an ‘exodus’ community of women, separated from the church in order to express non-patriarchal theology, spirituality, and structure.”<sup>2</sup> Susan Adams in *Towards a reshaped church* defines it as “the grouping of women who choose to work together in transforming the traditional church and its theology, together with men who are identified by women as being allies in this process, and who are invited to participate with us.”<sup>3</sup> In 1988 *Women’s ministries and spirituality conference. Empowering to transform. A resource book for women*, Anna Gilkison and Jenny Schroeder express the essence of *woman-church* within the context of Aotearoa:

Woman-church is what we are part of whenever we express our theology and our spirituality as women. It connects women’s services with rural women reading feminist literature, who connect with women in the structures for change, who connect with women in society struggling for justice, who connect with the tangata whenua fighting for partnership and

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<sup>1</sup> From now on Aotearoa New Zealand will be referred to as simply Aotearoa.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-church theology and practice of feminist liturgical communities*, (San Francisco, 1985), p.57-74, cited in Susan Adams, *Towards a reshaped church. A feminist look at theological education and the future of the church*, (Auckland, 1991), p.12.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Adams, 1991, p.12.

control of their lives, who connect with women working on racism, who connect with women expressing their spirituality.....<sup>4</sup>

This forms the basis of my understanding of *the movement* or *woman-church*. This definition then will be used throughout this thesis.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis is not a comprehensive history of *woman-church* within Aotearoa over the last twenty years. Rather, the aim is to weave a picture, merging material from four women's conferences, loosely labelled as *Women in ministry*, with threads of women's lives from taped interviews. It attempts to speak of 'faith journeys' and an organic 'spirituality' unique to women within Aotearoa. It acknowledges the influences of women internationally but does not attempt to focus on the specifics of what is emerging worldwide.

This research comes out of my own desire to "gel" my Christian beliefs to my feminist inclinations. While happily calling myself feminist (and in some contexts I would be considered radical) in light of the views of the women I interviewed I feel almost a fraud. My earlier study on CEDAW<sup>6</sup> introduced me to the conflict between fundamentalist Christian women and Christian feminists within Aotearoa. It whetted my appetite but also forced me to consider my own faith. What did I believe and why? What was peripheral? What was not?

The post-modern era and feminist debate has allowed greater freedom in recognising the subjectivity inherent in research. So what 'baggage' do I bring to this thesis? I am a woman with feminist inclinations aiming to write sensitively about the spiritual lives of pakeha women in the church in Aotearoa. I write as a Christian woman who has grappled with many of the issues discussed. While I do not necessarily always agree

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Gilkison, Jenny Schroeder, "Help! I no longer feel comfortable in the church and don't know where I fit", *1988 Women's ministries and spirituality conference. Empowering to transform. A resource book for women*, (Auckland, 1988), p.16.

<sup>5</sup> In *Religions of New Zealanders*, Catherine Benland writes of the *women's spirituality movement* in New Zealand. Some would argue that what I refer to, as *woman-church* is the same as the movement Benland talks of. While I see that *woman-church* comes under the umbrella of the *women's spirituality movement*, this 'movement' encompasses a wider range of spiritual belief, including neo-paganism, than that of the women involved in *woman-church* in this study.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Low, *The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (UNCEDAW) debate. A clash of ideologies*. Research exercise, (Massey University, 1994).

with the conclusions that some women, or groups of women have come to I can sympathise with their struggles. This research, then, is a continuation of my spiritual journey.

Twenty-one women in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin as well as Palmerston North were interviewed. Initially interviewees were drawn from articles and ephemeral material. From there the “snowball” technique drew in other women involved in this *movement* or on the edges of it. Many more women could have been interviewed but as with any research there are limitations. Those interviewed are in no way unanimous in their views yet there is a degree of homogeneity as they search for a “spirituality” true to themselves and that ultimately will offer an alternative to the patriarchal church.

*Woman-church* is largely a white, middle-class, and educated women's movement. Each of the women I interviewed had tertiary education, and had been or was involved in theological study.<sup>7</sup> Women have questioned the content of theology study due to the strong masculine bias in material and method of learning. Since the early 1980s, there has been a concerted push for women to be a part of the training staff within these colleges, offering a feminist perspective in what was perceived as an otherwise male bastion. New avenues of teaching have been explored and promoted which attempt to offer a more relevant and conducive learning environment to women.<sup>8</sup> Women within *the movement* vary in age although a large percentage of women involved are in there 40s and 50s. They cover the spectrum of mainline and some evangelical churches, while others are on the very fringes of the church. Maori women have largely chosen not to be involved sensing there was much work to be done solely as Maori women.

*Woman-church* in Aotearoa has grown out of the feminist movement. Feminism did not begin to impact women in Aotearoa significantly until the 1970s. Along with this came

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<sup>7</sup> Women's participation as theological students was minimal until the 1980s. Since then women have studied theology in increasing numbers.

<sup>8</sup> There is not room within this thesis to explore the alternate training opportunities. Susan Adams, *Towards a reshaped church* is a helpful book in discussing initiatives encouraging study and training opportunities for women.

the channelling of female discontent into raising the status of women.<sup>9</sup> In the 1980s the women's movement entered its second-phase. Consciousness raising was replaced by women becoming more focused on particular causes, "and the first flush of political activity and exuberance transformed into more sustained action."<sup>10</sup> For Christian women new feminist understandings caused them to reassess the shape of their faith and critique the structures of their churches. It was not simply a matter of pushing for the ordination of women. By the 1980s mainline Protestant churches had already accepted female ordination.<sup>11</sup> The issues being raised were to do with the exclusivity of the masculine language used within Scriptures, liturgy and general church life; the theology founded on patriarchal structures and assumptions; the non-recognition of the validity of the female experience as being relevant in developing theology; and the lack of power or autonomy that women actually had within the church.

For some women the church no longer made sense. The slow rate of change inevitably meant they withdrew from church life and looked at alternative routes to explore their spiritual side or left 'religion' behind them. Other women have consciously decided to stay in church structures to work for change from within, whether in lay or ordained ministry. Still others remain on the fringes of the church, they are unwilling to relinquish all of the Christian tradition but are not satisfied with its current shape. They search for alternatives that fulfil them spiritually while keeping a 'foot-in-the-door' of their church.

The following feminist discourse is incorporated into Christian feminist theology.

Men have named things and people; men have thought, invented and shaped the world; they have mapped out reality for themselves and established sharply drawn boundaries within it. Women have been assigned their place and role within the scheme of things made by men alone. Today's feminists perceive the fetters and limits of these boundaries and wish to redraw the map of reality anew. They claim the right to do their own naming of things and people, to shape the world, define language and thought and weave the pattern of their own experience into the texture of culture and society.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Christine Dann, *Up from under. Women and liberation in New Zealand, 1970-1985* (Wellington, 1985), p.3.

<sup>10</sup> Charlotte MacDonald, *The vote, the pill, and the demon drink* (Wellington, 1993), p.206.

<sup>11</sup> Methodist women first ordained 1959, Presbyterian women first ordained 1965, and Anglican women first ordained 1978.

<sup>12</sup> Ursula King, *Women and spirituality. Voices of protest and promise* (London, 1989), p.26-27.

Identified are the oppressive patriarchal worldview and the need to define a positive woman-affirming alternative. Women now seek to assert themselves in naming and defining their own worldview.

Christian feminism has sought to rescue women from feminine passivity encouraged within Christian doctrine offering an alternative - contextually and experientially based. This venerates women's experiences rather than assuming their experiences are the same as men's. Women's experience is the starting place for interpreting the Scriptures. Scriptures are therefore read contextually, and filtered by feminist ideology.

Feminism is not the only influence. The religious climate within Aotearoa has increasingly encouraged openness and tolerance of divergent views. Strengthening secularism and a growing tolerance for cultural and religious alternatives has encouraged a willingness to consider the search for 'truth' beyond the boundaries of the Christian church. New Age spirituality and the personal growth movement have been elements of this as to the impact of post-modernism.

Post-modernism has had a profound impact on many women within *the movement*, encouraging a more subjective approach to their spirituality. For others the influence has been subtle. Recognition of the inherent subjectivity in all issues, including 'religion' (shaped by our cultural, social and lingual heritage) has freed women to reject the black and white dogma often offered within Christianity. Instead, women's understanding of God, the Christ and spiritual practice has altered allowing for a faith relevant to their lives in this century and the next. It has opened them up to their own creativity. It has meant they are less interested in dogma that discourages dialogue with those of other faith or religious understandings. *Woman-church's* eclectic nature allows for the flow of ideas between such 'movements' and 'ideologies' without seemingly compromising the essential elements of their faith.

For some in *woman-church*, the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent God of "traditional" Christianity, also represented in the human form through Jesus Christ is still very real. The use of feminine images enables them to have a fuller understanding

of God. For others their concept of God has become less personal. However, *woman-church* gives them the freedom to question and search without censure.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter documents four women's conferences held in Wellington in 1981, Auckland in 1984, Christchurch in 1988 and Taupo in 1994. Each conference had a particular focus and acted as a catalyst to stimulate thought and action amongst women within and outside churches throughout Aotearoa. Through analysing the conference material I have sought to encapsulate the essence and direction of each conference and the development of thought throughout the decade and a half that the conferences spanned.

Chapter Two and Three are divided into *Theology* and *Practice*. This is not an ideal split, but one necessary in the context of this thesis. As women have drawn away from the dualism of body/mind their spirituality has developed a holistic emphasis. To divide it into 'theology' – mind and 'practice' – body is in a sense emphasising the dualism that women have discarded. It attempts to rationalise material in a way which women largely would see unnecessary to rationalise. It in effect reflects a modernist method of dividing material that is largely post-modern. Despite this, however, there is a need to articulate my research so this method becomes expedient.

Chapter Two discusses developing feminist theology, documenting the shift in thinking on issues such as Christology, images of God and language. It is not intended to be comprehensive; rather themes appearing to be of greater significance have been drawn from conference publications and comments from interviews have been woven in where relevant.

Chapter Three highlights the changing practice of those in *the movement*. Again the chapter is not comprehensive and is ordered thematically. Emerging trends in corporate and individual 'worship' are discussed along with the changes ordained women bring to their churches. Interview material is widely used for this chapter.



Pseudonyms have been used for those not wishing to be identified. I have chosen to use the rather impersonal "Respondent A" approach to eliminate confusion. The full names of women, willing to be identified, will be used in the first instance, subsequent to that their first name only will be used. The contemporary nature of this thesis topic and the oral history component has meant that the thesis takes on a strong sociological emphasis. The topic also has a strong religious studies emphasis. My concept of history is strongly interdisciplinary so the blend of historical, sociological and religious studies seems quite natural.

As has been stated before this thesis is not intended to be a comprehensive history of *woman-church* from the 1980s to mid-1990s. Within the ambit of a Masters thesis it would be ambitious to attempt it. What this thesis aims to achieve is create a flavour, a taste of what changes pakeha women have experienced in their spiritual lives as they have been influenced by feminism and feminist theology. It aims to draw threads of women's lives together and paint a picture of one aspect of pakeha women's religious life in Aotearoa.

## Chapter One: THE CONFERENCES

For women the world over have been putting into practice a relatively new learning. We can make sense of our lives and find meaning in what happens to us when we stop long enough to tell our stories in a group of women. When our stories are heard and reflected upon together, we are no longer odd individuals with peculiar luck. There are things we share with other women, there are patterns which shape all women's experience. Once shared we can reflect upon the common experience and discern wider cultural and human patterns and deeper theological understandings.<sup>1</sup>

The content of conferences is a useful indicator of change - change in social thought, attitude and theory. This chapter will analyse the *Women in Ministry Conferences* held throughout New Zealand in the 1980s and early 1990s. It aims to reflect the changes occurring in a number of Christian women's consciousness regarding their understanding of feminist theology and 'spirituality'. There is not necessarily fluidity in the development of their thought due to the diverse and eclectic nature of these women's views. Nevertheless the conferences are markers of changing attitudes, beliefs and practices.

The 1970s saw women's consciousness being raised over feminist issues, particularly through the United Women's Conventions, held in 1973, 1975, 1977 and 1979. In the first issue of *Vashti's Voice*<sup>2</sup> the upcoming *United Women's Convention* was publicised. The 1979 Convention held in Hamilton proposed to have "Institutions of

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<sup>1</sup> Jocelyn Armstrong, Erice Webb, "Introduction", *With Heads Uncovered*, Enid Bennett (ed.), (Auckland, 1988), p.5.

<sup>2</sup> *Vashti's Voice* was a quarterly magazine published and edited by Mitzi Nairn along with input from Christian feminists in Auckland. A group known as the "Friday Group" regularly met to discuss feminism and its relevance to the church. From this group came the impetus for this publication and much later for the Auckland Women's Resource Centre. Janet Crawford in a brief history of the publication in February/April 1989 of *Vashti's Voice* describes the group and the publication as being influential in the feminist movement within the church and a significant instrument in developing initial networks of like minded women throughout the country. The title of the newsletter was taken from Queen Vashti who features in the Book of Esther, Chapter 1. "'Rising to the heights of self-consciousness and self-respect, she takes her soul into her own keeping and is true to the divine aspirations of her nature'. Feminist sisters said this in the *Women's Bible* a hundred years ago. Thus we connect ourselves to our heritage of spiritual struggle." First published in November 1978 it stopped publishing July 1992 - although it has recently restarted publishing. The readership was approximately 200 women.

Power” as one of its themes - the church and its patriarchal philosophy was an obvious target for reassessment. Dawn Danby in her article advertising the convention encouraged women to begin to think through the issues of inequality and oppression within church structures and called for women to “produce anything to help identify and illustrate the problems, and perhaps point forward to possible solutions.”<sup>3</sup> Danby exhorted women to “Help Christ’s Church become a worthy one. Help yourself and other women become a dignified and equal part of a transformed Body of Christ. Help the silly old pompous church die and rise again. We all need one another for this to happen...to pray, to think, to do.”<sup>4</sup> The resulting discussion and assessments at the Convention’s worship workshop focused on assumptions regarding God-language and thought. Out of such contemplation came the women’s own expressions of worship. Danby, a facilitator of the workshop described the results as “graceful non-sexist or women expression offerings.”<sup>5</sup> She goes on to state how it was worship that was simply decontaminated. It was imbued with feminine faith, spirituality and depth.”<sup>6</sup> The “Dismissal Affirmation” that ended the worship workshop represents an early endeavour by women to affirm their role in reshaping the ‘church’.

Dismissal Affirmation

We celebrate and affirm all the women and all the groups here at the Convention.

We celebrate and affirm feminist spirituality.

We call on all people in the churches to re-examine their theology, language, structures and practices in the light of this feminist spirit.

We call on the churches in and/or when their theory affirms the personhood and participation of women, to open up all structures and practices to the winds of change that feminist insights offer.

We call on all women related to the churches to look at the situation of themselves and their sisters in a patriarchal institution, and to work to develop faith beyond patriarchy.

We affirm and celebrate those women who are able to move ahead in a pioneering way in the development of faith communities.

We affirm and celebrate those women who are able to hang in and work for change in the institution.

Women have contributed their selves and their lives to the church, and are entitled to claim whatever of the Christian tradition belongs to them.

Women are the midwives of the “church” of the future,

<sup>3</sup> *Vashti’s Voice*, No.1, November (1978), p.9.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p.9.

<sup>5</sup> *Vashti’s Voice*, No.3, May (1979), p.9.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.10.

with their new ideas, creative insights and an ever-deepening spirituality.<sup>7</sup>

This 'Dismissal Affirmation' was both a denunciation of the church's patriarchal structures and also a statement of the participants' desire to reshape their spirituality based on their feminist ideology. It affirmed the diversity of spiritual thought amongst the women, giving them the room to work for change within and outside of church structures. These were women taking control of their spirituality, not allowing themselves to be restricted by the dictates of the church. There was acknowledgement of women's contribution to the church and their right to claim what they would of the Christian tradition, leaving behind that which was not affirming of women.

A growing number of Christian women were also awakened to discrimination within the church via research completed by the Women's Committee of the National Council of Churches in the mid-1970s. A booklet on the role of women in the church produced by the Committee sparked off discussion and drew women together to discuss its implications.<sup>8</sup> Women wishing to reassess their faith began to look for support from one another, and networks throughout the country slowly began to develop. *Vashti's Voice* acted as an important forum for women to discuss and articulate newly formed ideas, or to be critical of the church. The publication's broad topic base meant it did not appeal to everyone. However, it remained an important means of communication for Christian feminists throughout the country.

In the 1980s the seeds sown in the 1970s flourished. Awareness grew of the inequalities faced by women, particularly in church structures, as did their dissatisfaction and desire to bring about change. The *Women in Ministry conferences* were an opportunity to draw women together who were affected by or interested in these issues.

The Asian Christian Women's Conference in Christchurch held a Consultation for Theologically Educated Women in 1980. Nineteen ordained and lay women attended this Consultation. They represented a broad spectrum of church denominations,

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p.10.

covering conservative through to radical theological perspective's. Topics they explored included employment opportunities and overseas developments, sexuality and spirituality, sex roles and leadership, women in worship, women as pastors and new possibilities in ministry.<sup>9</sup> The Consultation was perceived as a beginning, "an initial exploratory event on which to build."<sup>10</sup> From the Consultation came plans to organise an open conference to be held in 1981 and for the establishment of regional support groups for women in ministry or in training. As was explained in the article in *Vashti's Voice*:

Women in ordained ministry are a small often lonely minority. They are mostly strongly opposed to authoritarianism and hierarchism, and feel a degree of oppression within the institutional church and traditional patterns of ministry. Those endeavouring to create new patterns of ministry generally receive little support or understanding. Through unity we shall gain strength."<sup>11</sup>

The first *Women and Ministry Conference* was held at Marsden School in Wellington in May 1981.<sup>12</sup> In the September/October 1980 issue of *Vashti's Voice* the conference was advertised as *Women and Ministry - an Ecumenical Conference*. Those who worked or planned to work for the church or women who thought seriously about theology were invited to attend. While laywomen were involved in the planning and did attend the conference, the initial conference emphasised the needs of women in ministry. One hundred women attended the conference from "diverse denominational and faith backgrounds"<sup>13</sup>. The three-day conference covered the exploration of ministries by sharing one's own experiences of ministry. It looked at various resource centres and explored the images of God, women and nature. Weather played an important part in aiding the group to draw closer together, rain confined them to indoors. Enid Bennett attended the conference and summarised her experiences by writing; "I found the

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<sup>8</sup> Women's Committee of the National Council of Churches, *Enquiry into the status of women in the churches*, (Christchurch, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> *Vashti's Voice*, No.6, February (1980), p.2.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> *ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> In *Towards a reshaped church* Susan Adams refers to the Consultation organised by Asian Christian Women's Conference as the first *National Women in Ministry Conference*. While it was the first effort to gather women together to focus on this particular issue I have referred to the 1981 Conference as the first. It represented the first open conference and both *Vashti's Voice* and Enid Bennett in her summary of all four conferences refer to it as the first.

<sup>13</sup> *Vashti's Voice*, No.11, May/July (1981), p.9.

conference itself fascinating and very rewarding. There was a great deal of variety, and though it was early days for us, a critique of and challenge to patriarchal theology, especially its sexist imagery and language, was a crucial element.”<sup>14</sup> Another spoke of the conference as being:

... a refreshing experience, a loose structure that allowed for all to contribute. A programme that let ministry emerge as experience - women presenting their ministry by telling their story: from women working in isolation to women living in community. At relationship level bonds of sisterhood were renewed and created.<sup>15</sup>

Susan Adams in *Towards a reshaped church* briefly talks of tension being evident at the 1981 conference despite the “joy and excitement of sisterhood”. The tension was due to disparity over the “the role of women in the church and who defined the nature of ministry”.<sup>16</sup> Bennett remembers that the conflict was dealt with positively as women sought to honour one another.<sup>17</sup> Following the conference Erice Webb summed up her experience of the conference in *Vashti's Voice*.

If three words sum up the experience they are growth, pain and joy. As a Christian feminist there was the joy of being once again in complete sisterhood - solidarity. There was the pain of being brought face to face with the issues that still divide women - and there was growth because the pain could not be kept under and spilled out and left no one untouched.<sup>18</sup>

No formal record of the 1981 conference was compiled. *Vashti's Voice* promoted the conference and also acted as a medium to document women's experiences of the conference. Within this material, words, phrases and images emerged as particularly significant in defining the essence of the conference and the emphases of those women involved. In later conferences they re-emerged sometimes with the meaning altered, reflecting a wider understanding. They were not original terms confined to conference texts, but were words, phrases, or images borrowed from church language, feminist language, or feminine images.

<sup>14</sup> Rev. Enid Bennett, “My journey through four conferences. 1981-1994” *Warp & Weft. The newsletter of the “COMMUNITY OF WOMEN AND MEN IN CHURCH & SOCIETY” a committee of the Methodist Church in Aotearoa*, (1994), p.2.

<sup>15</sup> *Vashti's Voice*, No.11, May/July (1981), p.9

<sup>16</sup> Susan Adams, *Towards a reshaped church*, (Auckland 1991), p.37

<sup>17</sup> Enid Bennett, *Warp & Weft*, p.3.

<sup>18</sup> *Vashti's Voice*, No.11. May/July 1981, p.9.



Space does not permit a complete analysis of all texts pertaining to the conference. Rather words, phrases or images that help capture the essence of the conference will be discussed here. Central to the first conference was that it was for “women in ministry”. It was about how women’s gender defined and shaped their ministry, and how working within patriarchal church structures restricted or shaped their “ministry”. “An ecumenical conference” further defined the intent of the conference, opening it up to women from any denomination, reflecting the openness to diverse thought and the desire to stop denominational differences restricting their relationships as women. This has been an important feature of the movement throughout New Zealand. Sisterhood held stronger ties than denominational differences. Indeed, echoes of the feminist movement was heard through the use of the term “sisterhood”, and signified the intent of women to unify themselves and draw strength from one another. It must also be recognised that at the time ecumenism was being strongly fostered by most mainline churches.

This conference gave those attending an opportunity to share their experiences. The importance of hearing other women’s “stories” and relating their own was significant. The sense of not being “alone” in ministry and the validation that came in recognising that there were alternate ways of “doing ministry” encouraged and challenged the participants.

The feminine image of “childbirth” resonated in the prose of women writing after the conference, encapsulating the sense of anticipation of something new and exciting taking shape. Enid Bennett wrote the following piece for *Vashti’s Voice* after the conference,

Women sharing with women, trusting, touching, healing, and being healed. Feeling pain, one’s own and others’ - reaching out to downtrodden and burdened sisters, women under oppression or suffering from putdown.

Claiming Jesus as the one who affirms us and accepts us, with no condemnation or imputing of guilt, enabling us to realise new wholeness, new freedom. ‘By grace we are saved’

Claiming our women-power, recognising our special and general ministry as human females. Power to give birth, to nurture life, to nourish little ones from our own inner food.





Lorraine Sealy – elder of the Pres church and member of its special committee on women in the church

Gaylene Jackson – Baptist minister in Mangere

Carolyn Moynihan – Journalist (Catholic)

Felicity Rennie – Nurse, and an adviser to an international association of christian women (Catholic)<sup>21</sup>

Adams recalls “Because we were all busy with many other commitments and responsibilities, the membership of the group when we met changed constantly. This had the effect of lengthening the early period in which decisions about the aim of the conference, and its style were made.”<sup>22</sup> This was not to be the only problem in the early planning of the conference. While *Vashti's Voice* advertised the conference and was a starting point for contact with other women, the working party had few clearly defined networks. At this stage the networks were in their infancy. “The old boys’ networks didn’t work for us”<sup>23</sup> recalls Adams. Instead an initial contact list was compiled, with newsletters sent to those on the list. Those women were asked to extend the list, including women who would be interested in such an event. By this “snowball” effect a tighter network was established.

In the May/August 1983 edition of *Vashti's Voice* the conference was advertised as the “Women in Ministry II? Womanspirit Rising?” and went on to explain the past and present intent of the conferences:

Dear Sisters: In May 1981 there was a national ecumenical conference in Wellington which was an attempt by ordained and lay women to explore the variety of their ministries – domestic and public, actual and potential.

It was agreed then that a start had been made to a process which should continue – this process of bringing together, for our mutual encouragement, the new meanings that life takes on as women think creatively about themselves and such social realities as church structures.<sup>24</sup>

Discussion starter kits, a *Vashti's Voice* Supplement, were sent to groups to encourage thought on issues such as women and money, health, sexuality, employment, racism, and patriarchy. The working group desired to stimulate discussion so women would

<sup>21</sup> *Vashti's Voice*, No.19, May/August (1983), p.9.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Adams, “The Women & Ministry Consultation. August 1984”, *With Heads Uncovered*, (Auckland, 1988) p.10.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p.11.

come to the conference prepared, having already considered issues so that it might encourage “some shared thinking in common”.<sup>25</sup> The working group aimed to keep communication channels open, informing interested women of the developments and encouraging feedback and participation in the planning process. Those in the working group had specifically identified that the gathering was to be a place:

...where women would feel comfortable, affirmed and challenged; where we could all participate; where our experience was recognised; where we could share our discoveries and our anxieties; where we could discover, grow and celebrate the unique contribution which we as women could make to the church and to our society. We wanted to meet as women.<sup>26</sup>

The conference was less structured than the previous one. In a letter to those interested in leading workshops Susan Adams and Judith McMorland, two of the co-ordinators wrote:

We aren't able to state categorically what the 'programme' for the Conference will be, as the actual events will be largely determined on the first day, Monday, when we have a “Mixing and Sorting” session, identifying session leaders and interested participants, and balancing interests with and against each other so the days can have some structure.<sup>27</sup>

While the mornings involved studies or lectures the afternoon's emphasis was on creativity - through photography, poetry, needlework, drama, storytelling and other such creative mediums. Flexibility was an important element of the conference with afternoon sessions potentially flowing out of issues raised in the more formal morning sessions. The evenings drew together the day's events with participants identifying issues and insights.<sup>28</sup> One woman remembers the conference having “lots of time where we sat around in a big group, 100 women, and had plenaries...there was a lot of that form of meeting, as well as workshops. But the most memorable things was the plenaries, where a lot of those kind of, racism and political stuff was worked out.”<sup>29</sup> There was a hope that the programme would flow and individuals would take up the responsibility to initiate “worship, celebration, critical or structural analysis,

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<sup>24</sup> *Vashti's Voice*, No. 19, May/August (1983), p.9.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Adams, “The women and ministry consultations”, p.11.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>27</sup> Women's Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Rosemary Neave interview, Auckland 30 August 1995.

denominational meetings, projects meetings and action planning.”<sup>30</sup> The analogy was that of a skeleton that could be fleshed out by the contributions of participants.<sup>31</sup> The organisers shied away from “experts” standing up and speaking. Rather it was a sharing of gifts and knowledge collectively. The Reverend Sun Ai Park from North Korea attended the conference, sharing her story through poetry. She writes of her memories of the conference in a chapter of *With heads uncovered*, the post-conference publication. What stood out for her was the way in which the conference did away with “all the traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic way of running conferences which were basically expressions of patriarchy’s ideology.”<sup>32</sup> What she saw instead “was truly a feminine and consensus model.”<sup>33</sup> The August/October 1984 editorial of *Vashti’s Voice* spoke of each woman attending experiencing “a different conference due to its style and process. At any given time there might be several things happening at once.”<sup>34</sup>

The Conference venue at Camp Morley, a beach setting in the Manukau Harbour, was chosen with care. The setting encouraged creativity while allowing women individual space. Through the division of women with similar ideological positions into groups<sup>35</sup>, accommodated in cabins or caravans, closer support groups were established. The caravans had been specifically trucked in to accommodate all those who wished to attend. The groups shared sleeping space as well as having breakfast and lunch together. In this way some 110 women experienced the conference. One woman expressed the importance of the setting in *Vashti’s Voice*:

Camp Morley is set beside the far side of the Manukau Harbour. Where over a large stretch of mud and sand the tide comes in and out. So many times this background, this back cloth filtered into what we said and did. What we painted, what was written in poetry and prose. What was said in worship and dance. People were spoken about as shells thrown together on the beach –washed by the tide of God’s love. These moods of the Conference were reflected in the moods of the weather – storm and calm.

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<sup>30</sup> Women’s Resource Centre Conference Collection

<sup>31</sup> Susan Adams, “The women and ministry consultation”, p.12.

<sup>32</sup> Sun Ai Park, “Pakeha and Maori Women: my impressions in Aotearoa (New Zealand) for two weeks”, *With heads uncovered*, (Auckland 1988), p.15

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>34</sup> *Vashti’s Voice*, No.24, August/October (1984), p.3.

<sup>35</sup> This was not done autocratically. Women were given the opportunity to locate themselves within various identified groupings, ie. ‘safe church’/‘post-christian’ continuum. This was then broken into ‘radical-political action’/‘personal growth’ continuum. Small groups, therefore, were formed of women who felt they could relate to one another.

God's creation filtered into our lives and living. Our surroundings became the symbols we used to understand ourselves better. God's glory became in them and was recognized.<sup>36</sup>

The diversity of women attending, with varying needs and expectations inevitably meant that tension sometimes emerged during the five days. The members of the steering group themselves were clear that the conference was to be an opportunity to give expression to their feminist ideals. They also recognised, however, that women would come with differing perspectives, ranging from those shaped by the traditional church through to those moving towards a post-Christian position. "Some saw ministry as the focus – others spirituality."<sup>37</sup> Holding such views in tension was always going to be difficult. One woman's memory of the event was that there was a "lack of clarity over who the conference was for".<sup>38</sup> Adams also recalls that the tension between an experiential style and the desire for intellectual stimulation caused some discontent amongst participants.<sup>39</sup> However, in light of the fact that demand for the next conference in Christchurch in 1988 saw 100 women turned away, one wonders how strongly the negatives impacted.

While many women gained personally from attending the conference at Camp Morley, it culminated in addressing specific social justice issues. A telegram of support was sent to Prime Minister, David Lange affirming the Government's Nuclear Free Pacific stance. The Conference also called for a Commission to be established to investigate the "legal, ethical and funding issues of Artificial Insemination by Donor and In-Vitro Fertilization."<sup>40</sup> Churches were to be approached "to examine their role through theology and teaching, in the formation of attitudes towards violence against women, and towards lesbianism and homosexuality."<sup>41</sup> As a result of the conference a Women's Foundation was established to enable funds to be made available to initiate specific women centred projects. The funds were also to go towards training for women and to

<sup>36</sup> *Vashti's Voice*, No.24, August/October (1984), p.10.

<sup>37</sup> Susan Adams, "The women and ministry consultation", p.10.

<sup>38</sup> Respondent A interview.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Adams, "The women and ministry consultation", p.14.

<sup>40</sup> Women's Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

help women to attend conferences. In addition to this, a Credit Union was to be established to make specific purchases for women. This, however, failed to eventuate.<sup>42</sup> With the end of the conference came the dispersal of the seeds that had been sown, and nurtured while at the conference. Networking continued, with small pockets of women meeting to discuss and explore the implications of their experiences at Camp Morley. As happened with the first "Women in Ministry Conference", women's experiences were published in *Vashti's Voice*. A small book, *With heads uncovered* was also published as a 'by-product' of the conference. The intention was not to "tell the story of the Conference" or "contain papers delivered at it." Rather it was seen as "a collection of papers and articles written by women who attended, reflecting the context out of which the Conference grew and the women-experiences that were expressed there".<sup>43</sup>

The 1984 Conference had several names. The August/October 1984 issue of *Vashti's Voice* stated in its editorial, "Well the Conference at Camp Morley has happened at last! What an event! More like a multiplicity of conferences. For a start, it had several titles – ranging from Camp Morley, to 'that women's conference', the Women & Ministry Conference, or the Women's Spirituality conference."<sup>44</sup> Women referred to it differently depending on what was important to them. In *Vashti's Voice's*, promotion it is interesting to note a change in title. The May/August 1983 issue advertised it as "Women in Ministry II? Womanspirit Rising?" while the May/July 1984 advertised the conference as "AUGUST CONFERENCE – WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY". At the bottom of the form was written "second women and ministry conference". It appears that there was a shift in conference focus somewhere between these two editions. Certainly by the end of the conference the focus had shifted. This change in focus may denote a development of more radical thinking throughout the running of the conference. Rosemary Neave commented in an e-mail,<sup>45</sup> that she believed initially there may not have been a strong association with the "Womanspirit Rising" movement as such but by the end of the conference a shift in emphasis had occurred. Some women considered the conference too radical and left or distanced themselves from it later.

<sup>42</sup> Women's Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>43</sup> Jocelyn Armstrong, Erice Webb, "Introduction" *With heads uncovered*, p.5.

<sup>44</sup> *Vashti's Voice*, No.24, August/October (1984), p.3.

<sup>45</sup> Rosemary Neave electronic mail, 11 August 1998.

The Press Release printed after the Conference is headed, "WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY (Women and Ministry Conference II). The article goes on to state: "The focus for the conference was Women's Spirituality, and it was probably the first time such a diverse group of women had met to explore together their spirituality as it relates to the issues of everyday life."<sup>46</sup> The previous conference had been concerned with "women in ministry". This shift allowed for the net to be cast wider to incorporate more women of diverse thought. Within the advertisements themselves "spirituality" was never defined, its definition in fact seems almost elusive in character. The women I interviewed varied in their understanding of the term. From the indications in subsequent material, however, there is a sense of women defining their faith holistically, having drawn away from the soul/body dichotomy and linking their faith, the essence of themselves closely with their sexuality. With the net widened, those who considered themselves in a post-christian position could be involved as their "spirituality" was not necessarily defined by "Christianity".

"AUGUST '84 saw us reach a high point in a process begun as 'Woman's Spirit Rising'."<sup>47</sup> The term "Woman's Spirit Rising" also appeared in the advertisement in *Vashti's Voice* in the May/August 1983 issue. This reflected the sense of (spiritual) energy rising as women got together and shared their "stories", searched for new ways of doing "ministry" or challenged societal and Christian norms that were oppressive. It spoke of the anticipation of change, brought about by the strength of women working together. The term itself was not original. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow edited a book entitled *Womanspirit Rising. A Feminist Reader in Religion*, published in New York in 1979. Mary Hancock in *Faces of the Goddess*, writes of her awareness of the "Womanspirit movement" in Britain and America which was "blossoming" in the late seventies and early eighties. The phrase, although borrowed, aptly described the developing sense of enthusiasm and excitement intrinsic to the conference. In the May/August 1983 edition of *Vashti's Voice* the planning group expressed their desire

...to focus more clearly on the potential and nature of women's spirit in New Zealand (as in the wider world). As we share together, we would hope

<sup>46</sup> Women's Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Adams, "The women and ministry consultation", p.10.



to develop our ability to support one another in the struggle towards a partnership in which this spirit can be claimed, named and offered.<sup>48</sup>

As with the 1981 conference, sharing their experiences and telling their “stories” was an important feature of the 1984 conference. Such “sharing” exposed

...the pain and anguish of being watched, criticised, suppressed;” and the desire of women to leap across the pain to a new place, to burst out of the present structures, yet also, for some, to continue the struggle of a commitment to the churches and their structures; the desire to bridge the gap between the past, present and future, to release the power of the potential woman-spirit – dynamic and strong.<sup>49</sup>

From this “woman-spirit” flowed the sense of discovery, of charting new waters or shaping something new and exciting. The need to discover “new ways of doing things” and to work “together to create a world in which everyone can live free of domination and oppression”<sup>50</sup> held a sense of urgency and a determination to work toward change.

This “sharing of experiences” took place within space that women had “claimed” for themselves. Camp Morley was obviously the site for the “sharing”, but “claiming space” appears to have meant more than the mere physicality of the conference. It expressed women’s choice to take time out to evaluate, to challenge and to be challenged. It meant women saying that they valued themselves enough to recognise their own needs and that of women generally and to allow themselves time for introspection. It spoke of assertiveness and empowerment. Sun Ai Park made an interesting observation, “I must say that we lived women’s spirituality rather than discussing it. Sharing of experiences was more important than learning about theoretical analysis of the theme.”<sup>51</sup>

The analogy of “birth” or “new life emerging” was once again portrayed in the verse, printed below, written by women attending the conference. This time however, there is a sense of further growth in the case of Enid Bennett’s piece “Poem for my sisters”. Sally Latham’s piece echoes the frustration of some that the birthing process is too slow.

<sup>48</sup> *Vashti’s Voice* No.19, May/August (1983), p.10.

<sup>49</sup> Women’s Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

"CONFERENCE '84

It's like a birth  
The first day  
Exciting, nerve wracking  
....will the baby feed?  
....will it happen alright?  
Apprehension .. maybe.

The second day  
.... Beginning to enjoy it  
tired but it's fulfilling

The third day  
The questions  
The tears  
The anxiety  
.... Will we ever make it?  
What are we doing anyway?  
What are we hoping to achieve  
Will we?  
W....  
We will ....

Maybe this birth  
is like your previous one  
But that one  
Had its own life  
And it grew.  
This one  
Has its life  
And it will grow  
We may not know  
How or where  
But it will

"But do we have to  
keep on giving birth?"  
you ask  
"Why can't  
we work with  
a teenager  
or even an adult?"

Well some of us are  
But maybe not here  
This is still the birthing place  
Tomorrow will be for you.<sup>52</sup>

POEM FOR MY SISTERS  
Woman-tree, tree of life  
Deep grounded roots

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<sup>51</sup> Sun Ai Park, "Pakeha and Maori women", p.16.

<sup>52</sup> Sally Latham "Conference 1984", *Vashti's Voice*, No.24, August/October (1984), p.12.



Arms outspread to shelter  
 Protective of tender growing young  
 Bonded with each other  
 And with all of life

Swaying gently  
 Resisting proudly  
 Thrusting upwards

Searching, probing, claiming light  
 and space  
 Sap rising

Body blooming  
 Fruit producing

Women-tapestry  
 Pattern and thread  
 We make the pattern  
 One in sisterhood.  
 A web of many colours  
 Wholeness in diversity  
 We are the song  
 We are the singers  
 As we dance, as we weave  
 We make all things new.<sup>53</sup>

The poetry and prose, the conference discussions and workshops all showed the willingness of women to make themselves vulnerable to each other. They were willing to ask the hard questions and they drew strength from one another despite their diversity. Women were acknowledging that they were “agents for change”. As Jocelyn Armstrong and Erice Webb write in the introduction of *With heads uncovered*,

One by one women are ‘uncovering their heads’ in the churches. We are shaking loose the bonds that have held us so long. As agents for change we are reclaiming our role as lifegivers, as co-mothers with God, as co-reconcilers with Christ. This is the new journey of faith. The experiences in this book are a start in documenting that journey. A journey we make together for life, for peace.<sup>54</sup>

*With heads uncovered* was, “one of the first collections of essays expressing feminist theology to appear in Aotearoa.”<sup>55</sup> It acted as an important means to gather together much of the current thinking and express the concerns of women particularly within the Christian tradition. Further analysis of the material within the book will be included in the following chapter.

<sup>53</sup> Enid Bennett, *Warp & Weft*, p.4.

<sup>54</sup> Jocelyn Armstrong, Erice Webb, “Introduction” p.9.

Other spin-offs from this conference included further development of the networks.

New women's groups formed to discuss issues and encourage each other, smaller local conferences were run to maintain the impetus of the national conference:

What has happened informally at the end of each of these conferences is pretty much somebody has said "well it was in Auckland this time, it was in Wellington last time it's up to Christchurch to organise it next time". Now when we say Christchurch this is totally kind of a thrown in to the air type of thing, and it's totally up to somebody from Christchurch to sort of say "shall we get together a group and organise something?" So when I say it's a network it's totally informal. So a group from Christchurch did get together. And each group that has planned it has been regional, they've claimed the 'mantel' if you like....but it hasn't been formally passed on to any particular group. It's just sort of "Christchurch you do something" and somebody said "yes well we'll pick it up. And it will be a conference in this tradition." And they have tried to work, generally to keep in touch with the planning with some people around the country but do it themselves. And they've been trusted to do that process, raise money and set the process and stuff like that.<sup>56</sup>

Out of such an informal process came the 1988 conference. In July 1987, a group of ecumenical women from Christchurch took up the 'mantle' and began to plan for the next national conference. The working group once again incorporated women from a wide range of faith backgrounds. Those involved were:

Hilary Barlow, Anglican Priest, Curate and Grandmother  
 Lois Clarke, Methodist Minister at Hornby Methodist Parish  
 Anna Holmés, Medical Practitioner, Catholic Laywoman  
 Jenny Keightley, Medical Practitioner, Presbyterian Elder  
 Margaret Lovell-Smith, Writer, Ecumenical  
 Janice Rogers, Mother, Ecumenical  
 Mary Scully, Catholic, Member of Sophia  
 Sue Spindler, Active in Women's Worship and Women's Spirituality  
 Groups, Ecumenical  
 Barbara Stephens, Director of Christian World Service, Ordained, Church of Christ  
 Susan Thompson, Student  
 Lynne Wall, Methodist Minister, St Albans Parish, Christchurch  
 (Convenor)<sup>57</sup>

Approximately twenty other women also assisted this core group. As in the past, opinions were sought nationally as to the shape of the conference. *Vashti's Voice* once again acted as an 'agent' for this process. Advertising for the conference is said to have

<sup>55</sup> Rev. Enid Bennett, *Warp & Weft*, p.5.

<sup>56</sup> Rosemary Neave interview, Auckland.

<sup>57</sup> Women's Resource Centre Conference Collection.

appeared in Crosslinks, Zealandia, Accent, NCC New Services and Anglican papers.<sup>58</sup> Women from smaller rural areas were targeted and encouraged to be involved, being perceived as potentially more isolated and needing of support.<sup>59</sup>

The organising committee took pains to clearly define whom the conference was for and the direction it was taking. Minutes of the Working Group show members grappled with the issue between the August and December meetings.<sup>60</sup> It was decided to call the conference *The Third National Ecumenical Feminist Women's Conference*. It was imperative, in the view of the committee, that 'feminist' be included in the title so that non-feminist women were not misled into coming to the conference and then being disappointed. It was decided that the Conference was "not for those women already comfortably in the church but for those questioning their role in the churches".<sup>61</sup> In the advertising brochure, the "Who" included:

- women who are actively involved in the churches but whose needs are not fully met there
- women in spirituality and Christian Feminist groups
- women outside the church who are exploring the feminist perspective in theology and spirituality<sup>62</sup>

There could be no misunderstanding the direction the conference was to take. Its theme was, "Empowering to Transform." This emphasised the active role women were to take in claiming their own spirituality and to bring about change within society. The advertising brochure explained:

**To Transform**

Ourselves - and then the rest of the world!  
Workshops being offered at the Conference, and the experience of the Conference itself, will provide lots of opportunities for personal growth and change. The Conference will also provide an opportunity to come to a better understanding of the oppressive and destructive forces in society, and ways in which we can work together to transform them.<sup>63</sup>

The aims were further explained in a Committee Press Release:

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Rev. Enid Bennett, *Warp & Weft*, p.5.

<sup>60</sup> Women's Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Women's Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

While it is certainly true that the number of women exploring feminist theology and spirituality is increasing, it can still be a lonely and isolated experience. The conference will provide an opportunity for gaining strength from a community experience. It will provide a supportive and creative environment for exploring and gaining new insights into theology and spirituality.

The format was similar to the 1984 Conference, with studies and discussion in the morning sessions and more creative activities in the afternoon workshops. Morning workshops covered such topics as *Racism and Theology* where the links between the two would be unravelled and *Help! The church doesn't make sense anymore* where women in the early stages of questioning their faith or church 'tradition' could begin to explore new ideas. The workshop *Devas, Dowsing and the Cosmic Dance* reflected the widening interest and a willingness to incorporate ideas foreign to the church 'tradition'. Other morning workshops included, *Spirituality, Mysticism and Women*, *How can I Transform myself*, *Women and Structural Change*, and *Wisdom and wise women speak*. The afternoon workshops once again offered a wide range of topics, from *Invading the Sanctuary*, an opportunity to creatively explore new symbols to *Exploring the Goddess*, an introduction to ideas of the 'Goddess' and ritual.<sup>64</sup> Clearly some of the workshops catered for those exploring beyond the boundaries of Christianity.

The working group felt strongly that Convenors of workshops should not be paid. Rather, they should offer their resources freely, reflecting a "women's way" of doing things.<sup>65</sup> This decision was not made lightly. One potential convenor raised the issue of not being paid, seeing it as "a typical male rip-off of women's energies".<sup>66</sup> The organisers, while sympathising with this view and recognising that taking workshops was the means by which some made their living, remained firm in their resolve. Convenors were offered travel subsidies and a waiving of registration fees. "By having a conference with no outside experts; no keynote speakers; but where women

<sup>64</sup> Women's Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> 1988 *Women's ministries and spirituality conference. Empowering to transform. A resource book for women*, (Christchurch, 1988), p.89.

empowered each other, we felt we were offering an important and alternative way of doing things.”<sup>67</sup>

The working group intentionally decided to limit the Conference to a live-in arrangement. The accommodation at Rangi Ruru Girls College, where the conference was held, was stretched to accommodate 150 women. While the desire for a ‘live-in’ arrangement prevented many women from attending, those organising the conference believed that to encourage a sense of community and retreat the conference had to be limited to the number they could accommodate. With an open conference, the potential for a sense of intrusion and a detraction from the “energy” emerging as the women spent time together would be encouraged. “When in retreat like this different realisations are possible at individual and collective levels. The power of transformation is realised in another way. Such separation empowers when back in ordinary life.”<sup>68</sup> However, despite this Christchurch women were invited to an open meeting on the Saturday evening. Organisers recognised that this had potential difficulties but planned to see that time was taken to draw both groups together.

Again, the conference engendered some discontent. Those attending ranged from ordained women through to pagan women, churched and non-churched women. The eldest attending was 80, the youngest just 19. So it was perhaps surprising that there was not more disagreement. However, the biggest area of concern was from women who felt that too much emphasis was placed on “empowering oneself” rather than “empowering collectively” in order to “challenge the systems of oppression.”<sup>69</sup> Webb explained in an article in *Broadsheet*:

Having the space and time to explore both pleasure and pain was, for Erice, a privilege, in a world with “other women daily spending their energy on basic survival. So my reaction to the individualistic style of the conference, its lack of collectivity and awareness of privilege, felt like the presence of a pea under a pile of mattresses. I, a princess of white privilege, was having a bad night’s sleep!”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>68</sup> Women’s Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>69</sup> *Women’s Resource Centre Newsletter*, 8/2 September 1988, Auckland, p.1.

<sup>70</sup> “Liberating ministries”, *Broadsheet* No.163, November, 1988, p.26.

Another perspective, however, was one of enjoyment, of time to be refreshed. Enid Bennett recalls in her interview:

I enjoyed...It was more apolitical than the others and although there were some who weren't happy about it, they thought it was a bit too much focused on own spiritual, empowering ourselves rather than changing society - there was a bit of debate about that in the plenary – but I enjoyed some real re-creation at that point and spent more time wandering on my own and resting in my room.<sup>71</sup>

In post-conference messages to the church an organiser wrote, “Many of the women attending the conference are committed to social justice and anti-racism work, but the conference was not issue oriented. Instead it acted more as a time to gather strength from the collective energy of the other women: a ‘watering stop on the journey’”.<sup>72</sup>

As with the 1984 Conference political statements were made and messages sent to appropriate groups voicing concerns or questioning actions. These included messages to the Labour Party Conference voicing dissatisfaction with Government’s economic policy which was seen as disadvantaging “those already powerless” and to the Anglican and Methodist churches urging them to fulfil the commitment made regarding the Treaty of Waitangi. Letters were also sent to other churches urging the recognition of the Treaty as “the covenant between Maori and Pakeha in Aotearoa”. Churches who were members of the World Council of Churches or the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa-New Zealand were questioned on their plans to implement the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women 1988-1998.<sup>73</sup>

That vitality overflowed into regional conferences. Christchurch and Auckland held follow up Conferences just months afterwards. Women who had been turned away from the Christchurch conference were eager to attend regional conferences. Further networking occurred as a result of the enthusiasm engendered by the gatherings. “Empowering to transform” the title of the third *Women’s ministries and spirituality*

<sup>71</sup> Reverend Enid Bennett interview, Tairua, 2 September 1995.

<sup>72</sup> Women’s Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*

conference or *The third ecumenical feminist women's conference*,<sup>74</sup> reflected the organisers desire to facilitate the "empowerment" or strengthening of the women attending. Individual empowerment was encouraged which would ultimately lead to societal transformation.

The post-conference resource book included brief summaries of events, photos of the conference artwork, prose and poetry, songs, personal accounts, letters, statements and resolutions. The introduction acknowledged the theme would mean different things to different women but the organisers felt certain "that every woman there will have received some kind of empowerment; experienced some kind of transformation."<sup>75</sup>

Jenny recounts in her reflections:

Before the conference, I thought empowering to transform would have to be an inner conversion, an inner transformation. And, thinking back on the days, that is true. But I also gained an empowerment from seeing the transformation in other women. I saw some very articulate and strong-spirited women there. That invited something in me also to be a lot stronger in what I believe. So that was empowering.

And also, I feel that the collective spirit there of a whole lot of women together, of such different ages, and coming from such different stages in their growth, their life-span, in itself was an empowerment. To be in a group with someone who could be my mother, if not my grandmother, who was delighting in the things that were coming from young women, was empowering.

Another aspect was that being with a whole group of women, I felt transformed in acknowledging to myself that I belonged to the feminist movement. This is an empowerment in itself – to know that I belong to this collective group, and through their collective energy I'm also part of something that is moving and growing and changing.<sup>76</sup>

The resource book, snippets in the *Women's resource centre newsletter*, and an article in *Broadsheet*<sup>77</sup> related the experiences of women attending and again reflect emerging themes and phrases from the conference. The titles hold a key to the essence of the conference. One title, *Women's ministries and spirituality conference* appears to be the "umbrella" heading. *The third national ecumenical feminist women's conference* is a

<sup>74</sup> Within the advertising of the conference the titles once again varied, perhaps reflecting the emphasis of the advertiser.

<sup>75</sup> *Empowering to transform. A resource book for women*, p.7.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p.65.

<sup>77</sup> "Liberating ministries", *Broadsheet*, No.163, November 1988, p16-29.



further explanation of what the conference was about and links it with the two previous conferences. They are both important. Gone is the “and” or “in” between the ‘women’s’ and ‘ministries’ showing a change in emphasis. As Margie Lovell-Smith explains in her personal notes of the conference.

Tied up with this, was our decision to label the Conference a “Women’s Ministries and Spirituality Conference” instead of calling it a “Women in Ministry Conference” which is how the former two conferences had been called...We hoped also by labelling it the “Third National Ecumenical Feminist Women’s Conference”, we were making it clear who the Conference was intended for,...The words ‘ecumenical’ and ‘ministries’, indicated the strong links which the Conference still had with the churches and the ecumenical movement: the word ‘spirituality’ indicated that we were not limiting the conference to women who were in the Christian tradition.<sup>78</sup>

It is interesting how by the use of the term “spirituality” the doors open wider. In interviewing women during my research each one had a differing definition of ‘spirituality’. It conjured up a range of understandings and the inclusion of the term here allowed women within the church to attend while also opening doors for women within a pagan tradition. Rosie in her post-conference reflections expresses some of what “spirituality” came to mean to her through the conference.

I express a lot of myself through art and that is spirituality. Because to me, my God is not in a church. My God is within me, and within all of life, including animals, birds, plants. And so creativity is a part of all that. That’s what the dance Genesis did to me – because we were so much into the whole creation of it. And it’s maybe reawakened that – I think that’s what I came to this conference to do. God, or whatever you like to call it – creation – brought me down here to retap into my creativity, so I can then take it back and live it more in my life.<sup>79</sup>

Pat Jacobsen in her reflections of the conference challenges the traditional church view of spirituality,

I think it is saying to the organised Christian church that many women do not find spirituality within the church, for their spirituality is far wider than the traditional church allows.

It is a spirituality which gathers up the mystics of old, looking at ancient models of spirituality where there is an affirmation of healing, empowering, self-affirmation, even looking at models of witches who were often on the outskirts of community and seen as healers, but outside of traditional church life.

In claiming this women are saying that there is a whole richness of untapped resources. Many women find the structures of churches inhibiting and smothering.

<sup>78</sup> Women’s Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>79</sup> *Empowering to transform. A resource book for women*, p.66.



One formation women find helpful is the circle. It allows each person to be included, each person affirmed, and recognised, whose energy is supported and added to, rather than diffused. This in itself supports growth.<sup>80</sup>

“Feminist” further defined the conference, encouraging women who were interested or involved in the feminist movement to attend, while deterring women not aligned with feminism. “Ecumenical” acted in a similar fashion. Women from across the denominational spectrum attended the conference. However, as is noted in the introduction to the conference resource book:

The word ecumenical took on new meaning at this conference. As well as the main Christian denominations being represented, there were women present who claim no Christian connections – some have never had them, others have rejected them. The Conference provided an important meeting point and opportunity for women who know they are religious, to explore the common ground between them, despite the very different labels they usually wear.<sup>81</sup>

The word “ministry” seems to lose its significance in this conference. The 1981 conference had set out to draw women, ordained or lay, to come together to encourage one another and explore new ways of doing ministries. By the 1988 conference the emphasis on ordained women was gone and women from all spheres were being encouraged to explore their spirituality in an atmosphere conducive to facilitate unity and strength.

The organisers desired to create a “safe place” so women would be comfortable and “trust themselves to be open”.<sup>82</sup> As Marilyn relates in *Broadsheet* the conference was a:

safe and sacred space where she was free to trust my own experience, share the fruits of others’ pains and labours and continue to unearth some of those deep roots of ‘crippling myths and binding truths’ that have shaped so much of my history.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p.68.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>83</sup> “Liberating ministries”, *Broadsheet*, No.163, November (1988), p.27.

Lynne Wall writes of her sadness that women do not necessarily feel “safe” in their local parish to explore, but rather sense the pressure to conform. She saw that women gifted to each other at the conference a “safe place”.

Here was a place and a time when a woman could be free to be herself in a warm and supportive atmosphere. There was opportunity to try out new ways of thinking and being without fear of ridicule or rejection, censure or condemnation. Women took risks in what they said, in the way they let their hair down, and in the sharing of community events. The risks paid off. There was a deeply felt tangible acceptance of one another which was all the more precious because of the wide diversity of the women present. I felt particularly moved when lesbian women felt free and safe enough to be themselves.<sup>84</sup>

Within this safe place “transformation” could take place. “For it is only when we find the safe place, that we can relax enough to realise the deep spiritual longing within us. Gone is the frantic searching and the ladder of marks on the spiritual thermometer. God is present in the touch and the tears, in the struggle and the sharing.”<sup>85</sup>

This “safe place” allowed women to be open to new ideas and to one another. Such was the level of acceptance and tolerance of one another’s beliefs and experiences some women publicly acknowledged their lesbianism for the first time. Women drew strength and encouragement from the atmosphere created. Audrey Sharp, co-facilitator of a workshop on the Goddess wrote,

I admit to feeling a little apprehensive about the Conference emphasis upon arriving in Christchurch. Would Christian themes dominate and would I therefore feel out of place by not belonging to a church? My fears proved unjustified. I found myself linked to all the women present through our shared spirituality, christian or pagan, and felt all around me an openness which allowed differing views to be shared in trust and good faith.<sup>86</sup>

Margie Lovell-Smith shared the highlights for her,

The special features of the Conference for me were the acceptance, the tolerance and the affirmation. No major divisions or conflicts surfaced although the women present were from widely differing religious backgrounds including church-going christians and women who were pagan. Women were left free to experience the Conference in their own way, and the facilitators of workshops and the collective events created

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<sup>84</sup> *Empowering to transform. A resource book for women*, p.63.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p.63.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p.67.

experiences which drew on our common bonds rather than showing up our differences. There was an enormous sense of vitality, fun and enjoyment.<sup>87</sup>

The analogy of birth, or new life does not emerge as strongly in the conference material. There is a sense of moving on from birthing into growing allowing the new to grow and explore, to take many different shapes. The spiral symbol on the front of the resource book, pictured in Figure 1, depicts the essence of this rising/growing energy. At its the centre was 'womanspirit'. "There was a sense that some very exciting things were happening throughout Aotearoa, and that the 'Womanspirit' once roused would not be sleeping again."<sup>88</sup>



Figure 1. The Spiral. From the front cover of 1988 *Empowering to transform. Resource book for women* also used on the advertisements and pamphlets for the conference.

<sup>87</sup> Women's Resource Centre Conference Collection.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

The next national conference was not until 1994. Auckland women took up the “mantle” and began to plan in 1992. They hoped to invite visiting Christian feminist Carter Heyward to speak at the Conference. Her visit was cancelled and with the focus on Centennial Suffrage Year Celebrations in 1993 the Conference was postponed until May 1994. The planning Committee was once again an ecumenical group of lay and ordained women. Those involved were Erice Fairbrother, a student at St Johns Theological College, Diane Strevens, Rosemary Neave of the Women’s Resource Centre, Beryl Turner, Ngaire Brader, Jean Brookes and Reverend Enid Bennett. The Auckland Women’s Resource Centre<sup>89</sup> offered administrative support. With the demise of *Vashti’s Voice* in 1992 the Centre acted as an important networking medium. Consultation occurred throughout the country, as it had with previous conferences.

A clear focus was immediately established for the conference. In the published pre-conference book the introduction relates the planning process:

In the time since the 1988 Conference, interest had been growing for having a gathering that focused more directly on developing and articulating a feminist theology which reflects our context here in Aotearoa New Zealand, especially as Pakeha/Tauīwi women....While there is always a need to pass the message on and to provide opportunities for new women to explore the issues, it seemed that there was also a need to pull together the threads of what women around the country were saying and doing in terms of feminist theology.<sup>90</sup>

It was therefore not to be a consciousness-raising exercise but a “second level conference” – it was to take another step forward.<sup>91</sup> It was an opportunity to look back at what had already been achieved but more importantly it was an opportunity to focus on future direction.<sup>92</sup> Five key areas were perceived as important: Christology, violence,

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<sup>89</sup> *Auckland women’s resource centre* arose out a common belief amongst women in the networks that there was a need specifically for “**resourcing for and by women** associated with the church, especially those who feel that their needs are not presently being met by the church structures”. Funding was sought by the *Friday Group* from various sources. Much of the funding initially came from the St Johns Trust Board of the theological college. It has developed to the point where the readership of their monthly newsletter is around 800. Their library contains a wide variety of material on spirituality and is an important resource for women not just in Auckland but throughout New Zealand.

<sup>90</sup> *Women and church: shaping the future. 4<sup>th</sup> National feminist theology conference Pre Conference papers* (Auckland, 1994), p.2.

<sup>91</sup> Rosemary Neave interview, Auckland.

<sup>92</sup> Rev. Enid Bennett interview, Tairua.

sexuality and friendship, women-church-power, and our context.<sup>93</sup> A symbol or logo, the 'flaming star' was developed for the conference (see Figure 2). The five arms represented one of the major sessions. The centre represented the first major session on "Our Context –Aotearoa, feminist, Christian, people of the Treaty, the economy." These were linked together with a thread which included "eating, laughing, caucusing, mazing, sleeping, challenging, networking, celebrating, meditating, growing, building, loving, massaging, changing."<sup>94</sup> It questioned how the ideas, the networks, the energy could be drawn into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "From where we stand, how do we hold ourselves together and what are our tasks as women in relation to church facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century?"<sup>95</sup>

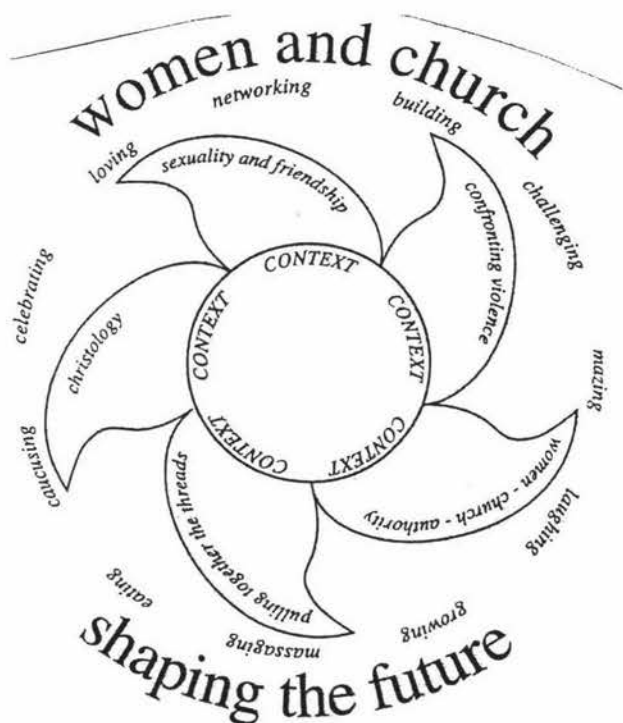


Figure 2. From the front cover of *Women and church. 4<sup>th</sup> National feminist theology conference. Pre-conference papers*. It also appeared on the post-conference publication and as on conference advertising.

<sup>93</sup> *Pre Conference Papers*, (1994), p.3.

<sup>94</sup> *Women and church: shaping the future. 4<sup>th</sup> National feminist theology conference. Conference Musings*, (Auckland, 1994), p.1.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p.2.

Pre conference papers were prepared with women and groups throughout the country “who were pushing the edges in some way” invited to contribute.<sup>96</sup> As had happened with the 1984 Conference, groups and individuals planning to attend the conference were encouraged to read the booklet and think about the issues to be faced. The booklet acted as a starting point for discussion. Key questions to contemplate were:

How does this writing inform us as we seek to develop a feminist theology in the area of  
 Christology – Who is Jesus? Who is Christ?  
 Violence: what is it about our theology that promotes a culture of violence/non-violence  
 Sexuality and Friendship: what new ethics/values will help us promote healthy relationships and community  
 Women-Church-Power: how do we relate to the Church as we know it?  
 What is the nature of our challenge to traditional power models, what other models can we offer?  
 Our Context: what does it mean to live as Pakeha/Tauitiwi in this land? What are the challenges and responsibilities?<sup>97</sup>

The Conference titled *Women and church: shaping the future. 4<sup>th</sup> National feminist theology conference* was held in Taupo at the spiritual retreat centre of Tauhara, with approximately 130 women attending. Rosemary in her interview described it as being more “process oriented” than “workshops and talk”. Enid Bennett described the structure in the *Conference Musings* booklet published after the Conference as:

The basic structure was to have major sessions built around six topics, with group work and plenaries making up the bulk of the time. There could be six day-time sessions leaving the evenings free. The next meeting affirmed some significant advantages of this method. **It would target issues, enable a common voice while appreciating differences, have reflections built-in, and demonstrate a collective way of working.**<sup>98</sup>

There was also room for caucus groups to meet and discuss issues relevant to them. A number of ‘caucus’s’ developed including one for lesbian women, for women involved in alternative services, a Catholic women’s caucus, a Methodist women’s caucus and a caucus for women living in religious communities. The structure of the Conference allowed time for these informal meetings, enabling women to draw the most from the five days.

<sup>96</sup> Letters and questionnaires were sent out to women in the network. There was also a request for names to be put forward as “potential resource people and conference facilitators”. It was designed to build a resource base, identifying people not only to help with the 1994 conference but that could be used as a resource for those planning future events.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid*, p.3.

<sup>98</sup> *Conference musings*, (1994), p.1.

Again, there were areas of contention. One woman I interviewed spoke of the lay/ordained divide when questioned about any differences between the groups.

As a lay person I was conscious of it. It was a very strong issue that came up then. My experience of Women in Ministry in terms of ordained ministry and lay ministry – I tread a very precarious line there. I still wonder whether in fact women are buying out when they go into ordained ministry. I find an easier relationship with liberal Catholic women than I do toward ordained women, although I see their struggle and I look back to myself and say – what has changed? What have ordained women done? Through all these struggles what changes have occurred in the Church? I can't see much change. That despite the energy and despite our fight for inclusive language, despite our fight for a more equitable way to worship and be together I still feel that the confines of the institution dampen that and restrict women. So I can't honestly say that I see any progress, in fact I see that those women are very tired of working so hard to retain what they have. That was an issue that was discussed quite hotly at Tauhara. It was a difficult one, there was a lot of tears, a lot of pain about it. I don't think it was an intentional thing about ordained women oppressing lay women. But I wonder whether when we ordain people, we elevate people and simply through that process separate women. I find that very sad. And I go back to the structure that imposes that.<sup>99</sup>

For some this was more of an issue than with others. Another woman spoke of a sense of anti-intellectualism with those studying theology in an academic setting having little opportunity to draw encouragement from one another.

One thing that I was very sad about was that there was quite a few of us who were doing theses and academic work and it felt that there was almost an unwritten law, an unwritten expectation that there should not be experts in the sense that there should not be people saying "this is how it should be you people down there listen". But it had the effect that there did not seem to be the space for us to get together and really talk about what we were doing. And as a feminist person working in an academic institution my only reason for working in a feminist scholarship is being another voice in women's thinking and I was rather sad that there was no place for me to have conversations about that....It seemed to be almost an anti-intellectualism.<sup>100</sup>

Despite the areas of dissatisfaction, from interviews and jottings in the post-conference musings it appears that there was also a great deal to celebrate. One woman summarised this as being "about freedom to be who we are as well as to hang on to our faith. To express our faith in as many different ways as we wish."<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Chris Church interview, Christchurch 16 December 1995.

<sup>100</sup> Respondent E.

<sup>101</sup> Chris Church interview, Christchurch.



The title of the conference is again an important indication of conference intent. Gone is “Women and ministry”, “ecumenical”, and “Women’s spirituality”. The emphasis had changed. Time needed to be spent focusing on what “church” was for women, or what they wanted it to become. “Feminist theology” was pivotal to this analysis, which explains the title *Women and church shaping the future. 4<sup>th</sup> National feminist theology conference*. The inclusive nature of feminist theology enables ‘ecumenical’ to be assumed within the title. ‘Women and church’ clarified the intent of the conference to work within the boundaries of the ‘church’. For women who have stepped outside this boundary the conference would have appealed less than the 1988 conference. ‘Church’, therefore, narrowed the intent of the conference as “spirituality” had broadened it. The “4<sup>th</sup> National” acknowledged previous conferences while the “feminist” further defined the conference emphasis.

The post-conferences publication again incorporated poems, prose, music and findings of the Conference. Rosemary Neave, the editor, wrote in the introduction that she felt the title was particularly pertinent.

Musings seemed like a good word to describe this book, and looking it up in the dictionary only seemed to confirm the idea.

Muse v. ponder, meditate; say meditatively

Muse n. any of nine sister goddesses in Greek and Roman Mythology presiding over branches of learning and the arts; (muse) poets’ inspiring genius (*NZ Pocket Oxford Dictionary*)<sup>102</sup>

From a giant cardboard box of “newsprint, a not quite comprehensive log book of reflections, miscellaneous letters and feedback”<sup>103</sup> the material, with the minimum of editing, was typed into the book. Despite the seeming lack of cohesiveness Rosemary comments on the “amount of common threads running through the musings”.<sup>104</sup>

Rosemary reflects further,

“What you have here is a series of ideas/images/reflections – half formed ideas, flashes of inspiration. Alongside the Pre-Conference papers, I believe that they will contribute to the ongoing development of a theology that moves beyond patriarchy and grounds us firmly in this context of Aotearoa/New Zealand at the end of the 20th Century.”<sup>105</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Rosemary Neave, “Introduction”, *Conference Musings*, (1994).

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

The analogy of birthing, never far from the surface of any of the conferences, was again expressed in the *Musings*. Marcellin writes "We were engaged in gestation and were delivered of a healthy bonding of 130 women. Something was created in those days which will be remembered by me and I fully expect by all, for a long, long time."<sup>106</sup>

Carole expresses in poetry the essence of the conference for her:

### Tauhara '94

A place of Peace and Disturbance;  
Of pain and hope;  
Of struggle  
and of celebrations.

We come from many places  
and spaces.  
Exploring our inner being  
Sharing our experiences  
Challenges the present  
Re-creating the future.

We all belong;  
We all have our stories  
We all know the violation.  
We cry  
We laugh  
We love  
Supporting each other  
Hands outstretched  
To be open to change  
Always vulnerable  
But knowing we have choices;  
that together we can make a difference;  
that relationships rather than structures stand.

We are community  
Grasping opportunities  
Free to move on  
Honest  
Letting go  
Liberating ourselves and others  
Offering ourselves  
Offering our lives  
As we journey together  
Dancing, Hugs,  
Tears,  
Bring unity.

The meeting place;  
encompassing diversity  
Embracing life  
Claiming our place

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<sup>106</sup> *Conferences musings*, (1994), p.52.

Exploring new ways.  
 Grieving  
 Dreaming  
 Taking chance on mystery  
 Listening to the call; within, between and beyond.  
 Experiencing hope;  
 Transformation  
 Celebrating new life.

We journey together  
 the spiral flows on<sup>107</sup>

Each conference recognised the 'journeying' process. However, women at the 1994 conference seemed to recognise and articulate it more than in previous conferences. Inherent in this was the concept of the 'process' being important and the concept of 'getting there' or 'knowing it all' being foreign. There was a genuine openness to learning and dialoguing with one another. Diane in her reflections of the conference writes,

the conference process encouraged a fairly thorough deconstruction of Christian beliefs which enabled me to free myself from much of the oppressive cultural baggage which weighs down the 'official line', and to hold on to the life-giving, liberating aspects of the Christian faith. I recognise this will not be the last time this happens – it is part of an ongoing journey.<sup>108</sup>

In post-conference reflections the warmth and affirmation of one another was openly expressed and an essential element of the conference. Bertha wrote "The shared search of truth, self-discovery and understanding of one another's spirituality, point of view, joy and suffering, was very meaningful."<sup>109</sup> A particular highlight and significant image for the conference was introduced by the DAWN network from Dunedin. They brought with them a "good quality man's suit" modelling it at the beginning of the conference. "It represented the patriarch – it was well made, good quality, fitted men well. But it didn't fit women well – wrong shape, size, colour, fabric..."<sup>110</sup> The Dunedin group challenged the conference to re-shape the suit. During the conference it was "referred to

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, p53.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, p.53.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p.51

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, p4.

and worked with as women turned it inside out, cut off sleeves, sewed on coloured fabric.”<sup>111</sup> This was powerful symbol as women assumed the role of being agents of change. Enid Bennett in the *Musings* reflects:

...In the beginning...there was a suit, ill-fitting, shapeless, drab, good for nothing. Good for nothing? Nothing good about it? Surely it was good for something...

So...where is the old suit? Gone for ever? It seemed discarded and yet....One woman took careful and gracious time with the garment, she applies her skills, her gifts, her desire to reshape...It began a journey towards new beauty and usefulness. Another young woman, from her own life's experience, saw that she could do something to the discarded garment and show that she is a mover, a re-mover and shaker; she is a dancer, an inviter to new energy, to new ways of being.<sup>112</sup>

A video of evening activities at the conference caught the vibrancy and spontaneity of the women involved. It captured the sense of energy generated, the laughter, the irreverence and sheer pleasure of being women together free to be themselves no matter their sexuality. It captured the pain and tears, the depth of anger experienced toward “the church” and the strength gained from each other. One of the evenings (partially caught on video) flowed into a noisy night of singing “raucously and loudly all the traditional church hymns that we could think of and every verse we knew.”<sup>113</sup> For some it was “somehow a cleansing and exorcising”, it was about the “freedom to be who we are as well as to hang on to our faith, to express our faith in as many different ways as we wish.”<sup>114</sup>

This “freedom to be who we are” has been an essential feature of each of the conferences. Chris Church also recollects the “exciting and intense atmosphere” in the earlier conferences, where women were able to “claim something for themselves” and identify things that they had not, until then, “found the energy to articulate. It would be easy to think that all the conferences “achieved” was a great bundle of ‘warm fuzzies’. Yet through the gatherings, the sifting of ideas and central beliefs, the struggles and dissonance a strong network of women have emerged working towards change, both

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<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, p4.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>113</sup> Chris Church interview, Christchurch.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

within the church and society generally. Anna wrote of the changes she had seen in the women involved in these conferences:

...Reflecting on where women were, at the Conference, I would say that a lot more energy is going into creative, productive, positive defining of who we are, what we think, what we have to contribute to the world, what we are building for ourselves. Although anger is still there, constantly refuelled by experience, we are acting less out of angry energy and more out of positive self-confident energy. It seemed to me that this is what the conference was all about. What have we learnt? What do we know? How can we consolidate what we know: our insights, information and understanding, so that the transforming power of our knowledge is heightened, dispersed, affirmed? ...I came away from the conference feeling that at this stage of its travels around the spiral of time, the Christian/Post-Christian feminist movement is strong, spunky, inspiring and wonderfully stable.<sup>115</sup>

Bennett in her summary of the four conferences shares her feelings on their benefits:

As well as enriching me personally, the gatherings, of between 100 and 140 women at a time, have consolidated a large community of pakeha women who are prepared to challenge sexist and powerful institutions towards their own transformation. We are a body of strong, loving women. The role of women as midwives is one I have described in my writing several times to express what I believe about our being 'change-agents', catalysts to bring into being a different reality, a 'new heaven and earth'.<sup>116</sup>

Not all women who attended one or other of the conferences would be as positive. For some, the boundaries have been pushed too far, to the point where they would question the link with Christianity at all. For others, the conferences have not gone far enough. It would be impossible for the conferences to be all things to all women. What is important and valid is the medium the conferences have given for women to address inequalities and to seek to create "in Aotearoa a theology that belongs".<sup>117</sup>

<sup>115</sup> *Conference Musings*, (1994), p.55.

<sup>116</sup> Rev. Enid Bennett, *Warp & Weft*, p.7.

<sup>117</sup> *Pre-Conference Papers*, 1994, p.5.

## Chapter Two: “A THEOLOGY THAT BELONGS”<sup>1</sup>

Can the church give women the space and recognition to do theology out of their own context and lived experience, acknowledging the validity of that theology when it does not fit the shape determined by male theologians? Are those who have determined theology in the past able to make room for feminist theology – not by adding it on as a supplement, an appendix, nor by reshaping it to make it acceptable for themselves but by providing ample space, allowing women-identified theology to do the shaping?<sup>2</sup>

The conferences revealed the desire of a great number of women to explore and challenge traditional concepts of church and God and to push the boundaries of theology in order to reshape their faith, their spirituality along more women affirming lines. This chapter narrows the focus to look more specifically at ways in which these women have reshaped their understandings. For some, the conferences acted as a catalyst, while for others, change occurred in the shadow of these conferences.

The “conversion” experience of many Christian women to feminism has brought with it numerous complexities. Women’s sense of marginalisation within the church grew as their understanding of feminism and feminist theology developed resulting in a sense of restriction and oppression. For some women the “awakening” has led them outside the church because for them feminism and Christianity are irreconcilable; Christianity is irredeemably patriarchal and their position in the church is no longer tenable. In some cases “wicca” - the goddess tradition - has become an alternative that sits more easily with them while others have become disillusioned completely with “religion” and left it all behind. For those remaining within the church there has been a questioning of how to marry their religious beliefs to a political ideology that challenges the structure and doctrine of their church. They have had to decide on the central tenets of their faith and the issues that are in fact cultural restraints or interpretative blunders. The desire to redeem church structure has also been a crucial issue. The slow rate of change has often meant that women have looked for alternatives on the fringes of the church to meet their spiritual needs. Others remain within the church hoping their work will bring about

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Russell, “Pakeha theology”, *Women and church shaping the future. 4<sup>th</sup> National feminist theology conference. Pre-conference papers*, (Auckland, 1994), p.5.

change. No matter what the position, a process of evaluation has occurred and women's faith or spirituality has changed because of it.

The conference literature and interview material will be used to examine developing themes and articulate the developing reasoning and understanding of the women within this *movement*. Little material was produced from the 1981 conference. The 1984 post-conference book *With heads uncovered*, the 1988 resource book and the 1994 pre-conference book are insightful documents as to the important elements in the developing feminist theology. As stated in the previous chapter not all women would associate themselves with every aspect included in this discussion.

Feminist theology developed within the context of the burgeoning feminist movement in Aotearoa. The growing confidence of the late 1970s developed in the 1980s into assertiveness. As energy levels rose so did the sense of empowerment and the belief that women "could do anything". For those women involved there was growing excitement and a sense of anticipation as they realised the potential for change.

Within the church setting, energy initially went into consciousness-raising, although not in any formalised way. A revolt occurred against the "ladies' bring a plate" mentality as women sought opportunity to "serve" not just through 'menial' tasks but through church leadership and ministry. The need to be acknowledged on an equal footing with men, was deemed by women to be imperative for their identity and self-worth to be recognised. Women took issue with gender bias, exclusive language, sexist imagery and patriarchy. As women's theological understanding developed, discussion took place around Biblical interpretation shaped by women's experience, and ecumenism that included cross faith dialogue and a reshaping (for some) of the God concept occurred.

Feminism and feminist theology were not the only influences on the spiritual development of these women. Liberation theology, liberal theology, and of particular significance of late, post-modernism have been influences within *the movement* to

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<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Russell, *The journey is hope. One Pakeha woman's exploration of a theology of liberation*, (Auckland, 1997), p.52.



varying degrees. Ultimately however, the acceptance of the feminist paradigm, to whatever degree, has been the dominant influence.

At this point a distinction must be made between women who hold "liberal" and "radical" feminist perspective. For the most part, this thesis is dealing with women espousing more radical views. Those with "liberal" views seek to ensure equality for women within the church without necessarily condemning completely its structures. Those with radical views, however, focus on "the male defined and dominated structure of the Church."<sup>3</sup> This structure, patriarchy, is perceived as the core oppression for women. As the Ursula King quotation expresses in the introduction, men have had the power to name, including the right to name women's experience. Within the Christian context, Ashworth Graham argues that

our thoughts, our images, symbols and traditions, our whole way of seeing the world, have been created by men, as men have had, over time, both the material and the social means to create and control theological understandings and Christian teachings from their own perspective. Women, on the other hand, have, through time, been singularly deprived of these means so that religious understandings, or theological "truths" relevant to women's own experiences and concerns have not been generated. If by chance such truths have been generated, they have been denigrated, suppressed and written off by those controlling the process of making and interpreting theology.<sup>4</sup>

This analysis underpins the philosophy that women within this *movement* bring to their faith. They recognise that the male experience has been assumed as normative and as a result women's experience, if identified at all, has been conceived as "other". This has resulted in a desire by women to reclaim and validate their experiences. Through telling "their story", re-examining Scripture and affirming an experientially based faith, women have addressed their previous lack of agency.

This "agency" which women have reclaimed has reshaped what was previously a "traditional" Christian understanding into a holistic spirituality or ongoing faith journey. Those involved in *woman-church* seek to encapsulate all that is seen as good within Christianity while leaving behind that which restricts and hinders women's spiritual development. This process is completely subjective. Women allow each other the freedom to shape their own faith. They may struggle together with theological issues

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<sup>3</sup> Tracey Ashworth Graham, "Images of women within Christian theology" *Vashti's Voice*, No.30, February/April (1986), p.12.

but they are not compelled to impose their understandings upon another. The “unique perspective” that each woman brings to her “faith” is validated.

Starting with our experience and reflecting on that experience brings us to realize that every life is significant and potentially revealing of reality. We then see that spirituality, or coming into relationship with reality, is not reserved for any select group or religious elite, but is available to all. Spirituality is the culmination of our natural maturational process – it is the fulfillment of humanity. For men, this process has traditionally stressed independence, while for women, maturation more usually takes the form of the self’s coming into relationship with others. The spiritual life, as newly informed by the normal, maturational experiences of women, can now be seen to grow out of the ordinary and to be present, unrecognized, in the lives of many.<sup>5</sup>

Their spirituality, then, draws on all aspects of life. The soul/body dualism is replaced by a holistic approach to life. This “spirituality” almost defies definition as it incorporates all of life; personal relationships with God/Godde/Goddess<sup>6</sup>, with friends and partners. A Women’s Resource Centre newsletter listed what women had expressed as being spirituality to them:

Essence of being; conscious awareness of being; awareness of Godde in all things, including self’ personal relation with Godde who loves, cherishes, and supports and enables; celebration of being a woman relating to Godde; experience of the divine; creative motion, life force of the physical world; extra dimension beyond the physical, mental and emotional dimensions, inner strength; being in touch with my creative self; it’s loving; it’s practice of faith; it’s how I feel about nature, people and loving them; it’s being part of an unlimited ‘whole’; being in touch with that which is beyond reach; it’s enabling, facilitating, teaching self esteem, well-being; openness, healing; it’s defining relation between God and self, self and others, especially women in a male dominated organisation (Church) and, society (Aotearoa); establishing and maintaining relationship with God; means of expressing beliefs...; an evolutionary process, realisation of the Christ within; it’s the ‘tasting’ of God however perceived, with the heart and not with the head; inwardly peace of the heart, outwardly peace in the world; nature of God’s spirit in us all; a way of being in touch with life and living it to the fullest.<sup>7</sup>

It is from this basis that women come to re-examine and challenge Christian dogma.

Catherine Benland defines feminist theology in *Religions of New Zealanders* as being:

so vast, profound, and utterly new, there is no quick way of summarising it. It affects every traditional Christian doctrine: sin, guilt, fall, atonement, soteriology, christology, mariology, eschatology and all previous

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>5</sup> Carol Ochs, *Women and spirituality*, (New Jersey, 1983), p.134.

<sup>6</sup> God/Godde/Goddess offers the masculine, gender neutral and feminine language forms. The ‘Godde’ term may also be used as a “dual gender form, or a female inclusive form. Goddess is referred to here solely as a feminine form of God. Their use here acknowledges the language used by the participants in the interviews.

<sup>7</sup> *Women’s Resource Centre National Newsletter*, 10/4 November (1990), p.2.

understanding of divinity. It is holistic; there is no body and soul dualism; sexuality is not excluded from spirituality. Absolutes are shunned, a plurality of beliefs encouraged. Nature is sacred; all forms of life are equally worthy. Personal autonomy and integrity are willed. Discipline and morality have been rethought. Decay and death are accepted. Time is more spiral and cyclic than linear. No political issue is excluded from theological scrutiny.<sup>8</sup>

While *woman-church* is involved in the analysis above it is not possible to discuss all of the above issues. Instead, I will focus on predominant themes such as inclusive language, images of God, Christology and sexuality drawn from conference material. It is important to note that the developing theology is not perceived as being solely relevant to women. While women have drawn strength from each other and in some cases deliberately withdrawn into exclusively women's groups, there is an underlying hope that the "new" theology will in fact replace patriarchal Christianity and offer an healthy alternative for both male and female.

The way in which Biblical material is interpreted is of major significance. Erice Webb in *With heads uncovered* addresses the issue of Scriptural interpretation, particularly those passages relating to marriage, which ultimately lead to a restrictive theology with regard to women's faith and identity. The interpretation of obedience and submission and the emphasis on women's servant role being like that of Christ, she argues, restricts the use of women's gifts and abilities in the belief that she must come under the leadership of her husband. These "patriarchal" views, Webb argues, leave women "estranged from the voice of God by structures and teaching of the patriarchal order."<sup>9</sup> These narrow interpretations have been rejected by *woman-church* although each woman would hold different views on how to deal with Scriptural texts.

Some women accept Scripture as divinely inspired and see it as an important text in enabling them to understand more of God. To deal with the sexist language they "re-read or re-appraise traditional interpretations of certain biblical texts."<sup>10</sup> The cultural context is taken into account and women's stories are uncovered from the text. Reverend Margaret Reid Martin writes in *With heads uncovered* of her awakening to sexism within the church and how that influenced her way of interpreting Scripture.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Benland, "Women's spirituality movement", *Religions of New Zealanders*, Peter Donovan (ed.), (Palmerston North, 1990), p.241.

<sup>9</sup> Erice Webb, "Servants of God", *With heads uncovered*, Enid Bennett (ed.), (Auckland, 1988), p.29.

<sup>10</sup> Elaine Storkey, *Contributions to Christian feminism*, (London, 1995), p.12.

Her method offers a means by which women struggling with patriarchy do not have to leave the Bible behind.

A great many Christian women have given up on the bible. They see it as far too patriarchal, dominated by male images of God and the stories of males. I am coming to see the Bible more as a palimpsest. Women's story is there but, as with many of those ancient pictures, the story has been overlaid and it is now an exciting discovery to peel off the layers and find the stories of women and of the female characteristics of God and many other things which make my understanding of the Christian faith so much richer. The Bible is the book of all of us, women as well as men, and though it is not the only source of understanding and of our ability to do theology now, it is an important source.<sup>11</sup>

The influence of international feminist theologians is evident in this approach, although Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's analysis would perhaps be more radical than Reid Martin's. Fiorenza in *Bread not stone* articulates a feminist biblical hermeneutic. The starting premise is that feminist theology "begins with the experiences of women."<sup>12</sup> Fiorenza then argues that any feminist interpretation must begin with a "hermeneutic of suspicion".

A critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation therefore seeks to develop a critical dialectical mode of biblical interpretation that can do justice to women's experiences of the Bible as a thoroughly patriarchal book written in androcentric language as well as to women's experience of the Bible as a source of empowerment and vision in our struggles for liberation. Such a hermeneutics has to subject biblical texts to a dialectical process of critical readings and feminist evaluations. In order to do so it insists that *the* litmus test for invoking Scripture as the Word of God must be whether biblical texts and traditions seek to end relations of domination and exploitation.<sup>13</sup>

Other women place less importance on the Scriptures seeing it more as a "human document, culture-bound, born into a patriarchal culture, and written by men."<sup>14</sup> This recognises that the Bible is not the sole source of literature to assist women in the development of their spirituality. Jo Ayers speaks of the direct influence of Fiorenza on her own Biblical interpretation,

For myself I think that women in more recent years, women Scripture scholars like Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza are causing me now to look at the Scriptures in a new way and ask myself quite challenging questions about Scripture and about the canonicity of the Scriptures. When I grew up, the Scriptures were the only words of God, but I know now that some

<sup>11</sup> Rev. Margaret Reid Martin, "A personal reflection and vision", *With heads uncovered*, p.23.

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread not stone. The challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Boston, 1995), p.x.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.xiii.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p.12.

things were in the canon and some were out of the canon that could have easily been in and all that sort of stuff. When you look at the Scripture analysis of Elisabeth you realise just how laden with cultural prejudice the gospel is, just like any other piece of literature. So that's causing me to look hard at it and say "what other literature is also important for me and my spirituality."<sup>15</sup>

Many have interpreted or filtered Scriptural understanding through the lens of their own experience. With the validation of women's experience comes the ability to accept, reject or re-interpret Scriptures in conflict with their own experience. Scripture is no longer necessarily the starting point.

The patriarchal culture in which Christianity emerged is identified as problematic to women seeking a "faith" free of oppression. Women are in the process of peeling back the layers of enculturation to seek the essence of their faith unadulterated by patriarchy. The 1981 conference included an assessment of patriarchy and what it meant for women in ministry and how it shaped or restricted their ministry. The 1984 conference further analysed patriarchy and the subsequent conference book, *With heads uncovered*, offered clear analysis on it. Janet Crawford in "Sexism and sexuality" exposes patriarchy as the 'enemy'. Crawford explains that patriarchy is not solely a "Father ruled society"<sup>16</sup> but also refers to "a metaphysical world view, a mind set, a way of ordering reality in which the male is assumed to be superior and dominant and the female to be inferior and subordinate."<sup>17</sup> Crawford recognises the way women are subordinate to men because of patriarchy, and how the church has theologically justified this subordination. This oppression, she would argue, is due basically to the male attitude towards female sexuality.

In patriarchal societies the absolute human type is male. Divinity is male. Woman is differentiated from man, by man, on the basis of her sexuality: she has ovaries and a uterus; she menstruates, gestates and lactates. "For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her;...He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other".<sup>18</sup> Her status and participation in both the sacred and the secular spheres is directly related to her sexual and reproductive status at different stages of her life-cycle. She is primarily defined as virgin, bride, wife, mother, barren, celibate or menopausal. For

<sup>15</sup> Jo Ayers interview, Auckland 9 September 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, (New York, 1983), p.61, cited Janet Crawford, "Sexism and sexuality" in *With heads uncovered*, p.30.

<sup>17</sup> Janet Crawford, "Sexism and sexuality", p.30.

<sup>18</sup> Simone, de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1972, p.16. cited in Janet Crawford, "Sexism and sexuality", p.31.



men, on the other hand, sexual and reproductive status is usually of minor importance.<sup>19</sup>

Crawford goes on to argue that “the myth of feminine evil”<sup>20</sup> is central to the patriarchal male attitude to female sexuality. This attitude towards women’s sexuality is represented by the belief that she is inferior, polluting (due to her monthly cycle) and more lustful, weaker and less intelligent. These ideas have been legitimated by religion and deeply embedded within the subconscious of both males and females.

Patriarchy ultimately becomes an issue of power, male power over women. The hierarchical masculine church structures, the exclusively masculine images for God represent a means to subjugate women, whether consciously or unconsciously. It also includes power over those of other “races” and the earth and its resources. This is legitimated through particular Scriptural interpretation. While acknowledged in the 1981 and 1984 conferences, in the later conferences the battle against patriarchy was assumed. The 1988 conference saw women deliberately look at ways to take back that power and empower themselves and each other to bring about change. In the 1994 conference “women-church-power” was an important theme. Thirteen years on from the first conference women were still seeking to alter the balance of power. However, within this was talk of a power that ‘enabled’ as opposed to a power that ‘controlled’.<sup>21</sup> Women did not wish to replace one power structure with another. As Catherine Benland puts it, “They are not looking to replace patriarchal religion with matriarchal religion but with a religion for every kind of person, for every species, and for all the natural wonders and riches and complexity of our planet.”<sup>22</sup> Ongoing is the search for an authentic “faith”, a “spirituality” that recognises the worth of humanity, no matter the “race” or sex, and a respect for the cosmos; an alternative to patriarchy that does not replace one power structure with another.

The push for inclusive language has been one move towards disestablishing patriarchy. Initially this focused on “people” language and subsequently “God” language. The

<sup>19</sup> Janet Crawford, “Sexism and sexuality”, 1988, p.31.

<sup>20</sup> Hayes, H.R., *The dangerous sex. The myth of feminine evil*, 1972 cited in Janet Crawford, “Sex and sexuality”, p.31.

<sup>21</sup> June MacMillan, “Woman-church-power”, *Pre conference papers* (Auckland, 1994), p.22.

push for inclusive language has often been perceived as the pedantry of a few extremists. Yet to many women the use of the male nouns and pronouns as generic terms have left them feeling excluded and isolated. In *Made in God's image*, research into sexism in the Catholic church, women expressed their hurt at this exclusion.

I have wept with pain while sitting in a church listening to Scripture aimed at men, praying for men and to a male deity, singing about men, while three quarters of the congregation are women. What offends me even more is the women accept their invisibility and have little concept of their value as persons – we have been colonised.<sup>23</sup>

To many women (and men) exclusive language speaks of male arrogance and denotes the passivity that women have been encouraged to exhibit. It is yet another way by which women are brought under male subjugation.

Respondent A remembers her naivety at thinking it would be a simple process of educating the masses. It was just a matter of explaining “things to people and they would understand and agree with you.” This met with consistent resistance and much argument. Judith Dale recalls “twinking parties” with exclusive language in the Anglican liturgy being the target – “...and I used to go to church with a bottle of twink in my handbag. When I discovered one that had been missed I'd sit at the back twinkling out some of the ‘hims.’”<sup>24</sup>

As feminist theological analysis developed within Aotearoa, women recognised inclusive ‘people’ language did not go far enough. Inclusive ‘God’ language needed to also become an essential element of the feminist theological critique. Mary Daly coined the phrase “If God is male, male is God”<sup>25</sup>

I would say that *sexist* conceptualizations, images, and attitudes concerning God, spawned in a patriarchal society, tend to breed *more* sexist ideas and attitudes, and together these function to legitimate and perpetuate sexist institutions and behavior.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Benland, “Theology of power. Using power theology to demote or promote”, *Pre conference papers* (Auckland, 1994), p.21.

<sup>23</sup> Christine Cheyne, *Made in God's image. A project researching sexism in the Catholic church in Aotearoa* (Wellington, 1990), p.51.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Dale interview, Wellington 30 November 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Daly, *The church and the second sex. With a new feminist postchristian introduction by the author* (New York, 1975), p.38.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p.38.



In the context of Aotearoa women have been battling with this analysis regarding language and ultimately images of God. The predominant, if not sole use of masculine images such as Father, King, Lord and male pronouns as well as the emphasis on Jesus' masculinity (particularly within the Catholic tradition) ultimately encourages the creation of a male God. Those interviewed remembered growing up with strong masculine images of God. The images of the "big daddy in the sky"<sup>27</sup> or the "very strong being. Probably a male God with a beard and white flowing robes, who was in the sky"<sup>28</sup> were dominant images interviewees had of God as they grew up. Respondent D describes her image of God at seven or eight being exactly like her minister: "He was a man in a black robe in a pulpit up high." Another explained "there was also an emotional relating to God as a Father who could give things or refuse things, and who also knew everything I was doing, like Santa Claus."<sup>29</sup>

Daly would argue that such images are not easy to dislodge.

Many intelligent people are not aware of the depth and far-reaching consequences of this problem. It appears to such persons that an image of God as 'an old man with a beard' who lives 'up in heaven' is too childish to be taken seriously by any adult. They feel certain their own belief is on a level far above these notions, and that the same is true of every educated adult. In actuality their confidence in themselves and in others like them is groundless. They fail to realize what a powerful grip such images have upon the imagination even after they have been consciously rejected as primitive and inadequate. Indeed, shades of 'the old man with a beard' – his various metaphysical equivalents – continue to appear even in the most learned speculations of theologians. They appear even more obviously and frequently in the watered-down, popularized versions of these speculations, for example, in text books, religion classes, and sermons.<sup>30</sup>

The conferences have been opportunities for women to exorcise such images. 1984 Conference material showed increased interest in drawing out the feminine in God. Anna Holmes in 'The Dark Night and the motherhood of God' writes of the "predominant theological image" of God as Father and its inappropriateness for this time.

This powerful father god was an idol suited to the social and political needs of its peoples and times but is now a stumbling block as are all attempts to codify, contain and enclose a God who is beyond all ideas and words. The need of the world and church at this time is to recover the sense of relationship – to rediscover the motherhood of God. All that we can try to

<sup>27</sup> Rev. Margaret Reid Martin interview, Auckland 29 August 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Chris Church interview, Christchurch 16 December 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Respondent C.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Daly, *The church and the second sex*, p.180.

do at this time is to try to expand our imperfect vision and knowledge of God.<sup>31</sup>

The emphasis on a male God, Holmes argues, perpetuates a theology of triumphalism leading to war and brutality – shifting the emphasis to mother God draws on the nurture and relational emphasis of the feminine. Holmes also articulates imagery of God as womb, along with the link with the cyclical rhythms of nature and womanhood.

God, that dark womb in which we grow, the secret place where our form takes place and we are sustained and nurtured to maturity. The enfolding, bringing forth, enfolding and bringing forth that is part of the reality of human motherhood is also part of our spiritual motherhood. Motherhood matches the cycle of creation, potential, fulfilment leading on to creation that is part of our understanding of the interrelationship of God in the world.<sup>32</sup>

She is not advocating a complete withdrawal from the acknowledgment of God as Father but urges the recognition of the motherhood of God alongside the masculine images.

The challenge that is presented to the church by a call to recognise the motherhood of God is very real – a demand for repentance and reconciliation – a call to conversion. It requires a recognition of the motherhood and fatherhood of God as equal theological concepts.<sup>33</sup>

1988 conference material shows women exploring alternate images of God. Some worked within the goddess framework. Others explored the mystics, particularly Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena and their feminine models of relating and imaging God. Others were introduced to Sophia. God as Wisdom, or 'Sophia', was introduced in a workshop run by Judith McKinlay. Within the 1988 workshop, McKinlay took women through the Old Testament revealing Wisdom in the pages of Proverbs. Within these texts, Wisdom is discovered as "A tree of life – rooted in the lives of women – a teaching, nurturing figure – female and so linked deep within her with all those women who span the Old Testament books – a symbol empowering and yet empowered, too, by women."<sup>34</sup> McKinlay went on to trace Wisdom through to the New Testament, again revealing her within Scriptures, this

<sup>31</sup> Anna Holmes, "The dark night and the motherhood of God" *With heads uncovered*, p.36.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p.41.

<sup>34</sup> 1988 Women's ministries and spirituality conference. *Empowering to transform. A resource book for women* (Christchurch, 1988), p.17.

time particularly in John's Gospel: "In this gospel, stories were preserved of women doing unexpected things and women remembered for them – founding a community – making the community confession – first witness of the Resurrection."<sup>35</sup> The question was then asked "So who is Wisdom for us?". McKinlay offered this as a means to contextualise her relevance in the lives of individual women:

A tree of life – a frond of life – rooted in the lives of women in Aotearoa – that same strong female figure bearing within her the stories of women named and unnamed from our tradition – still nurturing – still instructing – still covering this land with the mist of life. So many images – so many ways of empowering us – so that we too are strong enough to go out and stand in our gates, our places of authority and speak "with Wisdom".<sup>36</sup>

Enid Bennett, greatly influenced by this workshop, went on and further studied the Sophia/Wisdom tradition in 1989. In the 1994 pre-conference book she wrote a paper on *Sophia. Or what wisdom as woman can do for us*. Bennett offered Sophia as a catalyst for transforming patriarchy into partnership. With Biblical reference to the Old Testament she develops the idea of Wisdom as Woman and then through New Testament passages she extrapolates the links of Christ with Sophia. From this emerges a "divinity which is not determined by gender-exclusiveness, where male and female can be celebrated as gifts within a good creation, brought into being by a creative energy, a divine partnership, Wisdom/God"<sup>37</sup> What is encouraged is an "embodied spirituality", a recognition of the "God-within", affirming of women and allowing their "inner voice" to speak and be heard. Respondent H's experience encapsulates the Wisdom concept on a practical level:

...what I sensed was for me when I prayed to God or Jesus, it's as though God's going to come and rescue me and haul me out of a difficult situation and some how treat me as a kid a bit and help me. But all of a sudden here was Wisdom standing alongside me saying come on we two women will get there. It was a strengthening of who I am, which is for me who God is anyhow. The God who dwells within me and stands tall and helps me stand tall and works within me to make my decisions that are going to be appropriate.

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p.17

<sup>37</sup> *Women and church shaping the future. 4<sup>th</sup> National feminist theology conference. Pre-conference papers* (Auckland, 1994), p.46.

Personal preference is the dominant influence in how women name and image God. It is important to note, however, that a growing theological basis is giving women the freedom to discover their God in new ways.

Central to traditional evangelical Christian doctrine is the belief in Jesus being God's son and that he came to earth to redeem humanity. Christ's atoning act is represented by his death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection. Salvation is free, to those who accept Christ as their saviour, and as a means to a relationship with God. Women within *the movement* have been seriously grappling with the implications of such doctrine for women. The conferences prior to the 1994 Taupo conference did not include Christology. By 1994, Christology became a predominant theme. This showed how women were working on developing their theology beyond the initial critique of patriarchy. The pre-conference material included four papers on Christology along with a workshop paper offering opportunity for guided reflection on the topic. The material was intended to provoke thought and offered a broader interpretation than the traditional interpretation of Christology. For some women, their Christology remains largely untouched. To them Jesus' encounters with women within the gospels have taken on a greater significance, ultimately offering "alternative ways of structuring relationships."<sup>38</sup> Emphasis is placed on his humanity rather than his gender. Salvation through Christ is still readily accepted. The Bible as the ultimate authority filters these women's feminist beliefs and thus their Christology remains largely unchanged. For others, however, their Christology has been significantly reshaped. Their feminism shapes and filters their biblical understanding to a greater degree.

In the 1994 pre-conference papers on Christology Barbara Nicholas and Harriet Penhey suggest that those within the "liberation theology" stream work from the supposition that "understandings are not derived from the bible, but are thought out in conversation with the biblical material, with the christian tradition, and with women's experience."<sup>39</sup> Central to their Christology is the need "to liberate and heal women, and not to justify or support (even in a hidden or subtle way) their continuing oppression".<sup>40</sup> Nicholas and Penhey argue that the theology articulated

<sup>38</sup> Barbara Nicholas, Harriet Penhey, 'Feminist Christology', *Pre-conference papers*, p.40.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p.40.

...needs to work not only for those of us who have some power (eg income, institutional status, education, social contacts), but also for those who are less powerful. Does our christology function to liberate them and us, or does it perpetuate unhealthy dependencies and relationships and continue to justify the establishment of relationships where someone still has power over another and we've just changed the person who has the power?<sup>41</sup>

Their workshop on "Feminist Christology: ethical implications" encouraged women to explore their Christology, the assumptions they held and how it impacted on others.

In acknowledging the wisdom of beginning with one's own experiences in the development of theology, Jenny Dawson suggests that the questions

"HOW did Jesus save us?" and "How exactly can Jesus be spoken of as redeemer?" have implications about human liberation rather than about some cosmic trading post where one life is swapped for many. Thus, it is not longer meaningful for us to talk of redemption in terms of the desired and deliberate death of a particular young man, to pay the price of our human weakness.<sup>42</sup>

Dawson reinterprets "Jesus was sent to die for us" into "Jesus came to live for us". Christ's life becomes more important than his death. His life is understood as being redemptive "because it is relational, justice-seeking, life-sustaining".<sup>43</sup> Rather than a passive acceptance of the need for a "saviour", Dawson encourages humanity not to abdicate their "creative power." By not abdicating she argues "we become co-creators and co-participants and no longer in need of a "one-for-all-one-perfect-sacrifice-for-the-sin-of-the-world"<sup>44</sup>. Instead of the image of the broken body of Jesus on the cross and the sense of powerlessness that it evokes, Dawson re-examines the cross in light of those gathered around it.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the cross symbol is the women gathered at the foot of the cross. They stand in solidarity, committed to living together, with space for others, in such hope that other people's children never have to go through this again. They redeem the dream....

We look for the day when the symbol of the Christian faith is not just the lonely cross or the crucifix, but Jesus with friends gathered around sharing the suffering and sharing the new life....

In re-thinking understandings of power, much of the way the institutional church currently works and expresses itself becomes meaningless. Perhaps the power of the cross, is best symbolised in terms of the community of

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p.41.

<sup>42</sup> Jenny Dawson, "Who needs a God who sent a Son to die for us. Re-thinking ideas of power and the church in the light of an alternative way of looking at the cross." *Pre-conference papers* (Auckland, 1994), p.36

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p.37.

solidarity which gathered at the foot of the cross, is really the power that goes forth from us, each and all of us when we are vulnerable together.<sup>45</sup>

Both Dawson and Adams emphasise the negative impact of the glorifying of death and suffering, particularly to women. In her discussion paper Adams addresses the issue of the violence of Christ's death and its significance for women. She challenges the proclamation that "Jesus Christ died for us, to save us from our sin, and to open the door to new life". Rather than offering hope she sees it as a story participating in "building a climate of violence", violence that women are protesting against. In relation to women in particular, Adams questions the salvation "myth" and its encouragement of "submissive suffering". Adams sees it as a means to justify suffering, particularly for women.

The ingredients of the salvation myth – suffering, death and obedience ("Christ died for us") – continue to promote suffering as acceptable and to be accepted, and death (particularly sacrificial death) as potentially redemptive. Whatever Christians have wanted to say about this, the underlying message is that it is through submissive suffering and martyred death that salvation comes.<sup>46</sup>

Like Dawson, Adams is concerned with the passivity encouraged by accepting Jesus as saviour, the one able to rescue us "from the struggles of human existence" and the power differential it implies.

Judith Dale's paper raises the issue of Jesus' maleness and questions how he could identify with her as a woman and the implications that has from a relational aspect. Again, the condoning of violence and abuse through the crucifixion is of grave concern. Ultimately in the case of the crucifixion, suffering is seen as redemptive and is therefore justified. Dale argues that this has serious implications for particularly women and children as it "serves to condone violence in general and violence against the weak..."<sup>47</sup> Dale also discusses the uniqueness of Jesus and the hierarchical model that it exhibits.

Women are committed to multiplicity, respect for difference, variety and variation, seeing anything else as totalitarian and oppressive. Jesus as the Only Begotten Son and 'alone worthy to be praised' (etc) disallows special

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>46</sup> Susan Adams, "Who needs salvation? A look at salvation and violence" *Pre-conference papers*, p.32.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Dale, "Christology" *Pre-conference papers*, p.43



personhood for other people from other times, places, revelations, and notably for women.<sup>48</sup>

Even if Christ was feminised, Dale queries whether it is enough. The issue of Jesus' power remains, although in feminine form. The power structure itself has not changed. She also takes issue with heterosexuality, encouraged through the imagery of the church as the bride of Christ, arguing that women are adversely affected by this in ways that men are not. Dale also expresses that the encouragement of the parent/child imagery is detrimental to mature adult development. "Jesus as the divine Son/Daughter models a path for the individual that is child-like."<sup>49</sup>

The papers included in the 1994 pre-conference book reflect the developing feminist thought and analysis about Christology. Of particular concern to the authors were the issues of the violence of the cross, Jesus' gender, and the power differential interpreted through the salvation story. The Bible, seemingly condoning violence and the concept of a loving God sacrificing "his" son, are in this context, unfathomable. The papers were not perceived as a complete analysis on the topic but rather important mediums to provoke thought and encourage discussion.

These papers do not reflect the total analysis on Christology. Individual women's experiences have led them to differing understandings of the "Christ story". Respondent F has a very different position. She wonders whether all suffering can be redemptive. Involvement with sexual abuse counselling and her "disillusionment with the maleness of God" led her away from Christ. As she was drawn back her understanding of redemption and Christ changed and a new understanding developed "organically".

Where I think I am now is that... I was swimming in the ocean at Easter, thinking of my friend who had died and also thinking of Easter. I was singing all the old hymns as I jumped over the waves. It suddenly occurred to me that my friend had virtually suffered as much if not more than Christ. It started to get that whole concept of suffering as being redemptive and fulfilling the sufferings of Christ. All that started to make sense. What if everyone's pain is redemptive? What if Christ was showing on the cross that pain isn't wasted, that it's not just a mistake. What we've done is say that only Christ's pain is redemptive. What if all pain is redemptive? It developed over the time, that what if the person of Jesus was showing us what it was like to fully human. I don't know what it's like to be fully woman because we've only got patriarchal women. What if men didn't

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p.42.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p.42.



know what real manhood was, so Christ was saying 'this is what real manhood is -I'll show you .' So Jesus showed what it was like to be fully a human being: Godlike, yet fully human. We've had all these church conferences about the ...creed and all the heresies about Jesus being all human and not divine, or all divine and not human. And what if this is how we all are, and that's why Jesus said - Greater things will you do. And what if Jesus was the first, and what if we then follow in his way? That's what it meant - the Christian way, Christ's way. That started to make a lot of sense to me.

For others, Christ's life rather than his death have taken on greater meaning. The way he lived, his example, his struggle for justice, is central to their faith. For many, the cross has lost its centrality, or its image is being rewritten. Others adhere to a more 'traditional' understanding of the cross although the importance of the 'eternal life' it brings is less of a focus than their working for justice and peace today. Others are comfortable with unanswered questions. For them Jesus, the cross and as a result the Eucharist<sup>50</sup> are left as open ended symbols.

Within the emerging theology of *the movement* is the acknowledgment and elevation of women's sexuality. Spurned in previous generations, womankind is being acknowledged as positive rather than being despised. This takes various forms. As patriarchy has implied feminine inferiority and encouraged the distinction between body and spirit/soul, elemental to these women is the rejection of this soul/body dichotomy.

The core of Christianity's sexism is the notion of God's maleness and by inference the notion of woman as not God. It is our physicality, our earthiness that confirms our impurity. Theological discourse define females as earthy, bodily and carnal, the epitome of materiality, chaotic nature and non-rationality. Females provide the counterpoint for the purity, the rationality and the spirituality that is quintessential God-ness and maleness.<sup>51</sup>

This has encouraged a separation of the spiritual from the physical. In the 1994 pre-conference book Betsan Martin, writing on the ideas of French philosopher Luce Irigaray, talks of the dualisms created.

In the logocentric paradigm, the perfection of God/Christ logos is contrasted to man's imperfection, thus constructing a dualistic order of god/man, perfection/imperfection, the word/flesh. Language and meaning are structured in continuity with this order of binary oppositions, male/female, rational/emotional, good/bad, light/darkness, sun/moon, spiritual/carnal and so on.

<sup>50</sup> See Chapter 3, p.86 for discussion on the Eucharist.

<sup>51</sup> Lynne Alice, *Feminist interventions in religious studies*, MA Thesis, (University of Canterbury , 1989), p.158.

In this dualistic order woman has been assigned the position of man's 'other', an object in a subject/object or master/slave paradigm. Woman has been associated with nature, with the body, with earth, with inferiority in the male quest for transcendence in rationality and spirituality. Woman has been defined by men and in dualistic relation to themselves. In this symbolic order maleness is identified as contrasting to femaleness. The supremacy of maleness is maintained through the domination and repression of femaleness. A system of opposites is also a system of hierarchical oppositions. Using images from the natural world, Irigaray represents that which in logocentric dualism has been termed as oppositional – day and night, life and death, generation and decay – as rhythms, cycles of life, not opposites.<sup>52</sup>

This separation is recognised as detrimental to healthy spiritual development. The Baptist/Presbyterian upbringing instilled in Judith influences a tendency to value mind/soul over her body. She sees the negative impact for women as being feminine attributes are disparaged. Those interviewed talked of the desire to leave behind this dualistic interpretation and draw on a more holistic understanding. In the 1988 conference a workshop on women's sexuality encouraged women to examine the detrimental images of women foisted on them and recognise their femaleness as positive.

We spent some time sharing about the images, messages, words, situations that have been negative and destructive in our experience of sexuality. And through this we shared some of our wommin's pain.

On a wonderful wommin's body we then shared the images, messages, words, situations that were positive in our experience of sexuality. In sharing about our sexuality, naming what has been unnamed, talking out some of the experiences and feelings, we were changed. And so began some healing, some transforming, and empowering of us as wommin.<sup>53</sup>

This inclusive emphasis has also seen the integration of one's sexuality into one's spirituality. On one level this involves discovering what women bring to their ministry or personal faith (not necessarily consciously) that is uniquely female. The 1981 Conference looked at recognising distinctively women's ways of doing things. The following conferences further encouraged this. Margaret Reid Martin, the first ordained woman Presbyterian minister, talks of awakening to the influence of her gender on her ministry:

<sup>52</sup> Betsan Martin, "Luce Irigaray" *Pre-conference papers*, p.51.

<sup>53</sup> *A resource book for women* (Auckland, 1988), p.30.

Many times after ordination I was asked how I felt as a woman minister. I always stressed that I was a person first. I thought there was no real difference. Some men, some women, have particular gifts or strengths and this would make their ministry unique. Later I found my emphasis changing. Yes, I am a person but I am a person who happens to be a woman. I am still struggling with what that means in terms of style of leadership, of ways of making decisions, of the issues that are important to me, of the concern that I have for people and relationships.<sup>54</sup>

On another level, for some it involves the recognition and celebration of women's life cycles using the images of maiden, mother and crone.<sup>55</sup> They seek to affirm whatever stage of the cycle they are in. Especially important is the respect given to those crones or older women passed child-rearing age, in contrast to the general societal attitude. Again, not all women within *the movement* would identify with this. Others take the cycle images further into more ritual-based practice.

Within this perspective there is also a critique of heterosexual relationships when presented as the only acceptable form of relationship within Christianity. The feminist critique has encouraged the acceptance of lesbians. The conferences themselves encouraged openness to lesbians, and lesbian relationships. This acceptance within the conferences, enabled some women to identify themselves publicly as lesbian for the first time. The 1994 pre-conference papers included a critical analysis by Judith Dale on "Sex and sexualities" and the conflict that gay women felt because of the condemnatory attitude of the Church to homosexuality. Freedom to acknowledge their sexuality at these conferences has marked the spiritual freedom experienced through feminist theology.<sup>56</sup>

This acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of spiritual and sexual was described in another way by Respondent H:

...often times of sexual passion or excitement are times where you feel closest to God and times of spiritual excitement you feel aroused. I think that it's a relatively common experience where people are in the height of

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Reid Martin, "A personal reflection and vision" *With heads uncovered*, p.22.

<sup>55</sup> This is an identification of part of the wicca tradition. Maiden relates to young women, not necessarily virginal, who are independent and free, mother relates to parenthood and middleage and affirms the reproductive and nurturing aspects of that age while the crone acknowledges those women beyond child-rearing age and the wisdom that comes with that age. It is an example of the eclecticism of *woman-church*. Those identifying with this aspect of wicca would not necessarily wish to incorporate other aspects of this tradition.

<sup>56</sup> This acceptance of homosexuality is of course not the sole preserve of feminist theology but is another aspect of the openness that feminist theology encourages.

worship to feel sexually open and our spirit is not just in our head it's in our whole body. It's about giving your whole body to God, body, mind and spirit.

This is reflected in the recognition of the "God within". Marg Schrader in the 1994 pre-conference papers states. "It is a recognising of the sacredness of our own lives, and indeed our own bodies. It is a recognition that God speaks not only through the Bible, the church and other authority figures, but also through our feelings, our intuition and in that deep, quiet voice within each one of us."<sup>57</sup>

Another aspect of the emerging theology is the need for racial sensitivity and the importance of working toward a bi-cultural understanding and nation. Sun Ai Park summarises her understanding of the context of racism within Aotearoa - "As women demand their rights, demanding their men to redress injustice done to them, they too must understand the Maori people's demands for their rights to the land and fishing which are taken away from them in spite of the Treaty of Waitangi and against the Treaty itself."<sup>58</sup> *Woman-church* consciously works toward recognising the rights of the tangata whenua. The 1988 conference held a morning workshop on theology and racism run by the Pakeha women's theology and racism collective, a group of women who had been meeting fortnightly for three years. A collective approach was encouraged as women explored together the implications of "what theology is, where it comes from and who does it".<sup>59</sup> In the pre-conference papers the Auckland planning group suggested asking the following questions as each "concept/project/decision is considered during the conference."

**How does this concept/project/decision guarantee Maori self-determination:**

**\*\*So that Te Tiriti o Waitangi is honoured and actioned by us**

**\*\*So that these things which are helpful to us are not achieved at the expense of Maori.**

**\*\*So that these things will be less likely to offend Maori in their status as tangata whenua**

**\*\*So that Maori economic, political, social and spiritual values and practices will be acknowledged.<sup>60</sup>**

<sup>57</sup> Margaret Schrader, "Women's Spirituality" *Pre-conference papers*, p.23.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>59</sup> *A resource book for women*, 1988, p.15.

<sup>60</sup> *Pre-conference papers*, 1994, p.6.

Primarily, it was pakeha women discussing race issues. Maori women's groups have chosen not to be involved in the conferences, focusing their energies into Maori issues.

The influence of postmodernism has been a further development in theological analysis. This intellectual movement gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s as the latest intellectual trend, with an emphasis on radical relativism of knowledge. For feminists and feminist theologians it has been a useful framework to further analyse and shape their ideology. It could even be argued that post-modernism's pluralist and relativist emphasis in fact gives legitimacy to *the movement's* experientially based faith.

Women's acceptance of postmodernist analysis varies. Some may not be consciously aware they are influenced by it. Postmodernism was not specifically discussed at any of the conferences. However, its influence is evident within the interviews and the conferences.

Of particular significance to feminist theology is the deconstruction of the metanarrative. This means that the idea that "one system of myths that can unite human beings into one people or the globe into one 'world'"<sup>61</sup> and subsequently one 'truth' or world view has been replaced by the understanding that there are many 'truths' dependent on culture and individual experience. Ultimately, this means the rationalism or objectivity of modernity is replaced by subjectivity. Within this is an acceptance of emotion and intuition playing an important role in the interpretation of 'truth'.

Postmodernists also argue that texts no longer have an inherent meaning. Each text has as many meanings as there are readers. Each reader dialogues with the text through their own unique perspective.<sup>62</sup> This implies firstly, that there is no 'right' reading of any text, and therefore no one can impose the text as 'truth' on someone else. Secondly, because the text does not offer one 'truth' it can be contextualised to make it more relevant to the reader. Such reasoning has led to an acceptance of differences and a celebration of diversity.

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<sup>61</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A primer on postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids, 1996), p.45.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p.6.

This has influenced *woman-church* through its experiential emphasis and the willingness of women to re-interpret Scriptures and Christian dogma in light of their experience and culture. Rosemary explains the impact of this on her Christian understandings and beliefs as she contextualises the Christian 'myths' into a 'myth' relevant to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

And to some extent that's what I think about Christianity and Judaism. They're not historical kind of facts so much as they're myths that have grown up to give our lives some framework and meaning rather than carved on stone tablets which have been delivered to us, which is pretty much the literalist version of the Bible. A bit like John Smith and the Mormons – that these were given to you and every word is there and can't be challenged. Which I think is putting Christianity as a kind of myth that gives life and meaning if it's not being handed down on tablets of stone its something that we have created to give meaning to sustain us. If it no longer gives meaning and sustains us some parts of that myth then we can change it. Which is partly what feminists, radical feminists who stay in the church are doing. Writing the myth if you like – if the idea for instance that God demanded a sacrifice of his son, and that this had some good, healthy and salvation benefit – if that idea is a fairly abhorrent idea in a current 20<sup>th</sup> century understanding we can recreate that myth. It may have made sense in the context where people looked at things very differently but do we have to explain that whole myth, that whole, that whole culture of sacrifice and stuff like that to understand it. Surely we can have something a little more contextual, so if it hasn't been handed down to us like that then it's something we can form and reform.<sup>63</sup>

Judith now recognises that "Everything I think is a product of those words and structures. How can it not be?"<sup>64</sup> The Bible, then, is a text read and interpreted through the experience and knowledge, "the sedimentary layers" of the reader as well as being a "text of its own reading". The Bible is more complex as a text than other texts though, as it "carries with it 2000 years of giving it a credibility." For Judith, the Bible "is the word of God in so far as the living word of God – in so far as whatever living and word and God means..."<sup>65</sup> Ultimately, then, it comes down to verbal constructions:

...technically speaking I don't see how there can be a God separate from our concepts of God. I don't even think there is a God as spirit holding the universe together which is what the creation spirituality and most new-age people would say. That in a way my position doesn't have anything to say about whether it's there or not. It might be or it might not, but what we know is what we know through our verbal constructions. It might be there or it might not be, but that's not the point really..."<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Rosemary Neave interview, Auckland 30 August 1995.

<sup>64</sup> Judith Dale interview, Wellington 30 November 1995.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Judith Dale interview, Wellington 7 December 1995.



Unlike Rosemary and Judith, Respondent A has not “got very much into post-modernism yet” and does not plan to “go entirely down that route”. However, she does see it as raising some very real questions as to how much God is a human construct and whether it is possible to define which aspects of our understandings are constructs.

It is interesting to note some feminist theologians are now seeing the limitations of postmodernist analysis in regard to *woman-church*. While a consequence of the analysis is freedom to shape an individual less dogmatic faith it also creates greater fragmentation of thought making it difficult to “hold together a movement”.<sup>67</sup> This same freedom to express one’s faith also causes difficulties when trying to correct a particular perspective, in the case of feminist theology, the issue of patriarchy and the lack of inclusiveness for women. Postmodernists would argue that ‘truth’ is relative to the individual’s experience and culture, and therefore, the issues of feminist theologians are but one view among many. They are no more ‘right’ than anyone else. It can potentially leave little weight behind their arguments against patriarchy and frustrate efforts for change.<sup>68</sup>

The development of feminist theology within Aotearoa has been very much from the grassroots. Lay-women recognised from the very first conference that “clergywomen could not have ‘ministry’ to themselves.”<sup>69</sup> Ordained women were not “allowed to exhibit a hierarchy of Christian ministry in which those who were ordained ministered and those who were not were the ministered to.”<sup>70</sup> With women’s ordination laywomen hoped that the sense of dislocation they felt within their own churches could be dispelled as it opened opportunities for them to “share fully in the life of our churches.” They too felt they had much to offer – academic training was not a prerequisite for ministry.

We too knew the church. We too were theologians – not of the academic kind but through our living experience of the church and faith and our reflections on them. We too had something to contribute out of our desire to see the church and our ministry reconciled. To enable it to exhibit a new relevance not only to women in today’s world but also to our children.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Adams, “Struggle and hope: is it enough?” *Keeping our heads above water*, Ree Bodde (ed.), (Auckland, 1998), p.5.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Jocelyn Armstrong, Erice Webb, “Introduction”, *With heads uncovered*, p.7.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, p.7.



By this women reject the hierarchical structures of the church and acknowledge each person's ability and right to minister. Within *the movement* there was a sense of women learning from each other and being free to experiment together. The conferences themselves tended to avoid having "experts" speaking but rather encouraged dialogue between women.

Despite the aversion to 'experts', visits from overseas feminist theologians have awakened enthusiasm and interest. Groups throughout the country have read material from feminist theologians such as Mary Daly,<sup>72</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Letty Russell, Carter Heyward and Phyllis Tribble. These theologians have been influential in developing feminist theology within this country, particularly in the early stages. A number of women have studied under these theologians in America. However, they have filtered their theology to ensure its relevance to *woman-church* in Aotearoa.

Throughout the fourteen years from the first *Consultation of theological educated women*, feminist Christian women have worked toward the development of a feminist theology that affirms women and offers freedom. They have moved from asserting the need for inclusive 'people' language to searching for a Christology relevant to women for 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Women are not alone in the dismantling and rewriting of their theology. What is important, however, is that women have given themselves permission to question. The degree to which *woman-church* is willing to rewrite theology, however, has critics arguing that little is left of Christianity. Critics would argue it has been overwhelmed by feminist dogma. Whatever the position, the search has begun for a theology that denounces patriarchy, affirms women and is relevant to the time and culture of Aotearoa, in essence a "theology that belongs".

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<sup>72</sup> Currently Mary Daly identifies herself as post-Christian.

## Chapter Three: PRACTICES

...some of the women...went to a women's spirituality workshop, and it just burst upon us like a dam that the tools for ritual were within us and that we weren't reliant on any external structures to express our spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

In tandem with the search for a “theology that belongs” has been the freeing of women within *the movement* to explore alternative spiritual practices than that of the traditional Sunday church service. Women have freed themselves from cultural and institutional restraints and allowed themselves to ‘practice’ their faith intuitively. Most material for this chapter has been sourced from the interviews. While there are some links with material from the previous chapter, it is difficult to correlate the spiritual journeys of interviewees specifically with each theological development. There are, however, some recurrent themes. It is also problematic to locate the shifts in practices in any particular linear progression as each woman's journey takes its own shape. With these difficulties in mind, I will seek to discuss emerging trends in spiritual practice amongst women in *the movement*. Discussion will focus on changes in corporate worship, individual practices and the practices of ordained women.

Changing spiritual practices developed within a milieu of developing alternative spiritualities. The ecumenical movement encouraged inter-faith dialogue, particularly after the Nairobi Conference of the World Council of Churches in 1975. As feminist theory diversified in the 1980s, it began to develop a “spiritual” side that had previously been spurned. This resulted in a search for “women's spirituality” free from patriarchy. The New Age and personal growth movements, which grew rapidly in the eighties and nineties, encouraged individual spiritual development although not through any particular formalised religion. Celtic spirituality was also undergoing a renaissance; emphasising affirmations and links with nature as opposed to negatives, and creeds. Creation spirituality, encouraging a theology of ecological responsibility espoused by Matthew Fox (a Jesuit priest who spoke widely to conferences on the topic until his suspension from the priesthood in the late 1980s). Within this melting pot women

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Ayers interview Auckland, 1 September 1995.

within *the movement* have experimented, searching for an authentic woman affirming reality of God/Godde/Goddess. Women's spiritual practice has reflected the changing shape of their understandings of themselves and their God/Godde/Goddess. Their practices, when not constrained by church structure and tradition, is often organic in nature and affirming of themselves and others.

The women I interviewed all came from "churched" families (those conforming to a social expectation) or Christian families (those with some form of active faith) or were drawn into church life by neighbours or friends. Respondents talked of attending Sunday School, and Bible Class, with the Evangelical Unions (Inter-Varsity Fellowship) or Student Christian Movement being influential during their time of tertiary education. Women came from both evangelical and liberal persuasions.

Catholic women spoke of saying the Rosary, attending Mass and saying morning and night prayers. Janet Marsh-Webster spoke of being 'born again', baptised by immersion, baptised in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. As a Pentecostal, her commitment was reflected in daily quiet times, speaking in tongues, attending church twice on Sunday, midweek Bible studies and prayer meetings.<sup>2</sup> For others, church attendance, involvement in teaching Sunday School, music groups and other areas of lay ministry were important aspects of their spiritual life. To varying degrees Bible study and intercessory prayer were part of these women's lives. Respondent F recalls being committed to studying the Bible and Bible reading. "I think I would have liked to have been able to say when I was eighty, 'I have never missed a day of reading my Bible and praying'. To me that sounded the height of dedication." Jo Ayers spoke of fulfilling the stereotypical role of women within the Catholic church. She recalls:

I grew up in a very traditional Catholic environment and accepted it fairly fully and played the supportive female role in a lot of social and religious things. Like women were always the sacristans, the people who set up the altar for the priest to say mass, and wash the linen. I was involved with some of that doing cleaning in the church and making cups of tea at parish functions.<sup>3</sup>

How these women now 'practice' their spirituality encompasses a wide range of experiences depending on their openness to alternate religious thought and their

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Marsh-Webster interview, Dunedin 16 December 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Jo Ayers interview, Auckland 1 September 1995.

acceptance of the feminist paradigm. Enid argues that the foundations laid in early life have a powerful psychological pull and individuals either “kick over the traces” and totally reject them or are wary of letting them go.<sup>4</sup> This would seem to hold true, for a number of women spoke of being unwilling to leave some of their Christian beliefs behind.

For some of those unwilling to “kick over the traces”, the search for authenticity has meant a renewed sense of the importance of church sacraments and doctrine while working out their expression for “our” time.<sup>5</sup> This has allowed for the influences of feminist ideology to address the issue of gender bias without making major structural differences to church and personal practice. For others personal practice has undergone greater change.

How these changes have impacted on corporate practices will now be discussed. As has been stated earlier despite *the movement* being referred to as if a homogeneous grouping, it is far from this. There is great diversity within its ranks and not all women would associate themselves with all of what is analysed below.

All the women within *the movement* express a sense of exclusion felt with the use of non-inclusive language in services. For many it has acted as a barrier to full participation, if not a barrier to church attendance. Use of hymns and choruses pushing fighting and victory themes was also perceived as alienating. Janet Marsh-Webster recalls her realisation that these images were no longer acceptable to her. “I remember having to stand out the front – in front of 1100 people having to sing inane songs like, *We will fight on the beaches, we will fight for the Lord* and I thought ‘I can’t sing this any more it’s absolutely abominable.’”<sup>6</sup>

For those within the Anglican and Catholic traditions inclusive liturgical services have offered an alternative.<sup>7</sup> Some began as monthly services and have developed into alternative worshipping communities. Others started but have not continued.

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Enid Bennett interview, Tairua 2 September 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Kelly-Johnston interview, Auckland 31 August 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Janet Marsh-Webster interview, Dunedin 16 December 1995.

One worshipping community has formed its own traditions. The Spiral community in Auckland emerged out of an inclusive language service at St Matthews Anglican Church in 1987. For some women it has become their “church” or “faith community”. It includes men and meets monthly, incorporating rituals, worship, reflection on theology and social activities. Theology and concepts of spirituality have evolved since it started ten years ago. The group’s practices have altered accordingly. Ngaire Brader, a member of the community, recognises that some would consider the link with Christianity tenuous and the theology “dubious”. However, she argues that “that’s really where our roots are and it’s our heritage. What we do makes sense because the people within the group generate the worship experience – it isn’t imposed by anybody else.”<sup>8</sup>

Rosemary Neave, instrumental in Spiral’s evolution, talks of the regular rituals celebrating the seasons. Included is the “linking with the seasons – linking in the elements of the earth and some of these kind of principles of Wicca without the Goddess type stuff.”<sup>9</sup> The celebrations coincide with the seasons of the Southern Hemisphere rather than the traditional link of Northern Hemisphere seasons, making it more contextual.<sup>10</sup> Rituals may be as simple as planting spring bulbs in autumn to mark the autumn equinox. This celebration of the seasons encourages an affinity with the earth that ultimately leads to a theology of ecological responsibility. Within the community there is also a strong social justice emphasis.

The women within the community attempted to form a woman’s ritual group for exploration into the goddess tradition. However, this disbanded after some felt that it was not the direction they wished to take and others were already involved in pagan ritual groups. Again, trial and error has marked this search for an authentic corporate outworking of their faith.

Other discussion groups have been focused solely around reading material on feminist theology and women’s spirituality. Other groups have been more ritual based. Some

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix for examples of alternative liturgies.

<sup>8</sup> Ngaire Brader interview, Auckland 6 September 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Neave interview, Auckland 30 August 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Juliet Batten has been instrumental with her books, *Power from within a feminist guide to ritual-making* and *Celebrating the southern seasons. Rituals for Aotearoa* in encouraging the celebration of seasons in tune with the southern hemisphere.

groups have been exclusively women, (sometimes named *Women-church*)<sup>11</sup>, while other groups have been open to both sexes. The search for a place to “belong” has not been simple. Different solutions have worked for different individuals and groups.

Due to dissatisfaction with traditional forms of worship, women’s ritual groups, discussion groups and alternative liturgy services have formed. These have disbanded as needs have changed or suitability has been questioned. By nature they have been eclectic drawing from a variety of traditions and religious practices. Some women attend such groups ‘alongside’ church while for others it has become “church”. Feminist theology, the goddess tradition and alternate liturgies have all been explored to varying degrees in different groups.

Chris Church and Respondent B are both involved in different study based groups in Christchurch. Chris describes her group as being specifically non-ritual based but a place where there is freedom to talk:

There’s freedom to talk about faith, about God. There’s space for everybody to bring their agenda to that group. It’s definitely not ritual based. One of the building stones of that group was that we didn’t actually make it into a ritual group. I know the need for rituals for people. Several members of the group wanted to have ritual within that context and we put it to the group and a decision was made on behalf of everyone. We got together and said, is this what we want and if not, is there other places.<sup>12</sup>

Respondent B spoke of her group emerging as a support group. They emphasised women’s spirituality “as some of the members of the group had left the church and weren’t interested in talking about Christianity”. Material used included Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Travelled*, *The Wise Wound* on menstruating spirituality and other works of women theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether. Only parts of the books were focused upon. What generally happened “is that somebody said that ‘I’ve got a good book that I’d like to talk about a little bit’ and other people might read a few chapters and then we’d discuss those chapters. The books were more a starting point than a finishing point and it ended up being more a support group than a study group.”

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<sup>11</sup> This is distinct from what I have called *woman-church*. In this context *women-church* is a particular community of women meeting together outside of the restraints of church life as opposed to the general *movement* of feminist Christian women networking throughout Aotearoa.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Church interview, Christchurch 16 December 1995.



A significant group with clear direction has been the Friday Group. It was set up in 1982 by several ordained women in the Auckland Diocese "to monitor the emerging ordained ministry of women in relation to structures of the Anglican Church and the Auckland Diocese."<sup>13</sup> However, it also became a place where feminist theology and alternate leadership styles were discussed. The group was strongly committed to justice issues and analysed "structures and power dynamics" within the church particularly relating to women. They had a strongly outward focus and were instrumental in setting up the Women's Resource Centre as well as pushing for women lecturers at St Johns Theological College. The group met for fourteen years and finally disbanded in 1996 when women recognised they no longer had the energy to "contribute to Diocesan life as they had been doing."<sup>14</sup>

Other groups have been more ritual based and organic by nature. Effectively, meetings took shape as women felt led. The leadership is shared. There is freedom for women to participate and add to meeting content as they sense it is appropriate. In this way, the meetings are intuitive and different contributions of women are accepted. A hallmark of these meetings is creativity, often not given the opportunity to be expressed in traditional services.

Respondent C talks of her experiences with a group of Catholic women in Dunedin who meet regularly on a Sunday morning and share lunch after their meeting. More than 20 women are involved in the network. The women take "turns at planning each one." "It's different every time. Sometimes we'll just talk, reflect on Scripture and share. Sometimes we'll have a ritual involved. Sometimes we do singing. Sometimes there will be an activity." There has been a deliberate attempt to use a variety of symbols differently; water, wine, the cross, candles and flowers:

We don't have a lectionary that we read out of and read all the prayers - we let them come from within us. We use movement, dance and touch. Sometimes we would hold hands, hug each other, use oil to anoint each other, wash one another's hands or feet. Sometimes we're hesitant about doing these things too because we don't know how we or the other women will react. When one is shaping a new thing, you have to take chances sometimes. Yet when we have shared and done things differently we all appreciate them. Sometimes depending on personality or stage, one doesn't

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Adams, "Struggle and Hope: is it enough? Personal reflection on the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women" *Keeping our heads above water*, Ree Bodde ed., (Auckland, 1998), p.8.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p.4.



like something as much as something else. One time we embroidered a bit on a piece of cloth. We each did a symbol. One woman simply wasn't into embroidery. So that's fine, we had to make her feel welcome to be there and okay not to do it. We're quite sensitive about that, and about way women out there understand God. Some of the women are at different stages with language and images of God, so some people will still talk about God as he and that's fine, because God is neither he nor she and yet God is he and she. So we accept that in one another. We've shared different kinds of Eucharist - in the sense that it is a thanksgiving for who we are and for our relationships and for God's gift of creation and everything else. We would not call it Eucharist in a typical Catholic community because it would be misunderstood.

So we have a place where we meet, and for the last two years it's been going fairly strongly. We take turns, two of us at a time to plan the next one. We meet about 10.30 in the morning on a Sunday and bring finger-lunch for afterwards. It's different every time. Sometimes we'll just talk, reflect on Scripture and share. Sometimes we'll have a ritual involved. Sometimes we do singing. Sometimes there will be an activity. I would say it's gradually growing. There's a group of 20+ names who are in the network and probably about a dozen of us gather each time together. I sometimes now can't go because it overlaps with our Sunday liturgy. I'm certainly willing to forego that but my children are starting to get involved in various things and so if they have something on that demands my presence at the parish, I go to the parish. Sometimes I go late to the liturgy. It's very important to have that group of women.

Another group in which Respondent B was involved similarly fostered creativity at its meetings:

A theme would be chosen the previous time and then women were free to bring something to contribute towards the theme, be it a poem, a picture, or a meditation, or thought or flower or a whatever. And it was – there was a song book of some purely women's spirituality type songs and Christian spirituality type songs – and then somebody would be nominated or a couple of people would be nominated to do the leadership of that and we'd just put in your bit as it seemed appropriate.

The search for a 'place' to belong is not without tensions. Respondent B spoke frankly of her frustration with her involvement in *Woman-church* in Christchurch and later at a Women's spirituality group.

One of the continuing tensions I'd always felt was Christian groups are too conservative for me but women's groups don't fit my belief system and I really need something that is kind of in the middle. I need a – I guess a Christian women's spirituality group because non-Christian groups don't really suit me either. I couldn't share my actual spiritual beliefs there. The feeling of the group was good I like the inclusive feel. I like the fact that the rhythms of nature are acknowledged. I like the gentleness. I like the use of symbols that's involved -that's involved in that and I like the fact that people share themselves rather than listening to somebody else. But for me I have to have – I have to have somebody or a group with whom I can share my Christianity.

Two women I interviewed now actually live and work in communities that they have founded. Along with others, they offer counselling, spiritual direction, retreats, quiet days as well as offering an alternative worshipping community. For some it has become their faith community. It encourages a more contemplative, meditative style of worship, that includes a use of symbols, silence, music, thought and sharing from the silence. There is an openness to dialogue rather than an autocratic form of teaching. Women are again encouraged to express themselves creatively and intuitively. For Respondent H, the retreat centre she founded has become her faith community. It is where her “theology gets formed and where people really know me and hold me accountable.”

Respondent F is involved in a similar community. However, it has taken an unexpected shift in theology by incorporating the images of the goddess within her spirituality and counselling. For Respondent F, the lack of scriptural role models for women, is offset by the example of Demeter as mother and Aphrodite as lover. “What getting in touch with Demeter or Aphrodite or Hero or whoever is doing for women in saying, ‘you’re made in the image of God, and this will give you a glimpse of what the image of God is like in its female form’.” The lack of inclusiveness, hierarchical structure and concept of clergy leave her feeling uncomfortable within formal church services. Her woman’s group acts as an inclusive family-like community. They meet regularly and share the leadership - “we eat and walk together and we share. We pray for each other, but we don’t do it in formal prayer. We hold each other prayerfully. It is organic for us.”

Some question Respondent F as to whether she is replacing one institution for another. However, for her the community is an expression of her personal faith. Through it, she encourages other women, “who sit opposite me to find their expression of their spiritual journey. So that instead of one great conglomerate of institutions we have all these people out doing their thing, being guided by the beckoning finger, with beliefs growing. To me that is being salt and light.”

Whether in small communities, inclusive liturgical services, discussion groups, or ritual groups women are working autonomously to create an environment conducive to their spiritual development. They deliberately seek not to re-create the hierarchical structures and autocratic means of leadership they have experienced in the past. The planning of

the conferences and the structuring of women's groups has deliberately been non-hierarchical. Leadership is team based and individual views are valued and upheld. The conferences were planned through consulting widely with other women. It was vital, to organisers, to hear what other women were saying and affirm and value their views. While discussion and ritual groups may have individuals leading meetings, all are given the opportunity to contribute. Creative talents are encouraged in a non-threatening environment as women explore aspects of themselves that have not been recognised in traditional church settings. For *woman-church*, the focus has been to create a single level of women enclosed and supported by one another in a circle as opposed to the hierarchical church structure.

This spiritual journeying has also taken place individually. Personal spiritual practices have changed markedly, although individuals' experiences have been different. The intuitive nature of their faith, when experience is free to 'speak', has revealed their uniqueness. However, while individual stories are unique some generalisations can be made about personal practice.

Women have experimented with images of and language for God. Devotional and prayer life has undergone considerable change. Relationships and nature have taken on greater significance. Women have more freely expressed their faith or spirituality in ways that allow them to listen to "the inner voice", the "Spirit" or "the God within" as opposed to the dictates of the church. Ultimately, they have allowed themselves to trust and listen to their intuitive side.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter women's images of God have undergone considerable change. Developing feminist theological analysis has legitimised what women were coming to understand and experience as the feminine side of God.

The issue of God's gender is very significant. In the minds of most Christians, God is beyond gender. However, in practice, God is largely male. Respondent E talks of the quandary:

I think God has to be gendered. People say God is beyond gender and I would agree with that but human beings think in gender categories. Our language is gendered and we can't get away from thinking in gender terms. So it's important to me to envisage God every bit as mother as it is to envisage God as father. And as a woman I think it's more important to me to envisage God as woman.

Respondent H was confused over her new feminine experience of God. Her sense was of God being "the one that nurtured me and loved me and contained me and held me. And it took me weeks before I realised that my experience of God was like being in the womb." Respondent H actually felt unable to voice her new understanding until she studied in America under Radford Ruether. There it was perceived as nothing unusual. Radford Ruether explained that womb and compassion came from the same root Hebrew word. It was a relief to Respondent H that the image was Scriptural. Even as I interviewed, Respondent H quoted Scripture to justify her new images - more now out of habit than necessity.

Rosemary Duncan's experience of motherhood opened her to the recognition and experience of God as mother and validated her long held feminine images of God.<sup>15</sup> Before becoming a mother she had grown into a relationship with God as father and friend. When her children arrived she was awakened to new feminine images of God especially in Psalm 131.

And that opened up a completely new way of looking at God because I felt as if my whole way of functioning as a person which had feminine aspects which were different than the male concept of God and all those feminine images of God throughout the Bible which I had known right through and had always meant a lot to me - they came to life really.<sup>16</sup>

The growing awareness of God's feminine side has encouraged women to experience God in new ways. Drawing from images within Scriptures, the writings of the women mystics<sup>17</sup> and their own experiences, God has become midwife, mother and womb. Enid spoke of the impact of a workshop taken by Judith McKinlay on Sophia at the 1988 Christchurch conference. "To me it was just the answer to everything because it affirmed that Wisdom is a teacher. It confirmed me in my teaching role - restored my confidence no end."<sup>18</sup> The impact of using feminine God language in Respondent D's personal devotional life has been profound. God began to make more sense:

The crunch for me came when I read John 3:16 and I read, "God so loved the world that she gave her only child" and that hit me very deeply. Theologically I'm not sure exactly what was happening there but it was a significant moment for me. This was real and this was a God that makes sense to me now in ways that God hadn't before.

<sup>15</sup> Rosemary Duncan interview, Auckland 4 September 1995.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> In particular, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avial and Hildegard of Bingen.

<sup>18</sup> Rev Enid Bennett interview, Tairua, 2 September 1995.

Women explored new names for God, seeking to redress the balance of solely masculine and feminine terms, such as Mother God and Mother/Father God. Non-gender specific names were also used such as Godde. Goddess was also used, although some women aligned it with the wicca tradition they did not support. More inclusive terms such as Creator God, Divine One, Divine Wisdom and Godself have all been experimented with and used to varying degrees. For many, God has “come down”. The image of the man with the white flowing beard and the judgmental pointing finger has been replaced by a God alongside and within who is caring and more tender.

Respondent C’s re-evaluation of her faith left her wondering who or what God was. As she explored feminist theology she began to see many different images of God - “So I began to look at God as; Wisdom, from the Books of Wisdom, Proverbs; as God as Mother; as Spirit, who was a tender and caring God and not necessarily so judgemental. A God who encourages and empowers.”

While women have intellectually assented to God’s feminine side and explored imagery and language to balance the masculine bias, for some the change has been difficult on an emotional level. Patricia Allan, an Anglican minister, recalls images of a very authoritarian, male God who was “very given to answering prayers”. She has found it difficult to be free completely from these images and emotionally accept feminine images of God. For Respondent D the impact of socialisation is profound. She recalls feminine images of God planted in her mind early in life. She still struggles with their use.

When I was five mum told me that if I was a good girl God would stitch another beautiful stitch in my dress that I would wear in heaven. That was a female sort of thing. Also, when I was a teenager the minister talked about the Trinity being like a person who was a Sunday school teacher, a sister and a cub leader and again it was the women. There was never any transference that therefore God is a ‘she’.

They were there, but God is male and I have to say still that God is male in lots of ways – it’s been so much pushed into me. I fight it all the time because I’m absolutely convinced God isn’t male. The socialisation is just incredible. I don’t know if it’s age or what but I’m not sure that it’s possible to change completely and yet I want to just throw it away.

Respondent H recalled her experience at the first *Women and ministry conference* in 1981 with women pushing for feminine God language. She was stunned by two things, firstly “the women in the back row who every time a ‘he’ was mentioned they would

say 'she' and every time 'Father' was mentioned they would say 'Mother'. I was sort of – there was a crossing there between thinking how rude they were and how amazing they were." The first time she heard feminine God language used spontaneously also deeply impacted on her. As a woman prayed, "Mother God embrace my children over there" Respondent H cried. She now uses feminine imagery and language for God naturally.

Respondent F struggled with her perception of God until in a period of reflection she moulded clay. "It came out of the clay – a beckoning finger." For her this encapsulated God. It freed her from a lifelong emphasis to 'serve'. "And now instead of working flat out in between my job or killing myself, it's like the essence of me. I don't have to strive. The finger just leads me on to giving or resting or whatever."

Other women's experiences and analysis have moved them to where God has become less tangible. Respondent A spoke of feeling she understood God less now than she had before. For her, people have "captivated" or "domesticated" God and have limited who God is. As her concept of God has become hazy she has subsequently put more emphasis on the Spirit. Another woman spoke of her concept of God broadening from just "a mummy in the sky" to "Spirit, life force, energy" However, she felt this was still an inadequate expression of her experience because it sounded more impersonal than intended.<sup>19</sup>

A number of women have gone through a process of moving from a "personal" God concept to a belief in "some kind of spiritual or higher power." The 'shape' this 'higher power' takes varies. Ngaire was unwilling to accept that her life was independent of a "higher power". For her, God, or "a power, something that is good"<sup>20</sup> remained.

Women who are heavily influenced by post-modernist analysis accept God as only a human construct. The idea of even a "spirit holding the universe together" is denied. Respondent G expressed understanding of the "God thing" as "energy of life", "relationship" or "ebb and flow" rather a "supernatural being out there". Whether or not a 'spirit' is there is irrelevant to Judith. She believes that what we know comes

<sup>19</sup> Rev. Margaret Reid-Martin interview, Auckland 29 August 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Ngaire Brader interview, Auckland.



ultimately from verbal constructions. While she does not discard the “God” word, she sees it merely as a word “of greater power and significance and ...more layers of stuff around it than any other word”.<sup>21</sup> She explains “post-structuralism frees me since its all only words. It’s all only structures. It’s all only discourse...”<sup>22</sup> Rosemary has also been profoundly influenced by post-modernism. She has moved from being a “conservative evangelical rebel” to a “post-modern de-constructionist.” She believes that “what we see is what you get. I’m agnostic, if not atheistic about the presence of some life force beyond, above, out there. Probably agnostic about it rather than atheistic – just that so the whole idea that...we have of God is something that we’ve ‘constructed’ rather than something that has been ‘revealed’.”<sup>23</sup>

Other women view these changes as cosmetic. They recognise a need for a life-giving spirituality and find even Christian feminism unsatisfactory. Their search is for something more affirming of themselves. Some have found it in “women’s spirituality” where the images of the goddess have been “resurrected” from pre-patriarchal times. Beryl George was drawn into the goddess tradition through a continuing education class in Auckland. She subsequently became involved with a woman’s ritual group and found it “incredibly powerful”. She explains her beliefs:

I think now what I feel strongly connected to is some kind of spiritual force or being which is quite ‘other’ from – than anything I ever experienced in the Christian church. It is very much earth based. It’s very – like my spirituality is earth based, its seasonal, its very much affected by the environment....It’s definitely not Christian, it has aspects of light and dark as both creator and destroyer. It’s very hard to explain...no I find that even talking about father/mother God or mother/father God in a Christian context that to me doesn’t feel any longer the god, the spirit, the whatever that I relate to. The one I relate to is other than that and I’ve had some incredibly powerful experiences around that...<sup>24</sup>

The number of women espousing these views is growing. Many ritual groups have sprung up, often spontaneously, from women’s need to connect with their spiritual side holistically. Ruth Gardner, in *Faces of the goddess* expresses these commonly held thoughts:

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Dale interview, Wellington 7 December 1995.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Rosemary Neave interview, Auckland.

<sup>24</sup> Beryl George interview, Auckland 4 September 1995.



My spirituality connects me to life itself, to the past, the future, to every other form of life, to nature and her seasons and cycles to my family and friends and to a wider universe.

My spirituality is female, it's to do with my being a woman and the special connection I have with the life force because I am a woman. It means honouring models of female divinity and being aware that I am part of that divinity. It's also about the need to bring feminine and masculine into balance.<sup>25</sup>

This book recounts the spiritual journeys of several New Zealand women. The book gives opportunity for women to express their developing spirituality in a non-judgmental context.

Alongside the changes in imagery and language have been the changes in personal practices. Elements of prayer life, particularly in the evangelical tradition, includes praying for and on behalf of individuals and prayer for God's intervention and participation in daily situations on both a personal and global level. This emphasis on the 'list' approach of petition and intercessory prayer has often been replaced by a more contemplative style of prayer. There is more silence and stillness. Respondent H talks of "a longing for silence and being aware that that was how God was speaking to me." Some women believe less "in a God who finds me parking spaces." Jo acknowledges that as her image of God has changed so too has her prayer life. Quantity of prayer and having enough faith so "God will poke his finger in and move things around and make it right"<sup>26</sup> has become less important. She explains:

...because my view of God has changed...as being with me and permeating all of my existence and the existence of other things in the planet.... I could understand a transcendent identity out there, now I don't find that so easy to understand. I find prayer of praise a lot easier than I use to, Catholics were never very good at that I don't think. And I find the Celtic prayers like the binding prayers, you know those prayers like 'I bind unto myself today the great power of the Trinity, the breastplate of St Patrick,...I think its called a ... breastplate prayer which is very typical of the Celtic prayer, calling to yourself things to protect you, but it is essentially a recognition of the God imminent around you, you know. So I find them very good. And the kind of blessing prayers in that tradition of...recognising God, the presence of God in things around you. .... "may the road rise to meet you and the wind always be at your back, and may God hold you in the palm of his hand', you know that kind of stuff."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Gardner, "Ruth Gardner", *Faces of the Goddess. New Zealand women talk about their spirituality*, Celine Kearney ed, North Shore City, 1997, p 127.

<sup>26</sup> Jo Ayers interview, Auckland 1 September 1995.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

Change for evangelicals has often been more profound than that experienced by those from a liberal Christian tradition.

The reflective style of prayer has been influenced by the writings of the women mystics, – Theresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen. Respondent H talks of the importance of the mystics on the inner journey - “a lot of the early saints, the ...saints talked about the only way to God is through self-knowledge and the deeper you go into yourself the deeper you get into God.” For her the ‘inner journey’ is deeply significant. Social justice issues and caring for the earth she also sees as “very real and central.” Her practice involves “discovering who she is in God.” This includes exploring her giftedness and her own pain and joy and from there “moving out” to whatever God is calling her to do.

Respondent C only slowly recognised her contemplative side. As she explored the readings of the mystics, she recognised that in order to grow in her relationship with God she also needed an “awareness of oneself.”

I was resentful if anyone interfered with those twenty minutes, which is all I had during the day, of washing dishes when I could be in my own space. It was realising that - I realised I did have a contemplative side. I might not have been thinking about God in those times but I was taking time to go into myself. As I've read more of the mystics, especially women mystics, Theresa of Avila, and Julian of Norwich and Hildegard and Mectilde and also John of the Cross, I've realised that an awareness of oneself is one of the first necessary steps for an awareness and a relationship with God. Reading that was a relief for me because I had always been interested in who I was as a person but felt it was a selfish thing to do, to concentrate on oneself. Reading that Teresa felt that way, I felt I was given permission to explore myself at the same time as exploring who God was. I've realised that they are intricately woven....

Respondent B spoke of attending ‘new agey’ seminars that developed tools such as meditation to enhance her spiritual growth

.....I've learned how to meditate and I try to do that about three times a week. And I ask God to come with me in my meditation and just go wherever I go. And I find that that has been probably more helpful and being able to find a way to pray is not really prayer in the strictest sense all the time, but it's being open to God.

Judith talks of the freedom she has found through post-structural analysis from the guilt of “I ought to be doing this”:

....this post-structural thing has released me from that because there isn't any dictate that has got any validity so if it doesn't work well then I don't want to do it.....there is nothing to tell me that I have to do anything. So I try and do only what I want to do. Or I try to want to do the things that are good for me...so I try to have more fun. I punish myself a bit less. I try not to punish myself for wasting time when I do things that I wish I hadn't done I try to think 'now I did them so no sense in worrying about that'.....what I in practice do, which I actually think is spiritual practice...is what I do when I first get up or before I start work, ... - it's not housework but its fussing around. I fix up the flowers in the hall nearly every day...some forms of cooking and eating are too. Self-nurturing things, the self-loving things are spiritual practices...

Bible reading has often become difficult for women grappling with their theology (particularly relating to gender issues). Some women have reached the point where Scriptures have become an anathema and they have put them aside for a period of time. Two women specifically spoke of their struggles. Both spoke of "taking a breather" from Bible reading. In Janet's case she also took "time out" from God.

I stopped reading, apart from when I had to do it for exegesis. I stopped praying, I said God, I think we need a bit of a break from each other. Don't take it personally, I think I just need some time out. I read passages but all I could hear was these wrong interpretations just coming out of the text and all these sloppy exegeses that I'd been subjected to all these years and these unbelievable typological sermons that could haul anything out of anything. It all came flooding back. I couldn't read it and stand off from it.<sup>28</sup>

Janet is prepared to allow time for reconciliation:

I'm not going to be bulldozed in this 'the Lord's coming back in the next couple of years, we've got to work like crazy'. God's very patient. He's been around for thousands of years. The next couple of years is not going to matter one iota.<sup>29</sup>

Respondent D's return to Bible reading and meditation has engendered excitement after a period of "fighting" with the text. "I've now integrated things sufficiently that I'm able to say that there is something worthwhile to be gained from it and to try and find that and transform it into something liberating for me and others – it's really quite exciting and enjoyable".

Acknowledgment and experience of God through nature is another element predominant within *the movement*, at both an individual and corporate level. This relationship with nature has previously not been considered "kosher."<sup>30</sup> However, women's theology

<sup>28</sup> Janet Marsh-Webster interview, Dunedin.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Rev. Patricia Allan interview, Christchurch 3 January 1995.

legitimises their practice. Patricia questioned a group of older women about their concept of God. While masculine images were predominant, one woman admitted to seeing God as “the evening star” and another placed a flower in front of her when she prayed. Both hastened to add they knew the star and flower were not God but they spoke of God to them.<sup>31</sup> Starting with the premise that the soul/body dichotomy is wrong, women have become more open to allowing nature speak to them of God and recognise the intrinsic spiritual link between them and nature. This awareness is not always conscious. Respondent C explains:

I always found that even though I sort of didn't know if God was there for those years...I was always very close to nature and I think for me that's what the connecting point was. That's how God kept in touch with me during that time. Because I always would go outdoors hiking, skiing or whatever and I would always come back at peace and I couldn't articulate what that was....

Others consciously recognise the spiritual importance of their relationship with nature. For Jo growing plants makes her aware of “the immensity of God and nature”. For other women, the seasons are an important influence on their lives. Through ritual they celebrate the various seasonal festivals such as the autumn equinox, and the winter solstice. For those in the Spiral community there is a recovery of “a theology, a symbolic framework in which we take account of our relationship with the earth not just our relationship with other people....”.<sup>32</sup> Matthew Fox, the proponent of Creation Spirituality, has strongly influenced the community's ecological theology. This recognises the differing energy levels associated with the different seasons.

In all that there's a different kind of energy and I don't mean this in a ... new age ...of waving crystals kind of way, but we feel different in autumn and spring and winter. And so part of that is actually tapping into that energy that we feel and actually using that to kind of motivate ourselves personally and politically to do what – what we actually have the energy for. In winter time it is ... the more pulling your horns in,... it's a time for reading and reflection and wondering what is the next thing to do. Spring is the time where you think 'yeah, okay what am I going to grab hold of? What is it that I want to do now?' So that's all been quite an important part of those ritual formations.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Rev. Patricia Allan interview, Christchurch.

<sup>32</sup> Rosemary Neave interview, Auckland.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

Respondent F quotes a Sunday School illustration - "I am a pip inside an orange. Therefore the orange is inside the pip." She grapples with the mystery of the interconnectedness between her, nature and God:

I have the experience of going out into the night sky and looking up and seeing this tremendous velvet dark sky with the moon and the stars and it's like - WOW! That is soul. That's Divine. There's something out there that is more than me and I'm in relationship to it. It's what I call Divine. It cares. It knows. It creates. It sustains. It holds. All the old words I have had since Sunday School days. The awe and wonder. And that which is out there I experience. Therefore there is a oneness. I too am Divine. I hold myself in awe and wonder and reverence and mystery. And all that I saw out there I see within me. It's as though I am a fragment of the heart of God. It came to me. It grew organically. So when I go out there and look at that whole canopy, I think "Yes! The Divine".

Judith feels centred or rooted or belonging to nature, rather than experiencing God in nature. On aesthetic grounds, she is 'moved by', places like temples, mosques and the outdoors -in mountains, bush and rivers.<sup>34</sup>

The environment was also significant at the conferences. It contributed to an "atmosphere" conducive to spiritual development at the 1984 Camp Morley conference<sup>35</sup>. The setting for the 1994 Tauhara conference also impacted on those attending.

The setting was so conducive to life and healing. But the people were also able to resonate with their surroundings. The trees, ferns, grass, rocks of the outdoors together with the astounding peaceful and comfortable interior provided a suitable backdrop to a magnificent tapestry of women.<sup>36</sup>

Another aspect of *the movement* is the importance of relationships. Some spoke of not understanding who or what they believed in. They found it elusive to define, 'life force', 'spirit', Divine One, or God/Godde/Goddess. They could, however, define it in terms of relationships. Chris viewed relationships as central to community and this was important to her faith journey - "My worship is very immersed in those understandings about how we respond to each other". In times of crisis, Ngaire talked of turning to friends rather than a "me personally prayer", for it was in friendships, love and support that she discovered God. Jo believed her relationships were a "profound expression of

<sup>34</sup> Judith Dale interview, Wellington 7 December 1995.

<sup>35</sup> Refer to quote Chapter 1, p17.

<sup>36</sup> *Women and church shaping the future. 4<sup>th</sup> National feminist theology conference. Conference musings*, Auckland, 1994, p.52

God”, especially her marriage relationship – “So holy moments for me are in terms of relationship – with my husband, children and friends”<sup>37</sup>. Jo also sees laughing and making someone laugh as a “wonderful expression or experience of God.”<sup>38</sup>

The importance of relationships was recognised by the organisers of the women’s conferences. Within the first hours of arriving at the conference venue, activities facilitated the drawing together of smaller groups or cells of like-minded women. This was especially important for the organisers of the 1988 conference, who saw it as a means to develop a safe environment and to create a sense of unity; a place of nurture and security.

‘Connections’ defined the faith or spirituality of two women. Rosemary explained, “I see spirituality as being something about the connections between me and myself, people around me, the world around me, the earth and God...”<sup>39</sup> Respondent D believed:

It’s more a mystical sense about the acceptance of nature and the value of relationship. I think that’s where my so-called Christianity and faith experience is today. It’s about being available to people, with the strengths and gifts that I’ve got. I want to somehow encapsulate that in a way that doesn’t demand institutional religion.

Ecumenism is another characteristic of *woman-church*. The 1984 Conference interpreted ‘ecumenical’ in a broader sense than the 1981 conference, implying inter-faith dialogue.<sup>40</sup> The range of workshops at the 1988 conference further signalled women’s willingness to explore and adapt practices from differing philosophical slants. The conferences and interviewees reflect a sense of ‘not having all the answers’. The ‘them’ and ‘us’ mentality of black and white fundamentalist Christianity is absent. As a result other religions are not discarded as irreconcilable to Christianity and are certainly seen as options for people of other cultures. One woman spoke of it in terms of Fowler’s stages of faith.

And I have got to a point in the development of religious understanding according to Fowler that I realise there is only one God, one Divine, one world. And that there is only one truth and that truth is beckoning people.

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<sup>37</sup> Jo Ayers interview, Auckland.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Rosemary Neave interview, Auckland.

<sup>40</sup> Refer to Chapter 1 p.30 for previous discussion on ecumenism.



We may sit at the surface playing around with different names and fighting about what our sentences mean but in the depth of you and me and that Moslem and that Buddhist there is still only one Divine beckoning.<sup>41</sup>

Celebration of the Eucharist is another area that has developed for women both corporately and individually. The Eucharist or Communion has been an essential element of the Christian faith for nearly two thousand years. For many women in the movement the act of remembering Christ's death has become less relevant as the centrality of the cross has faded. For Respondent A it has taken on new meaning:

The Eucharist is important to me. It would be hard to tie – really tie that down because my theological understanding has changed but I still think that is an important ritual that has multifaceted meanings really. And I think I'm more interested in symbol and ritual because I think there is a great power in symbol and ritual....And gathering to eat a meal together has that regardless in a sense of the theology or even the words that you use – it's such a basic human activity I suppose.<sup>42</sup>

However, for Chris, it has become a ritual she finds difficult preferring to focus on the social justice and peace aspects of the gospel.

For me the biggest move away from the church in a spiritual and psychological sense has been the focus, particularly within the Anglican church, on the Eucharist which I find quite a violent and difficult celebratory event of the church. I'd like to focus more on the church as a place of rejoicing in the ethic of what Christianity is. And for me that's what Christ tried to talk about; peace and social justice.<sup>43</sup>

The Eucharist's significance has also altered for some ordained women. Carole Graham's perceives the Eucharist as an "outward sign of the new covenant" for those ordained women with a feminist orientation.

Jesus used his eating at table and his sharing of table fellowship as opportunities for welcoming and accepting all, especially the marginalised. He not only healed people and made them whole he acted out and made real the new covenant which God had intended. The new covenant – like the old one – was to find its fulfilment within community and as people found wholeness together.

The results of the Questionnaire suggest that those women priests with a "feminist" orientation towards priesthood share this vision of the new covenant. For them, too, the Last Supper has significance both as heralding the new covenant as Jesus intended it and for highlighting the importance of table fellowship as an outward sign of the new covenant. For these women priests, presiding at the Eucharist is not so much looking back to that time when Jesus initiated a new relationship between God and humankind; it is looking forward to the future and perfect fulfilment of that

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<sup>41</sup> Respondent F.

<sup>42</sup> Respondent A.

<sup>43</sup> Chris Church interview, Christchurch.



relationship. It is not so much re-enacting what was, but anticipating what will be. For them the Eucharist is something which is powerful in its earthly relevance. It is the occasion when people are invited to share in the community of Jesus. When they preside at the Eucharist these women priests are most conscious of Christ the suffering servant – an indication that they see themselves as facilitators of that new covenant which is characterised by justice and equality but which may in turn involve pain and suffering.<sup>44</sup>

It has been deeply significant to women within *the movement* to be able to administer Communion and receive Communion from other women. Respondent H recalled how important it was to her to receive Communion from a woman. However, the response of those receiving Communion from her was not always positive. Some were happy to receive Communion if her husband was there as her “covering”, while others were particularly negative about it. Many people, particularly within the Catholic tradition, argue that Jesus’ maleness (which is significant to them) is not being acknowledged when a woman serves Communion. However, for those within *the movement* the emphasis on Jesus’ gender only reinforces the masculine image of God.

As such we must continually reflect and question the consequences of our theology. For instance, the movement to allow women to be ordained within some strands of the christian church required a rethinking of the place of Jesus. It became apparent that for many Jesus could only be represented by a male – that the “maleness” of Jesus was an essential part of his saving life. Allowing Jesus to be represented at the eucharist by a woman shifts the focus from his maleness to his humanity, and de-emphasise the maleness of God!<sup>45</sup>

Women within *the movement* have experimented with serving Communion at ritual groups and alternative liturgy services unaided by an ordained minister. Some have done so in their own homes with their children. There is an acceptance of the “ministry of all believers” therefore the individual has the right to serve Communion where they consider it appropriate.

While ordained women can reshape their own personal ‘spiritual’ practices, the change taking place in church life is often slow and restricted. There is tension between facilitating change and not “alienating” the congregation and church hierarchy. Some

<sup>44</sup> Carole R.M. Graham thesis, *Re-membering the Past...Re-shaping the future. A study of the ordination of women as priests in the Anglican Church of Aotearoa New Zealand 1977-1990*, MA thesis in theology, Vancouver School of Theology, 1994, p.135.

<sup>45</sup> *Pre-conference book*, 1994, p.41.

feminists promote androgyny and do not emphasise the differences between men and women, seeing them merely as a result of socialisation. Other feminists articulate the gender distinctions, men as logical and analytical while women nurture and are more feeling oriented and the need to balance both within the individual. Within *the movement*, it appears that women's way of doing things is emphasised as unique. The ordained women spoke of the differences they brought to their ministry as women. They offered different perspective's on traditional ideas and creative ways of doing things within services. Respondent E explains,

I work within the structure. The changes one makes are small. So one changes the language, one tries in many ways to bring as much feminine imagery into as possible. One does small things in services. So in one service last year when there were four ordained women here we all celebrated communion together all four of us. Instead of having one figure we had four figures. Or we had another service and we had, it was a Eucharist, and we divided everybody up and had picnics and groups of people celebrated. And somebody asked me afterward whether it had been a Eucharist or agape meal. Obviously thought we had gone a bit far for it to be a Eucharist. We thought it was great. So one tries where there are places where one can experiment and change but its not large.

Margaret explains that while she works within the traditional framework she tends to be more "informal, non-traditional....I look upon the opportunities as ways of offering them something that's just a little bit different from what they may have thought about."<sup>46</sup> She offers insights from a woman's perspective while seeking to make it relevant to all. Another 'little gesture' that Respondent E spoke of was her desire to "protest the demarcation line between lay and clergy" by not robing:

... I'm one of the few in this presbytery of clergy that don't robe. When I celebrate communion I wear a stole but that is all I wear....in a way I'm uncomfortable in being ordained if ordination signifies a disjunction between lay and clergy.

Patricia remarks on her own practice and that of other women priests,

I think that women priests...I think we've brought a flexibility and intuition that is a women's contribution. I remember a funeral in Hokitika that I took where the granddaughter (a six or seven week old baby) of the woman that had died came to the funeral. Although the woman had never met her granddaughter I took the baby and introduced the grandmother in the eulogy. That was very powerful.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Rev. Margaret Reid-Martin interview, Auckland.

Although not ordained, Respondent F spoke of not immediately recognising her creativity reflected her feminine side. She naturally used symbols and creative ministry tools such as music, drama, and clowning. She encouraged an experimental, creation-centred (always Biblical)<sup>48</sup> focus on developing one's faith. For example, instead of teaching indoors the teaching was done outside:

So I started to use flowers, or we would do worship walks...They would go out under a tree and there they would read the Scripture about a tree, or Jesus going into a garden...They would write their feelings down on the card. Then they'd move to the next place which might be a dish of salt, and the instructions would be taste this – read Matthew Chapter 5 – write down – it became experimental.

Change whether corporate, individual or as an ordained minister has come with much angst. Women spoke of struggling with the implications of the battle for change and expressed their sense of isolation within Christian communities as they “fought” for change. *Woman-church* has been a ‘place’ of nurture and support. Every meeting or conference where women have gathered has been an opportunity to draw strength from one another. Women have identified the right to name their own spiritual reality, recognising it as being distinct from that of men. They have argued their uniqueness as women is not recognised within the church. They have, therefore, sought to create or re-create a ‘faith’ affirming of women’s experience and diversity. They recognise their faith is a ‘process’, a ‘journey’ and that they will never have all the answers. This gives them the freedom to accept the many different views and practices along the spectrum. Having had a rigid church tradition imposed on them in the past they are loath to impose a particular belief structure on each other. As they search for a “theology that belongs”, their practices are reflecting the journey for authenticity.

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<sup>47</sup> Rev. Patricia Allan interview, Christchurch.

<sup>48</sup> The emphasis on her activities being Biblical comes from the need to legitimise her practice for others within the denomination. Material needed to be Scripturally based or it would be considered suspect.

## CONCLUSION

"Despite considerable provocation I am staying in the Anglican Church." So read a plastic coated button received by Susan Adams from women friends in Australia. For Susan Adams, it 'captured' her renewed certainty of where she was called to be.<sup>1</sup> In an article in *Accent* Susan Adams talked of her decision to remain in the Anglican Church. Fundamentally, her 'radical feminist' perspective compelled her to work to transform the church and society, ultimately working for "true justice". When she wrote the article she believed the church still had a contribution to make to society and that it held some influence on society's values and ideologies. However, Christian feminist women, she argued were needed to remain in its structures to push "for new institutional styles and actions."<sup>2</sup>

A changed church will be able to influence social ideas differently, it will be a sign of hope for change in the world, and it will be itself, a more just and gospel-shaped institution. By challenging the ideology, theology, ethics, and leadership-style of the church we can play a part in the transformation of both church and society.<sup>3</sup>

Adams also wrote, "women like me **are church**". There is a sense of belonging despite the inequalities. "It is **our** home and family, too. Our foremothers as committed and faithful Christian women left us a legacy to care for, to nurture, and to add our own gift to in preparation for handing on to future generations of women and men."<sup>4</sup> It is such thinking that prevented many feminist Christian women leaving the church.

Those who have remained have worked passionately for change in church structure and practice. It could be argued the change has been slow and minimal. Yet women have stayed, often on the fringes, out of a deep conviction that the church still has something to offer under the layers of patriarchy.

The ethos of *woman-church* is opposition to the inherent patriarchy in the church and its effects reflected through sexism, racism, exclusive language, theology and church practice. Women within *the movement* are seeking to re-create church into something

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Adams, "I am staying", *Accent* 3:1, February 1988, p.20.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p.20.

that accepts the differences in gender, “race”, class, sexual orientation, and that is affirming to women. It gives individuals the right to use their gifts and abilities no matter the differences. Women long for a place open to explore and experiment, to allow for creativity and to ‘know’ God beyond the boxes created for Her by liturgies and church practices steeped in patriarchy. There is still a belief in Christianity’s ability to offer hope in today’s world. What is questioned is how Christianity is offered.

Feminist theological analysis is the ideology of women within *woman-church*. It has been greatly influenced by overseas feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Mary Daly.<sup>5</sup> However, it has been made relevant to the concerns of women of Aotearoa. While the degree to which women within *the movement* have digested and accepted feminist analysis has varied, women’s “sisterhood” has kept them dialoguing. Their genuine desire to work for change causes them to work across their differences.

The religious and social culture of the period certainly encouraged openness to wider ideas and values than that presently found in the Christian church. This has included the New Age and personal growth movements, those practicing alternative faiths, Celtic and creation spiritualities, the churches ecumenical movement<sup>6</sup>, and goddess religion (or wicca). Some women have drawn threads from these into their spiritual practices. However, the strongest influence on women in *woman-church* is their feminist praxis and ultimately their developing feminist theology.

*The movement* has struggled with whether it can actually facilitate change within the church or whether the church is irredeemably patriarchal. Some have chosen to work within the current structures hoping to force change from within. Others believe that their energies are better spent searching for workable alternatives outside of or on the fringes of the church. In some cases, these alternatives have involved withdrawing to women’s groups, whether discussion or ritual based. For those remaining within church

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>5</sup> They are referred to as the “founding mothers of Anglo-American feminist theology” by Carolyn Brewer in “In the beginning was the voice of the Mother” *Keeping our heads above water* (Auckland, 1998), p.29

<sup>6</sup> For some this was solely between denominations, but the World Council of Churches throughout this time were also encouraging cross-faith dialogue.

structures, women's groups have often been a place to be strengthened and encouraged in their current roles.

The alternative liturgy groups, discussion groups, and ritual groups have offered opportunity for women to further develop their theology. In tandem, the opportunity has developed to explore new ways of practicing their faith outside the ambit of church control. These have included: inclusive language liturgies, women's rituals - honouring women and recognising the "God-within" (as opposed to the emphasis on a transcendent God), rituals celebrating the seasons and acknowledging the importance of creation, shared leadership in meetings, and encouragement of spontaneity and creativity. Women are searching for authenticity, being told less what to believe and an emphasis on encouraging the intuitive side. For women involved, it is more about moving away from dualism and encouraging a holistic faith, focusing on the inner journey as well as the social justice element of the gospel message. These groups are places where "herstory" is acknowledged and honoured. Hierarchical structure is discarded for an organic and experientially centred ethos.

The theology and the resultant steps into new faith practices have occurred as the impact of feminism on the church has heightened since the late 1970s. The '*Women in ministry conferences*' in 1981, 1984, 1988 and 1994<sup>7</sup> have reflected the changes taking place in the thinking and practice of the women involved in *woman-church*. They have been important opportunities for women to gather and sift through dogma, experiment with practice, encourage creativity and acknowledge and honour themselves as women. They have been examples of women networking and dialoguing in a space independent of men. They have been opportunities for women to draw strength from one another. Earlier in the 1980s, buoyed by the progress being made politically by and for women, feminist Christian women sensed that changes were possible within the church. There was a growing anticipation and excitement at what could be achieved. In the later years there has been an ongoing determination to carry on despite slow progress.

Since beginning this research the sense of dogged determination has been tempered. In some cases, there now exists a deep tiredness and a battle against cynicism. A recent

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<sup>7</sup> Another national Conference was held at Livingsprings on Banks Peninsula in 1998.



text explores how women in *the movement* in Aotearoa are feeling at the end of the “decade for women.”<sup>8</sup> Susan Adams’ chapter “Struggle and Hope: Is it Enough?” is of particular interest in light of her article in *Accent* written at the beginning of the decade for women. She recalls how full of optimism they were at the start of the decade.

Ten years ago Christian women, and especially feminist Christian women, were full of hope. The decade was established: empowering, affirming, giving visibility, enabling and encouraging women in their actions for peace and justice, and urging the churches to stand in solidarity with the ministries of women as they took leadership and acted in ways which would transform oppressive structures. Great things would be achieved...or so we dared to dream.<sup>9</sup>

Writing at the end of the decade, Adams talks of a deep weariness among those involved in *the movement*. Women are tired of constantly tackling “institutional issues.” By 1994 those involved in the Friday group recognised that they no longer had the energy and were “struggling to keep their heads above water.”

At our meetings of the Friday Group and the Women’s Resource Centre we became aware that not so many of us were able to be there as regularly. Numbers began to fall off even at the Spiral liturgy and discussion group, each of which met once a month. It became apparent that many of us were expressing deep tiredness. It was becoming harder and harder to keep our energy up, our health in good shape and to continue to exercise the ministries we had come to expect.<sup>10</sup>

Two years after this realisation, the Friday group disbanded. Adams goes on to discuss the churches’ “sanitised rhetoric” in relation to women in church and society. Susan does not deny the changes in regard to language, the increased number of women involved in theological training and number of women being ordained. However, she argues:

...the depth of meaning, transformative intention, and action behind the rhetoric has lessened: the shining exterior of inclusion and equality masks a reality of denial, reaction, marginalisation and despair. As the church struggles to survive in the arena of competing ideas and diversity of “spiritual” expression, the influence of women – a late arrival on the scene of public ideology – is seen as a threat to that survival.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *The ecumenical decade of churches in solidarity with women* was instigated by the World Council of Churches. It ran from 1988 until 1998. It was up to the churches to take the concept and ‘run’ with it within their own parishes. Although some attempts were made to acknowledge it, to a large extent it is argued that it was women in solidarity with women as opposed to much of the solidarity coming from the churches. Those contributing to *Keeping our heads above water* seem united in their summary of the minimal impact that this decade had on women’s lot within the church.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Adams, “Struggle and hope. Is it enough?” *Keeping our heads above water. Reflection on the ecumenical decade of churches in solidarity with women* (Auckland, 1998), p.1.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.3-4.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p.5.

She believes that what has been gained is under threat. The “hard won gains” need “careful nurturing”. Adams paints a grim picture. However, she is not alone in her interpretation. Other contributors to the book also discuss the lack of progress and the sense of retrenchment. The women are still there, networking, writing, educating, struggling but it appears that it is beginning to take its toll on women’s health and energy levels.

Susana Carryer in *Keeping our heads above water* writes as a “young adult of the nineties” raising concerns regarding the attitude of women in her generation to feminism. She writes:

Many young women my age have never encountered anything resembling resistance or overt disapproval as we shape our lives to the complete disregard of traditional expectations...at least that is the way it appears. The label feminist is frequently regarded as an insult, equating with lesbian, as the backlash against having been daughters of the seventies takes its toll. The cry comes “we know girls can do anything, you don’t have to keep telling us!” The continued emphasis of the previous generation on needing to claim our right to equality is perceived by many younger women as an inability to acknowledge how far we have come, and leaves many of us frustrated and blind to how far we have yet to go.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis has focused on the changing spirituality of pakeha women involved in *woman-church*. The ‘women and ministry conferences’ have been a useful indicator to reflect and highlight developing theology and changing practices. *The movement* has profoundly impacted on the lives of many women throughout the past 20 years. In light of the issues and concerns raised by Adams and others one wonders, however, what the future of *woman-church* is.

At the time of writing I am aware of the completion of Alan Jamieson’s doctoral thesis on *A churchless faith*<sup>13</sup> and the Methodist Futures Group study on Alternative Faith Communities. Such works recognise the changing needs of people within Christian communities and the disaffection people are feeling towards traditional church structures. As more people assess their disaffection and look to alternatives where

<sup>12</sup> Susana Carryer, “Water is not a solid element”, *Keeping our heads above water* (Auckland, 1998), p.42.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Jamieson, *A churchless faith. Faith outside the evangelical pentecostal/charismatic church of New Zealand*, PhD thesis in Sociology, University of Canterbury, 1998.

hierarchical structure and rigid dogma are not adhered to perhaps *woman-church* will become more 'normative' than 'alternative'.

In the meantime, however, it appears that *woman-church* is in a state of flux. In order for it to continue to grow I believe, as Adams suggests, there is a need for the "painfully-accrued wisdom"<sup>14</sup> of those who rode the last wave of feminism (the second wave of the feminist movement) to be made available to the next generation. Perhaps as "mentors" their energy would be better spent – encouraging and challenging those younger women (and men) who also have the passion and the drive to work for change.

Women I interviewed spoke of questioning where their children fitted into the search for an authentic spirituality. While some seemed to separate their involvement with *woman-church* from family church involvement, others partially included their children, and others held 'services' with their children at home. Again, in order for *woman-church* to grow strong and provoke change surely its ethos needs to be instilled in the young. I believe there is a need to rigorously assess the place of 'family' within *the movement*.

I recognise *woman-church* has established itself out of the specific needs of women but I believe that if it is to prevent itself from losing ground as women in *the movement* tire (and even become cynical) there is a need to encourage and 'train' the next generation. The past 20 or so years have seen threads of women's lives woven together as they have searched for spiritual authenticity within *woman-church*. *A magnificent tapestry of women* has been created. If new *tapestries* are to be created in the new millennium and dreams of an inclusive 'church' realised then strength must come from the young at a grassroots level, encouraged and strengthened by those who have already 'cut their teeth.'

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p.7.

## APPENDIX

Included in the Appendix are examples of inclusive liturgy and prayers.

The following liturgy was included in *Vashti's Voice*, No.26, (February/April, 1985), pp.7-10.

### A Liturgy for Laywomen

*(freely adapted from the New Zealand Liturgy, 1970. Everything here is to be said in unison, except where indicated.)*

#### THE PREPARATION

May Godde bless you and keep you.

May Godde let her face shine on you,

and be gracious to you, and bring you peace.\*

This is the day which our Godde has made;

let us rejoice and be glad in it.

*(The sentence of the day may be read)*

All-encompassing Godde, to whom all hearts are open, all desire known, and from whom no secrets are hidden; cleanse our thoughts by your Holy Spirit, so that by her grace we may truly love you and worthily praise you; so let it be.

Glory to Godde in all the universe,  
and peace to Godde's people on earth.

Our Godde, heavenly one,  
all-encompassing and beloved one,  
we are centred on you, we give you thanks,  
we praise you for your being.

Jesus perfect Christ of Godde,  
Child of Godde, beloved of Godde,  
you have shared in the failings of the world:  
teach us your mercy.

You dwell forever in the presence of Godde;  
receive our prayer.....

For you, Godde, are truly holy,  
you alone are all-sustaining,  
you alone are all-encompassing,  
with the fulness of Godde the Beloved.

*(Pause)*

When we remember our difficulties, yet Godde loves us and enables us to be whole.  
Before we celebrate Godde's great mysteries, let us remember our need of cleansing.

*(After a pause)*

I acknowledge in the presence of the all-encompassing Godde,  
and to you, my sisters,  
that I have suffered through my own fault and through others;  
and that I have caused others to suffer;  
in our thoughts and in our words,  
in what we have done,  
and in what we have not done;  
and I ask you, my sisters,  
to pray for me to our beloved Godde.\*

*(Pause)*

May the ever-loving Godde have mercy on us, forgive us all, and strengthen us.  
So let it be.

#### THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD*(said severally)*

- |                      |                             |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| A. Godde be with you | B. May Godde bless you.     |
| C. Godde be with you | A. May Godde bless you..... |
|                      | Etc.                        |

*(Here is space for readings, lessons, read prayers, and/or dissertation)*

#### THE INTERCESSIONS

Let us pray for the whole body of humankind,  
and for all women and men according to their needs.

*(Here is space for prayers for one another)*

Our Beloved, you are on earth.  
Blessed be your names;  
your wisdom come, your will be done  
among people as it is in nature.  
Give us what we need, not what we want,  
and forgive us our blindness, as we forgive  
those who do not realise.  
And lead us not into arrogance, but deliver us from despair,  
For you are the purpose, and the value and the meaning,  
for ever and for now. So let it be.\*

#### THE OFFERTORY

Sisters – we are one body in Godde.

By the grace of the Spirit we are baptised into one body.  
 Let us keep her unity in the bond of peace.  
 The peace of Godde be always with us.

*(Here the Peace may be shared)*

From you, Godde, comes all gentleness and greatness, all humility and power,  
 all peace, love and glory.  
 All that is on earth and in heaven is yours, and your own we return to you.  
 Come, Holy Spirit, everliving Goddess, and bless us and these gifts prepared  
 for your use.

Blessed are you, Godde of all creation.  
 Through your goodness we have this bread to offer,  
 which earth has given, and human hands have made.  
 It will become for us the bread of life.

Blessed by Godde forever.

Blessed are you, Godde of all creation.  
 Through your goodness we have this wine to offer,  
 fruit of the vine and work of human hands.  
 It will become our spiritual drink.

Blessed be Godde forever.

*(Pause)*

#### THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

- |                       |                                     |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| A. Godde be with you. | B. May Godde bless you.             |
| C. Godde be with you. | A. May Godde bless you.....<br>etc. |

Let us be centred on Godde.

*(Pause)*

Let us give thanks to Godde, for it is right to give Godde thanks.

It is right indeed and it is our joy and wholeness, beloved Godde, all-encompassing  
 and everlasting one, at all times and in all places to give thanks to you through the  
 essence of Christ in us.

For you have been the womb of all things from the beginning, and in Christ we are  
 made in your image.

In the fulness of time you healed us, when we were burdened with sickness.

You gave us Jesus to be born as one of us, to live on earth with us, to die on the Cross,  
 and to remain as Christ with us always.

Through Christ you have given all people holiness, by implanting in us your holy and  
 life-giving Spirit.

And so with the faithful who rest in the womb of the Goddess, whose glory  
 dwells forever on the earth, joyfully we praise you and say –



Beloved and blessed, Godde of strength and tenderness,  
 earth and heaven are filled with your glory –  
 Hosanna all around!  
 Blessed are those who come in the name of Godde –  
 Hosanna all around!

We give you thanks to you, Godde, all-encompassing Mother, because you have given us your daughters and sons, to show us that suffering is not the end of hope, because if we follow their example, we too will willingly give ourselves for others and for our beliefs, and that is truly what living means.

The night before Jesus died on the cross, he took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it, gave it to his friends, and said:

Take, eat, this is as my body, which is given for you; do this to remember me.

After supper he took the cup; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them and said:

Drink this, all of you, for this is the blood of a new covenant,  
 poured out for you and for many, to bring you health and wholeness;  
 do this to remember me.

Glory to you, our Beloved in the Christ:  
 we manifest your death,  
 we announce your resurrection,  
 we await your coming to us.  
 So let it be; come, Beloved Godde.

Therefore, all-encompassing Godde, as we look for your coming among all people, we now celebrate this re-enactment of our wholeness, with this bread of life and this spiritual drink. We know you will accept us because we are growing towards you; accept us as partakers in the Christ, with these our songs of joy and thankfulness. Grant that this bread and wine which we take may be for us our bread of life and our spiritual drink, in the mystery of Christ.

Fill us with your Holy Spirit, and by her grace and power make us one in the body of Christ, with all who share these holy things,

Joy and happiness are with you,  
 all-encompassing Godde,  
 here and everywhere,  
 now and forever.  
 So let it be.

### THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD and THE COMMUNION

The bread we break is a sharing in the body of Godde through Christ.  
 We who are separated are one body, for we all take a part of this one bread.  
 We do not make this act of communion alone, for alone we are lost.  
 But we each share in the commonality of this bread and this wine, and in the grace and mercy of this company gathered at this feast.  
 Let us receive this Body and this Blood in the remembrance of Jesus the Christ who died for us, and let us be nourished by the Christ in our hearts, with great thanks.

*(Here each shall break a portion of the bread and give it to her neighbour, saying - )*

This is the body of Godde, which is broken for you.

*(Similarly each shall pour out some wine and give it to her neighbour, saying - )*

This is the Blood of Life, which is poured for you.

### THANKSGIVING AND DISMISSAL

Beloved and all-encompassing Godde, we thank you with all our hearts for this mystery of body and blood in this Bread of Life and this Wine of the Spirit. We thank you for your love and care in the quality of life you give us, now and forever, and for our union with all of humankind throughout the earth and in all ages.

Therefore, all-encompassing Godde, keep us steadfast in your lovely company of all people. And now we dedicate ourselves, with bodies, minds and souls, to remain trustfully in your presence in the world, as Jesus did.

With you, all-encompassing Godde, through Christ and through the Holy Spirit, is both power and tenderness throughout the universe, forever and for now. So let it be!

We live in the world in peace.

We live in the presence of Godde.

- *Notes 1) The Preparation is a form of the "Aaronic blessing of Israel", Numbers 6. 22-6, based on the Jerusalem Bible version.*
- 2) The confession is adapted from the NZ Presbyterian communion service.*
- 3) The prayer structured on the Lord's Prayer was written by Cathy Wilson.*
- 4) The thanksgiving over the offertory gifts is from the modern Roman mass.*

These are excerpts taken from *Birthing from the womb of God. A lectionary for women*, compiled by Rev. Dorothy Harvey, (Wellington, 1987).

This lectionary was compiled for the Committee on Women in Church and Society, Presbyterian Church of New Zealand.

pp.6-7:

*During the Advent Season we become part of the creative, waiting process that precedes the birth of Christ. As Mary becomes heavier during these last four weeks we join in her eagerness to be set free from her 'confinement': This strong, young woman, not waiting in comfort but facing a 90 mile donkey ride over rough roads and no fixed abode at the other end.*

### ADVENT 1

#### THE WOMB PROTECTS

*The womb for us becomes the archetype of comfort, protection and warmth, a place to retreat to in time of danger or severe emotional pain. The 'places' in the following readings vary, but each speaks to us of our longing for a place of ultimate security.*

Genesis 6:13-7:34  
Deuteronomy 19:1-7

The Ark is a womb  
The cities of refuge

Jonah 2:1-10	A fish becomes a womb
Psalms 84	God's house as a place of safety
1 Samuel 24:1-22	A cave is a womb
Luke 22:7-13	A room with warmth of friends
John 14:1-14	There will always be a place

## ADVENT 2

### THE WOMB MOVES

*The Hebrew word 'rachamin' usually translated compassion, is closely related to the word for womb, 'rechem'. Hebrew references to God's compassion could meaningfully be translated as 'God's womb love'. Perhaps Jesus had this in mind when he implied that his suffering on the cross initiated the birth pangs which would bring forth a new humanity.*

Isaiah 63:15-16	A plea for God's compassion
Isaiah 30:19:21	The Lord is compassionate
Jonah 3:5-4:11	God is compassionate to all
Matthew 9:35-38	Jesus is moved with compassion
Matthew 11:25-30	Compassion for the poor of the land
Luke 7:11-17	Compassion for a widow
Colossians 3:12-15	Clothe ourselves with 'womb love'.

## ADVENT 3

### BIRTHED FROM THE WOMB OF GOD

"For God to express God is for God to give birth."

*Out of all that encompassing womb God has given birth not only to all human beings but to the whole natural world as well. Paul, for example in Acts 17:27-28, pictures the entire human race as living, moving and existing within the cosmic womb of one God.*

John 1:1-18	God expresses God
Genesis 1:1-25	The creative God
Isaiah 66:7-14	God births Israel
Romans 8:20-25	Creation groans with pain
Colossians 1:15-20	Christ, the first born
Hebrews 1:1-13	Christ, the creator
Isaiah 42:14-16	God in labour.

These creeds were formulated during a workshop on inclusive language at the Women's Spirituality Conference and appeared in *Vashti's Voice*, No.25, (November/January, 1984/1985), pp.10-11.

### CREED

I believe in Godde who created everything  
and in the human expression of Godde  
who came into existence through the presence  
of Godde-with-us  
as new life comes from the womb of a young woman.

I believe in the life of Godde lived out in the  
pain of humanity  
the martyr's death at the hands of political power  
human life extinguished  
but made new again in rebirth  
joined with Godde's own being  
complete.

I believe in Godde-with-us  
the ecumenical expression of Godde's being  
the company of all within Godde's core  
the acknowledgement of human frailty  
the renewing of life in the body  
the ongoing presence of Godde.

Lois, Manurewa

### CREED

I give myself to Godde, the source of all life  
And I listen to the message of Christ, the Saviour  
Who is conceived by the Spirit of life  
Born of woman  
Suffers for daring to speak and enact the truth  
Is crucified, dies and is buried

On this and every day, Godde is raised from the dead  
To be around us and within us, below us and above us  
From there to connect us with the past and with the future.

I rest in the Spirit of Life  
In the spirituality in all people  
In those who have shown us the way  
In the knowledge of our human frailty  
And I affirm that goodness will overcome evil  
And that Godde will always Be.

Marion Wood

ONE CHRISTIAN WOMAN'S APOSTLES CREED

I experience Godde the Source  
and Godde's Christ-life – the pattern of our being.  
This life originates in the Spirit of Wholeness,  
evolves within our humanity,  
suffers limitation in our situation,  
is crucified, dies and is extinguished within us.  
This Christ-life can rise from the deadness  
as It participates in another dimension  
where It is bonded to Godde.  
From within It provides the criterion of our true being.  
I experience the Spirit of Godde,  
this Spirit in others  
the unity this brings with others  
the possibility of healing and renewal  
and the potential for wholeness of being.

Johanna Spark

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