WOMEN FINDING THEIR VOICES
IN THE SMALL TOWN MINISTRY CONTEXT:
AN EXPLORATION OF VALUES THAT UNDERGIRD SOCIAL JUSTICE

by

Carol A. Gierak
B.A., M. Div., M. R. E.

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ABSTRACT

The concern of this thesis is with the formation of values for women who find themselves living in a small town in Central Ontario. For many years, I have questioned where our values come from. For example, does the church have any influence over the formation of our values? For people who are non-church members, what influences them? Do our values have anything to do with what we understand as spiritual experiences and social justice actions for our community?

The idea for this thesis came to me over years as I observed the caring and compassion of many people in my community. Their selfless acts of generosity were noteworthy especially since many of the people I knew were not connected to my church community. At the same time, I myself was involved with the church and so knew many people there well. Sometimes, the same sense of compassion and generosity was not as evident amongst church people as I had experienced amongst non-church people. I became curious about this. My curiosity has led me to this research and my research question.

Research Statement

It is my intention to explore the values which undergird commitment to social justice acts amongst church and non-church people. I wish to discover what kind of connection exists between an individual’s spirituality, values and actions.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

My interest in social justice began in the 1960's while I was a student at Michigan State University. It was the time of the Vietnam War, student protests, Vatican II and a time of general social upheaval. Old conventions and values were being discarded, but at the same time there did not seem to be anything to replace them. It was at this time that I began to question how we make life decisions regarding personal life and communal life. What informs those decisions? What about our backgrounds makes us the people we are?

With these questions, I decided to leave the United States and become a Canadian immigrant. I truly felt alienated from the culture I had been raised in, but I truly felt at home in the Canadian one which I chose. That sense of being "at home" increased as I became a Canadian citizen in 1974 and also a member of the United Church of Canada.

I was fortunate to be invited by a woman who was active in the church to come to St. John's. She felt that I would enjoy the experience of the church choir which I did. Before long I felt drawn into the social justice activities of the United Church, especially in the area of peace making. But after being involved with these activities for some years, I had a sense that people were becoming disenchanted in their endeavours to work for social justice. I also realized that women were beginning to distance themselves from the organized church because of their awakening feminism and their growing sense of alienation because of the use of exclusive language, meaningless ritual and marginalization.

I began to wonder about these two circumstances. I began to wonder how we can sustain our energy, our spiritual lives, in order to do the work of transforming society into the realized Commonwealth of God/dess. How can we as Christians and especially women, not lose energy, faith or hope?

The consequence of my questions led me further and further into both the academic world and the life of the church. After I finished a Master of Divinity degree in 1986 I began to think seriously about what I wanted to do with my life. I became a candidate for the ordained ministry to test my call. My call was affirmed by the church community and I was ordained in 1988. I have continued to question how we put our faith into action and I have continued to wonder about the place of women in the church. My many years of wondering have led me to the point of this research and writing about our values and how they inform our action in the world.

As an ordained member of the clergy of the United Church of Canada, I need and want to know the answers to my questions. It helps me to understand better my role in the church and the place of women as transforming and motivating forces in the institutional church.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the women of St. John’s United Church in Alliston, Ontario. It has been written with their help and with their inspiration and the hope that their voices will be heard in clear tones in the future life of this congregation. This work is also dedicated to the many women in the community of Alliston who give of their time and talent for the sake of the community and its well-being. Lastly, this is dedicated to my husband, Keith Gradwell, without whose tireless support this thesis would never have come to life.
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INTRODUCTION

The idea for this thesis has been in my mind for many years. For me, it is as though issues, conversations and people have finally converged in my mind enough to start asking questions about the relationship between spirituality and social justice.

I have been impressed over the last fifteen years by the people I know who are grounded theologically and biblically in the desire and ability to do social justice. My interpretation of social action or social justice is really another way to love our neighbour. I am reminded of the letter of James where he writes, “be doers of the word, not only hearers.” Thus, for example, people who are committed to working with refugees or people who work in and support women’s shelters are all involved in social justice.

But a question that has been with me for many years is why are relatively few church people involved with social ministries? This appears to be the situation in my present ministry context. There are about 680 members of this church with about 1300 people under pastoral care. However, with statistics like these, there are only four people who are members of the Outreach and Stewardship Committee. This is a curiosity to me. I wonder, as a result, what people perceive their Christian calling to be and what do our Baptismal vows mean for church members.

In contrast to this situation, I do know other community people who are not committed to any religious organization, but do have a belief in God and live selfless and caring lives on behalf of “neighbours”.
To add another dimension to this complex issue, there is the individual who "works" at social justice but with no heart. Thomas Merton made the following observation of such persons.

"For those who attempt to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening their own self-understanding, freedom or capacity to love, will have nothing to give to others. They will communicate nothing but the contagion of their own obsessions, their own aggressiveness, their ego-centred ambitions, their delusions about ends and means, their doctrinaire prejudices and ideas."

As a response to Merton's observation, I too have witnessed, especially in The United Church of Canada, a certain kind of "burn-out" that can be experienced when one is a "do-gooder" without sufficient grounding in a theological, biblical, or prayerful life. This is what I call a "spiritual" life. This is the kind of self-understanding we need to live meaningful and full lives.

This thesis, then, is an exploration of one small group of women in one congregation and their feelings and thoughts on spirituality and social justice.

CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXT OF MINISTRY

Part 1

The Context of Small Town Ministry

Ministry takes place in a particular geographical, historical, social, cultural context. There is a range of subtleties to be considered in any ministry situation. Letty Russell talks of the context as indicating the surroundings to which the events of ministry are connected and related. Ministry actions are viewed and interpreted differently according to how and where they are connected. She continues by saying that, "context provides a critical gaze for looking at connections between the way things are read and the social experience and social location of the text [ministry actions] and the reader… feminist theology is concerned with the way tradition shapes life for women of faith and struggle." This study is contextual insofar as it tries to understand the historical conservatism of this area and the life of this church. The context for my ministry is as follows.

St. John’s United Church is to be found in the small town of Alliston, Ontario about 80 kilometres north and west of Toronto. This year the town celebrated its 150th anniversary and for all of its life has been a rural centre. Until recent years, the potato

² Russell, Letty, Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1993, p. 32
fields and tobacco fields touched the streets of the town and almost everyone could look out of house windows into fields. In the last ten years, this has changed. The town has been slowly growing and now has a population of about 7500 people. The economic base has diversified from farmers, retired farmers and merchants, to that of an industrial town and one that serves as a bedroom community to Toronto.

The major reason for the change has been the Honda car manufacturing plant that was built on the edge of town ten years ago. The potato fields which had been there have given way to a huge factory, large warehouses and smaller factories which feed the car industry. Along with this has come the building of a number of new subdivisions. Presently the town is undergoing a massive road building project to accommodate the truck traffic.

Many of the long time residents of the town appear to be pleased with these changes. It has allowed adult children of these older people to remain in town. Previously, there was little in the way of jobs to keep young people here. There probably has been a sense of greater financial security for the town and all who are involved with the car industry.

In 1991, the town of Alliston was amalgamated with the two smaller towns of Beeton and Tottenham which are to the south of Alliston. The region is now called the regional municipality of New Tecumseth. Historically and down to the present day, this area has remained staunchly conservative, politically and socially.
In the early 1980's changes in the town were becoming apparent and concerns were being raised by some individuals. A small group of women in the town of Alliston joined together as an ad hoc committee concerned with the social welfare of the newcomers to the town. The women represented different aspects of life in the town. The women who came from the church community were concerned with how to welcome the many strangers in our midst. Some of the group were involved as parent volunteers at the school and wondered how the school and community might meet the needs of children who were being left at the school early in the morning, without supervision, as the parents were travelling to Toronto for work. One woman was deeply concerned over the lack of social services in our area. Another, who was a nurse at the hospital, was concerned over the high number of women who were coming to the Emergency ward as the result of abuse by a partner. This abuse also included children.

I became involved with this group in its early stages at the invitation of a woman who was married to the clergyperson at St. John's United Church. She, too, was ordained but was on maternity leave as she awaited the birth of her second child. She was on official leave and not part of the church staff. As the birth of her child approached, I took her place on the steering committee because of my interest in incorporating newcomers into the culture of the town and my even bigger concern for partner abuse.

The small group of women met and discussed the concerns we had. We also began to educate ourselves on the social issues which were engaging our interests. There was numerous studies and working papers available to us on the social welfare of South Simcoe County which were currently being produced by various agencies in Barrie. We
found that our feelings about how bad things were in our area were based in fact. There indeed was a high rate of suicide, alcoholism and abuse.

The hope of the group and all its efforts were put towards trying establish a shelter for women and children. The women gathered all of the information together and went to make a presentation to the town council with the request that the group be allowed to pursue education and funding for establishing a safe house. We were told, essentially, that we were a bunch of “do-gooders” and that there was no social problem in the area, as we described it.

This ad hoc group of women were not deterred from their goal. They went back to the drawing board to figure out how to get the community services which were needed. Eventually, it was decided that there be a Community Information Service. This started as a telephone information agency which put people in touch with the social service agencies they needed to access. This also gave the women of the group the leverage needed to advocate the women’s shelter. It took approximately five years for this to happen. Finally, “My Sister’s Place” opened in 1987.

I have been involved with these two agencies for the last twenty years, sometimes more deeply involved than others, and presently am the vice-chair of the Board of “My Sister’s Place”. This has always been an important part of my outreach ministry and my community involvement. The United Church Women’s organization of St. John’s has been supportive to the house all the years it has been opened. With this background information, I can begin to say something of my specific ministry.
St. John's, by United Church of Canada standards, is considered a thriving ministry. The social and economic make-up of the congregation is composed of merchants, farmers, teachers, lawyers, other professionals, and industrial leaders. However, this is not a description of the entire congregation. There are some single women with children and some separated fathers who are having financial difficulties. A few people are unemployed, but by far the greatest number is socially and economically well off. A significant portion of the congregation is composed of people who have recently retired and who live in Green Briar, a retirement village built in recent years on the edge of Alliston. The people who have come to St. John's United Church from Green Briar have generally been active people in city congregations and have brought with them new ideas, new ways of doing things and a great deal of energy. This occasionally sets up a situation of tension between the more recent membership and those who have been long time members. There is also a significant number of people who are elderly and who expect and require a great deal of pastoral care. There are about eighty in this category.

In this church setting, I am the minister responsible for education and pastoral care. In the education part of my job description, I am responsible for the Wednesday morning Bible study, Confirmation class for young adults, Membership discussion groups for adults who wish to join the Church for the first time or transfer from another denomination. I also facilitate short term educational programs such as marriage enrichment, family life, and special seasonal studies during Advent and Lent. In this regard I am the staff person who relates to the Christian Education Committee and to the
Sunday School. In addition, I am responsible for intergenerational worship and I preach approximately once a month.

For my pastoral care work, I do regular hospital visiting as well as visiting the four retirement and nursing homes in this area. I also visit new people who have come to the church, anyone who is seriously ill and anyone who requests a visit. In addition I do some counselling and pastoral care in times of bereavement, other life crisis events and preparation for marriage and baptisms.

Administratively, I am the staff person who relates to the Membership Committee which is concerned with the over-all pastoral care of the congregation. Recently, this committee has set up a sub-committee which is called the Pastoral Care Visiting Team. I am its resource person.

At the beginning of my relationship with this congregation, I was a church member involved in a variety of volunteer activities. When I went to Theological School in the early 1980’s, I moved to the margins of church life. And from 1984 to 1994, I was absent because I was ministering in other churches. I was called to St. John’s United Church in August 1994 and therefore this is my first involvement with this congregation as an ordered person.
Part 2

A Reflection on Female Leadership in My Ministry Context

I applied to St. John’s United Church for the position of Minister of Education and Pastoral Care in 1994 when a vacancy had been declared. I felt this was an appropriate move for me because I had previously ministered in very small congregations where the opportunity to do educational ministry was limited. I felt that by moving to a larger church, the opportunities for creative, educational ministry were more possible. My ministry always had included Baptismal Preparation, new members’ classes, Marriage preparation and some Bible study. With a degree in Religious Education, I was excited by my call to minister at St. John’s United Church in this specialized position.

However, it was not long before the excitement of new possibilities gave way to the reality of this ministry context. My first awakening came on the day when my call was presented to the congregation by the Pastoral Relations Committee. With the presentation of my name, a male individual stood up, went to the pulpit and began to challenge my call to this congregation. The issue was unclear as to why this would be a mistake, but my suspicion is that this individual is very uncomfortable with female leadership especially from me. He stated that my call would drive people away from the church.
It was decided that there would be a secret ballot and a simple majority would be the only necessity to extend the call. No one was to know the number of votes except the Pastoral Relations Committee and myself. I received a bare majority.

I will never forget my feeling of shock and dismay when that incident was reported to me later in the day. Nevertheless, I decided to accept the call for a great variety of reasons. I knew, however, that ministry here would be difficult. And in fact, ministering in this congregation has continued to be difficult. The person who spoke against my nomination has continued to be a vocal member of the Official Board undermining my personal well-being and my ministry.

My dreams of doing educational programming have not been fulfilled because my ministry consists of maintaining the necessities of church life, i.e. Baptismal Preparation, Confirmation classes, Marriage preparation and a regular Bible study. My "maintenance" style of ministry has allowed my colleague the opportunity to do special educational programming [e.g. dream interpretation] which is short-term in nature and very attractive to the community. It has also allowed him to do considerable travelling on behalf of the national church.

As I have analyzed my role in my context of ministry, I have recognized myself as the "church wife", the one who sees to it that the basic, fundamental pieces of church life are nurtured and maintained. This is done through keeping schedules, facilitating committees, running the Sunday School, and "filling in" on the Sundays when my colleague is away. This is a model of ministry imposed on me by my circumstances and the expectations of this congregation. However, the circumstances have prevented me
from developing my own voice. These were also the circumstances in which the previous clergywoman found herself. She, too, was a “church wife.”

I tell this story because in some ways it is a model of what happens to women at St. John’s United Church. The women are great workers in the church. They do the basic maintenance work of committee membership and teaching in the Sunday School. They make announcements in the church about the continuous stream of events which take place. But they are all “church wives.”

They have simply transferred their role from home to church. This is not necessarily a negative thing. In fact, since we speak of ourselves as a “household of faith,” it is positive. However, in this context, the household functions from a patriarchal model.

In an insightful chapter of Leading the Congregation called “Women in Church Leadership: An Emerging Paradigm”, Carol Becker makes a number of comments that are directly related to this ministry situation. She makes the comment that, “women in leadership positions in the church receive mixed messages about themselves and their work.” Indeed, this is the case. There are always church members who are supportive and say, “We want you here.” However, it is not clear whether one is wanted because one is a good facilitator and nurturer or because one has fresh ideas or can be an inspiration to doing things a new way. Maybe both. But the next comment Becker

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3 Shawchuck, Norman, and Heuser, Roger, Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving Others, “Women in Church Leadership: An Emerging Paradigm”, Carol Becker, Abingdon Press, Nashville, p. 262

4 Ibid., p. 253
makes is, "If you are going to be here, we want you to act in a way that will be comfortable for us (men)." I think this sums up the message I have received.

Becker further develops her argument by explaining that women work from a different leadership paradigm than men. Female leaders tend to be facilitators, they encourage people, they network, they build relationships, they process change and they wait. These are all attributes that are valued in the Christian community especially when they are found in men. However, when these characteristics are found in women in ministry, they are defined as indecisive. I find myself in the position of planting seeds, encouraging new ideas and then seeing someone else take the credit for them. In some cases this is good; in some it is not. Becker says this is common.

Becker points out that the church does expect and look for a healthy blend of feminine and masculine characteristics in its leadership. Nevertheless, it remains more valued in one gender than another. The difficulty still remains that while women attempt to be collaborators in their leadership style, the system remains hierarchical. As my colleague once said, to prove this point, "The buck stops here; when there is a decision to be made, I'll make it." In addition to a perceived hierarchy in the church setting, the community also sees us, not as a partnership, but as senior minister and assistant. For example, recently, I was called to be with the family of a senior member of our

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5 Ibid., p. 254
6 Ibid., p. 255
7 Ibid., p. 258
8 Ibid., p. 259
congregation at the time of his death. The family and I made preparations for the funeral service. However, after we had done so, the funeral director’s assistant stated that my “boss” would be in touch with me about the funeral arrangements.

Becker also points out that there is another major issue for the church community concerning women in leadership roles. The church has institutionalized a fear of the feminine. It began with Paul’s injunction that women should cover their heads in church and proceeded to the burning of witches in the middle ages to the present discomfort with having women in positions of teaching or authority. Becker suggests that at a conscious level this is denied, but certainly women still live with many unwritten rules of behaviour that restrict women’s speaking and actions.

I raise these as issues in my context of ministry, but I also believe these are the same issues which have caused some women to leave the church. Therefore, this discussion on the role of women in this church and in leadership positions does have some bearing on my research topic and participants. Half of the women in my research group are women who no longer attend church or who have ambivalent feelings about the church.

My personal reflection on my ministry in this context is that somehow my gifts for ministry and my potential for ministry have been subverted. They have been co-opted by others. My question then is, how often does this happen to other women in ministry as women’s ministry remains invisible in the church?
There is another point to make regarding women's ministry. Besides the issue of invisibility there is also the necessity for women to work twice as hard to prove themselves. Women in leadership are sometimes judged to be not as competent as men and therefore must work continuously to prove they are accountable and capable. And then the last and perhaps the most painful aspect of ministry is the subtle or not so subtle harassment. The not so subtle harassment comes from having to listen to a board member for the last three years trying to bring about a termination of my pastoral relationship. The more subtle harassment is about “women who have soft voices” or being small and being told to stand on a footstool as a child would, and having to wait two years for an office of my own. Clearly, all this would be unacceptable for a male clergy person.

This reflection has been put in the context of a feminist critique. This is important if in some future day we hope to bring about a transformation of this situation which will then allow for a ministry of mutual care, respect, equality and all other characteristics of social justice which are grounded in our theology and biblical understanding of what it means to be God’s people. As a consequence of such a transformation there may be the possibility of the re-integration of women into the church, the women who have left for good reason.

Out of this context of ministry, then, I have struggled with the question of how we move as a community from personal concerns to communal issues. I have desired to understand the value system of the long time members of this congregation and the value system of the newcomers and couple those questions to what is the value system of those
outside the institutional structure. With this in mind, I have formulated the following
research statement with the intention that, at the end of my research, the women of this
congregation and this community may speak of their concerns regarding social justice
issues more clearly. This is my statement of research:

It is my intention to explore the values which undergird commitment to social justice acts amongst church and non-church people. I wish to discover what kind of connection exists between an individual's spirituality, values and actions.
CHAPTER TWO
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ASSUMPTIONS

Introduction

This chapter includes the theory upon which my research is based. The first part of this theory rests on common assumptions of the Christian faith such as those found in scripture and in the Statement of Faith of the The United Church of Canada.

The second part of my research theory rests on a contemporary critique of the church based on the work of feminist scholars. These scholars include the disciplines of biblical research, feminist spirituality, feminist approaches to education and sociology and also ecclesiology. Feminism then is the primary lens through which I view all of my research.
Part 1

Theology of Ministry

I have always had a need to understand history and how it forms us. The same has been true for me in regard to theology. I need to know where we have been to figure out where we are going. In order to have some sense of a traditional or orthodox view of ministry, therefore, I looked to the document produced by the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, (1982). My denomination, The United Church of Canada, has made this document one of the primary tools in the formation of those preparing for ordained ministry. As well, it has been used as a resource document for materials which prepare young people for Confirmation, adult baptism, and parents who are wishing to have their children baptized.

A second document published by The United Church of Canada which has been formative for me is The United Church of Canada Creed. This creed was accepted by the General Council of the Church in 1968 as our profession of faith. Within this credal statement, which has been revised by subsequent councils, is to be found the beliefs of the Church and our call to live out those beliefs. It is as follows:

**WE ARE NOT ALONE, WE LIVE IN GOD’S WORLD.**

**WE BELIEVE IN GOD:**

- WHO HAS CREATED AND IS CREATING,
- WHO HAS COME IN JESUS, THE WORD MADE FLESH,
- TO RECONCILE AND MAKE NEW,
- WHO WORKS IN US AND OTHERS BY THE SPIRIT.
WE TRUST IN GOD.

WE ARE CALLED TO BE THE CHURCH:
   TO CELEBRATE GOD'S PRESENCE,
   TO LIVE WITH RESPECT IN CREATION,
   TO LOVE AND SERVE OTHERS,
   TO SEEK JUSTICE AND RESIST EVIL,
   TO PROCLAIM JESUS, CRUCIFIED AND RISEN,
   OUR JUDGE AND OUR HOPE.

IN LIFE, IN DEATH, IN LIFE BEYOND DEATH,
GOD IS WITH US.
WE ARE NOT ALONE.
THANKS BE TO GOD.

Another part of my theoretical and theological assumption and my theory of motivation for social justice lies in my need to understand how we live out our Baptismal vows. The following questions, with variations in the wording, are the ones used in The United Church of Canada in the Sacrament of Baptism:

1. Desiring the freedom of new life in Christ, do you turn away from the forces of evil and renounce their power?

2. Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him as Saviour, Redeemer, Lord?

3. Do you commit yourself to the mission and ministry of Christ’s Church?

My assumption is that each of these vows has the implication of social justice embedded in it. It is part of the teaching ministry of the Church to help church members uncover those implications. For example, a possible implication of the first Baptismal vow would be the redemption of women and men who turn away from violent situations and seek new life. The resulting actions of the Baptismal vows are understood by me to
be both individual and communal. When an individual takes the Baptismal vows, it is usually a parent who does this on behalf of a child. Sometimes adults also decide to join the church and they too have the opportunity to engage in Baptismal Preparation. This is one way the church carries out its teaching ministry. During the Celebration of Baptism, the community also has the opportunity to reaffirm its vows. The consequence of the vows, if fully understood by all, is social action.

Holding in balance the values and motivations of both "church" and "non-church" individuals, I must make an assumption on behalf of "church persons." My assumption is that social action will not occur unless people are well-grounded in scripture, worship and study. By this I mean through attendance at Sunday Worship and through opportunities for Bible study and study in the Christian life which includes readings in spirituality and in social justice concerns. We better understand our call to discipleship. To be awakened, to see what is happening, needs an awareness of the gospel and an awareness of how we are each called to discipleship. What is required of us is to make use of the hermeneutical circle which involves biblical/theological study which moves us to action, which moves us to reflection.

An important component of my theoretical framework is my interpretation of Luke 4:18,19.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (NRSV, 1989)
This passage grounds us as members of the Body of Christ and participants in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ through our actions. In this passage from Luke, Jesus clearly describes the intention of His ministry. These verses all speak of liberation from various forms of oppression. It is in our efforts to free ourselves and others from different kinds of societal oppression that we do participate in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

My assumptions, therefore, are that we are called to do social justice for the following reasons:

1. because of agreement to our Baptismal vows;
2. because as disciples of Christ we follow His example as outlined in Luke 4:18,19;
3. because we are told to love one another as brothers and sisters and as we love God and ourselves.

In the letters of Paul, we read that the well-being of the community is uppermost. I interpret that as meaning “community” in the widest sense of the word.

However, while I believe the above statements to be theoretically true, I also hold the assumption that while The United Church of Canada has been historically perceived to be a church which is concerned for social justice, this is no longer the case. My concern is that congregations within this Christian denomination are in danger of not keeping a balance between faith and action. Congregations see themselves primarily concerned with privatized Christianity or personal salvation. The theoretical basis for
this assumption is found in the writings of Douglas Hall in Canada and Wade Roof and William Willimon in the United States. 

While for the Christian, there are values espoused because of our covenantal action in baptism. people who are not "church" members are not bound by the same vows. I wonder, therefore, what set of beliefs or what kind of a value system "non-church" members live out. I believe that to some degree they are inspired in their work by the Holy Spirit because the fruits of the Spirit are not confined to the institution of the church. In this statement, I am assuming that there is a spirituality operative for both church and non-church persons. Furthermore, I assume that both sets of individuals do what they do because of values they hold.

9 The theory of privatized Christianity is also addressed by William Willimon in his discussion on the relationship of baptism and ethical actions in the world in his book The Service of God.
Part 2

Feminist Theology

In order to speak about feminist theology in the church, in the broadest understanding, I looked to Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza for such a discussion. Her thoughts and reflections on feminist theology and its impact on the whole of the Christian church are helpful to both the women who have elected to stay within the institutional church and those who have chosen to remove themselves from it. Therefore, Schussler-Fiorenza’s comments concerning theology are important to both of the groups of women with whom I have chosen to work.

Schussler-Fiorenza, in her book, Discipleship of Equals, gives a definition of feminist theology which is broad and encompassing and therefore helpful in an exploration such as the one in which I am engaged. To begin, she makes the comment that feminist theology is very complex. It is not possible to speak of “a theology” or “the theology”. Rather feminist theology is contextual and varied amongst each denomination of the Christian church. It is rooted in our diverse ecclesial visions.10 In the circumstances in which I minister, I can identify varying perspectives on feminist theology. These varying perspectives do not live easily side by side, but at the present

10 Schussler-Fiorenza, Elizabeth, Discipleship of Equals, Crossroad, New York, 1994, p. 255
time, the women do not have the words to articulate the subtle differences in their understanding of this complex discipline. This can show itself to be a source of tension.

Feminist theology, as Schussler-Fiorenza defines it, seeks to explore women’s experience of oppression and discrimination in society and religion as well as women’s experiences of hope, love, and faith in the struggle for liberation and well-being.\(^{11}\)

Traditionally, according to Anselm, the definition of theology has been “faith seeking understanding”, and for feminist theology it is best understood as the reflection on Christian faith experiences in the struggle against patriarchal oppression. If theology, as Karl Rahner puts it, has the vocation to engage the whole church in self-criticism, “then feminist theology has the task to engender ecclesial self-criticism...”\(^ {12}\) I see my role and part of my personal theology of ministry as that of asking the difficult questions which are concerned with self-criticism, in regard to personal decisions in life and the functioning of the church. There is a relationship between the theological and biblical grounding which I mentioned in the first part of this chapter concerning our denominational beliefs and Jesus’ announcement of liberation which women seek to reclaim for themselves. My intention is to question the “enculturation” in which we find ourselves. By “enculturation” I mean the context of life in which we have been taught to live and respond in particular ways; in other words our socialization. Enculturation may be in opposition to a “transformational” context which is what feminist theology is

\(^{11}\) Ibid., p. 251
\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 254
concerned with, i.e. the transformation of structure and transformation of self which leads to greater truth, justice, clarity and relationship to God.

Schussler-Fiorenza continues her description of feminist theology by saying that it begins with the experience of women struggling against exclusion and for human liberation and dignity. In order to accomplish this task, women must engage in the following methods: critical analysis, constructive exploration and conceptual transformation. This is my intention as I explore my context of ministry and engage in dialogue with the research group.

I do mention, from time to time, in this thesis, that I chose to engage in exploration specifically with women. One of the reasons I chose women is that women are not only the "silent majority" of the church, but the "silenced majority", in Schussler-Fiorenza's words.  

I believe women are silenced because they are intimidated by the system of the church and they feel marginalized by it. Women are observers in the church. Therefore, to make any changes in the system demands a great deal of energy. Religious feminists must then decide where they can best spend their energies. Sometimes women choose to stay and make their voices heard, at great cost. At other times women change denominations which I did when I left the Roman Catholic church to come to The United Church of Canada. And yet other women, such as the five women who are part of my

\[13\] Ibid., p. 251
research, choose no religious institution at all. Whichever route a woman chooses, Schussler-Fiorenza suggests women must never abandon our religious power and we must continue to articulate a religious, feminist vision of justice and liberation.\textsuperscript{14}

The silence of women in the church is part of women's invisibility. This notion of invisibility is further discussed by Schussler-Fiorenza as she notes the lack of visibility in the church and academy in terms of intellectual interpretation of the world because of the forces of patriarchy. Women are excluded from defining the world. This explains why a number of women feel excluded or not welcomed by the church. Men do not define human life and society and yet this is the assumption with which the church functions. Mary Daly makes the observation, "To break the silence and to reclaim the power of naming that was stolen from us," is necessary in order to achieve liberation from patriarchal structures.\textsuperscript{15}

Another element in the marginalization process of women is the use of exclusive language. Language, according to Schussler-Fiorenza, not only reflects the world, but also shapes our understanding of ourselves and the world. "The very process of learning to speak socializes us into a world in which male and masculine is the standard of being human...therefore it is difficult for both women and men to recognize the oppressive character of grammatically masculine language that renders women invisible and

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 3
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 261
marginal." But this kind of exclusively male language is noted by the non-church women of my research group as one of the reasons they do not attend church.

Schussler-Fiorenza speaks of the need for the church to change in order to bring about a community of justice, wholeness and liberation. One of the ways this is accomplished is by feminist theology articulating that divine presence and revelation are found among the people of God who are women. Women are and always have been called by God, even though, throughout history, the patriarchal church has made women invisible. Nevertheless, women have always heard God’s call and mediated God’s presence and lived in community as disciples. The purpose of feminist theology is to interrupt the patriarchal silencing of women in order to make women visible and audible as God’s agents of grace and liberation.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 263
¹⁷ Ibid., p. 267
Part 3

An Exploration of the Meaning of “Spirituality” for Women Outside the Church

In my introductions to the women in the research group who are not members of the church, I will speak further as to why this is the case. Some of these reasons include the following. In some cases, women with whom I spoke said they left the church because of the use of exclusively male language and biblical interpretation which does not honour women or their life experience. We will see that the non-church women express a feeling of not being welcomed or accepted in the setting of the church, especially if one expresses needs which are not usually heard by men or “traditional women.” The five non-church women in my group did not feel welcomed by the church and consequently do not have a connection to it. However, they all talk about having a “spiritual life.” We need to take some time to talk about what that means for them. Certainly, today, there are many definitions of the word “spiritual” being spoken of, and these may not all convey what we wish to say here. Therefore, for purposes of this thesis, we will explore the meaning of this word as it pertains to this group.

“Spiritual experience” has a different meaning now than it had in past centuries. I think in traditional Western Christian spirituality, spiritual response to a given situation, was defined narrowly. It always had to do with a religious experience from within traditional religion. Sometimes it was believed to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience of the Holy Spirit. At other times, spiritual experiences were considered mystical and were
often characterized by the individual withdrawing from the world into what used to be
called a “spiritual world” in which one lived a solitary or contemplative life.

However, in this century, ideas about spirituality have greatly expanded. This is
due partly to developments in human psychology as well as the contributions of feminist
theologians, educators and writers. These writers of the 20th century have suggested a
more unified way of perceiving the world through our minds and our bodies. We have
begun to understand that by being more unified or integrated individuals, we are in fact
more the way God intends us to be.

The feminist writers to whom I have looked for guidance and direction all start
from the premise that there is a difference between male and female spirituality.
However, these differences are not due to our genetic make-up. Rather, it is more likely
that our different spiritual experience and response is due to our social conditioning, our
“enculturation”. Valerie Saiving speaks of these differences in “The Human Situation”,
and she sees the differences mostly in terms of male experience being more obvious and
the female experience being more silent.18

I would also suggest, that a great deal of work on female spirituality can be
credited to Carl Jung. In his work with female clients and dream interpretation, he came
to the conclusion that dreams are a revelation of God. Jung himself was aware of the
bind which patriarchal religion imposed upon women and how limited their experiences

18 Saiving, Valerie, “The Human Situation”, Womanspirit Rising, Harper & Row,
San Francisco, 1979, p. 36
of religion are within those confines. However, when he asked himself how women could help themselves out of this bind, he came up with the same two options that feminist theologians have. The first option is to withdraw from organized religion and put energy into other endeavours as my non-church participants have. The other option is to remain in the church, but put energy into formulating a religious view of life which includes women and is different from the patriarchal style of the traditional church. Jung found himself, as many women do, but fewer men, needing to disengage himself from the old creeds and dogmas and he relied on his own dreams and fantasies to develop a new spiritual outlook for himself.19

For Rosemary Ruether, a feminist theologian, the difference between male and female spirituality is the difference between patriarchal religion and feminist spirituality. She says the operative question for men is, "What happens to me after I die?" In contrast, the female question is, "What has to be done for the child that is born?" The latter view leads to an entirely different world view than that of men. It moves us from individualism to a concern for the wider community and the world.20 Ruether also believes that women's spirituality desires to bring order back into the world. Women are observers of nature, they have babies, their concern is to learn to live in peace and harmony. It is a spirituality capable of transforming self and society.21

19 Golbenberg, Naomi, “Dreams and Fantasies as Sources of Revelation”, Womanspirit Rising, p. 223
21 Ibid., p. 264
Ruether, however, has made use of an interpretation of the writings of Teilhard de Chardin in developing a theory for the transformation of society. In researching some of his work, Ruether finds some hopeful observations. She sees two signs. There is the vision of the redemption of the soul based in traditional Christianity, which leads to the redemption of the world. But in Teilhard’s work there is a development of a unitary cosmic mind bringing the evolutionary process to completion when the Creator will unite with the Creation.  

There is an obvious closeness here with feminist thought. Both feminists and Teilhard believe in a long evolutionary process which is life-giving. Generally, women are concerned about unborn generations and the ecological condition of the planet. And it may be that women have a more optimistic view of humanity than patriarchal religion has. There is a belief and hope that good will prevail over evil.

Women are often not afraid to look beyond the confines of organized religion for ways to express spirituality: some have become interested in Native American spirituality and others in what used to be called witchcraft. This is now more often called The Old Religion. The Old Religion sees the spirit and flesh as one; there is no difference between the sacred and profane nor between nature and culture. The Divinity spoken of as the Goddess is both within nature and within the human being. Perhaps more importantly for some women, this religion is not based on doctrine, but rather on

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22 Ruether, Rosemary, Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology, Beacon Press, Boston, 1985, p. 198
experience and ritual. The rituals are meant for community-building. The Goddess is manifest in relationships, friendships, the giving of comfort and aid in much the same way as we perceive Christ to be present in the stranger. It is a community of equals, each working to attempt to change conditions which destroy life.

For a member of the research group who was raised on social activism in the church, Dorothee Soelle speaks of a different kind of spirituality that embodies action. She says,

"The most important virtue in this kind of religion is not obedience but solidarity, for solidarity asks that we change the image of God from that of a power-dispensing Father to one of a liberating force, that we cease to be objects and become subjects involved in this process of change, that we learn cooperation rather than wait for things to come to us from on high. These are all elements of mystical piety."

Feminist writers say that religious experience arises out of our life experience. Bibliically speaking, women's religious experiences as well as life experiences have been termed "curse", specifically menstruation and child-bearing. However, women who have left the church, or women who wish to transform the church, see these events in a different light. By accepting these events as part of life, we consent to God's will for us, especially the birth experience, as a central metaphor for creativity and love. Certainly for many women, the process of giving birth is the pivotal, spiritual experience of their

24 Ibid., p. 313
lives. Spiritual encounters of this kind take us both deeper into ourselves and also into the world.

Another feminist writer to whom the non-church women relate is Carol Christ. She has done extensive research into women's spirituality and has intentionally removed herself from the structure of the organized church. This author observes that for centuries, women have lived in the in-between spaces of their own inchoate experiences and the shape given those experiences by men. In other words, she believes women have not had the opportunity to experience their own experiences without male interpretation being overlaid. She also points out, as other feminist writers do, that there is an important link between story and experience. And now women are finding themselves, intentionally, in conversation with each other and in groups, telling stories about themselves which have never before been told, much as the women in my group did. Christ quotes Euripedes who said, “the world’s great order is reversed when women tell their stories.” This is indeed the case for the women at St. John’s United Church, as they find their voices and use them, the old order of the church is changing.

Carol Christ also suggests to women that they not ally themselves with a transcendent source which is changeless and beyond us, but rather our goal should be to try and understand we are part of the world and our world is constantly transforming and changing. Our mystical experiences which we have within our finite world make us

\[27 \text{Ibid., p. 230} \]
\[28 \text{Ibid., p. 230} \]
aware of being a part of a larger community, a place larger than ourselves, but
evertheless subject to change as we are. Margaret Atwood has reflected on this when
she says, "Nothing has ever died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become
alive..." (Margaret Atwood, Surfacing, New York, Simon & Shuster, 1972, p. 182)
The Wisdom writer who compiled Ecclesiastes would agree. [Ecc. 3:15] Religion and
spirituality need to be defined in a such a way that enables women to recognize
spirituality in their lives, not only in relation to an institutional structure, but in their ideas
of what religion and spirituality mean to the individual.

Sometimes the spiritual experience of women is a state of "nothingness" because
they have not been accustomed to hearing and telling their own stories. Of course, the
place where this happens most often is in the setting of patriarchal religion. Religious
stories give an orientation to our source of meaning. For example, God's giving of the
Law gives depth to the simple ritual of lighting Sabbath candles for Jewish people.
Christians orient themselves around the life and death of Jesus. But it is not only Biblical
stories which have a sacred dimension. Stories give meaning and value to life. At any
time, a story may give revelation of self and as a result one may be enabled to challenge
conventional values and expected roles.30

What makes a story sacred is its importance to the teller and the hearer. It can be
any kind of story. If it is a love story, then it is love which makes life meaningful.

29 Christ, Carol, Diving Deep and Surfacing, Beacon Press, Boston, 1986 2nd Ed., p. xiv
30 Ibid., p. 3
However, since women have not been accustomed to telling their story, in some ways they have not really been alive. They try to conform to the stories told about women, but it is not their own reality. The most common are the archetypal stories of Virgin Mother:Whore. But since not many of us fit easily within these two categories, it is hard for us to find ourselves in these stories. As a result we come again to that feeling of "nothingness."^{31}

However, now that women do tell their own stories in group situations, in books and any ways women communicate, we see something that is being produced which is both spiritual and social in its dimension. But if we look only at the spiritual dimension of the work, we overlook the social rules which need to be broken and re-constituted in the institutional settings in which we find ourselves. Carol Christ warns us that we should not separate our reality into two parts as Western philosophy has done. Rather, it is the intention of women's spirituality to seek wholeness and to heal the pain caused by dualism in our tradition which has divided us between spirit/body, rational/emotional, heaven/earth, life/death. What we need to be aware of is how spirituality can support women's needs for social equality. Women's spirituality concerns a woman's awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe. It includes contemplation as well as ideas shared with others. And it includes the classical question of "Who am I and why am I here?"

^{31} Ibid., p. 4
Part 4a

The Role of Education and Sociology: Where Our Values Come From

Perhaps the most important factor we are dealing with in this research topic as it relates to women inside and outside the church is socialization. We are socialized by our families, our educational system, our culture and our churches, to think a certain way, behave a certain way and believe in ourselves a certain way. This is what I call women’s enculturation.

In the ground-breaking book, Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind, the researchers and writers analyze for us the issues which underly women’s actions. In the interviews which were carried out by the researchers of this book, they were told by the women with whom they talked, that they were often discouraged from pursuing intellectual work on the grounds that it is unfeminine or incompatible with female capabilities. This, in fact, happened to a woman friend of mine when she applied to medical school. At the time, she had two small children and a Master’s degree, but she was told that women were not suitable candidates for scholarships in that particular school.

What happened to my friend is not an isolated incident. Women in different courts of the church are aware that men are better at getting attention in meetings and
holding it. The underlying message is that women have little to say and should, like children, be seen and not heard.\textsuperscript{32}

The reality of this disproportionate style of communication reinforces the belief that the conceptions of truth and knowledge with which women function are articulated and shaped by our male-dominated culture.\textsuperscript{33} Now feminists are beginning to articulate the values of the female world and to re-shape disciplines so that they include women's voices and continue to press for the right of women to participate as equals.\textsuperscript{34} The challenge to the church is to hear the voice of women in a non-patronizing way, and maybe even begin being invitational to them.

The study which the researchers of this book have provided is an invaluable opportunity for seeing the power of expanding our concept of human development.\textsuperscript{35} Through the stories of women, we see how women's self-concepts and ways of knowing are intertwined.\textsuperscript{36} If we value integrated individuals, this is truly a gift. However, for those who compartmentalize their thinking, it may appear scattered or less than logical. This is seen when women speak from their experience. The public is slowly beginning to value and appreciate what we learned through experience, but this very asset and ability

\textsuperscript{32} This phenomenon is still apparent in the United Church. At the last General Council held in 1997, for the first time women commissioners outnumbered men, but in terms of speaking time, men outnumbered women approximately seven to one.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 6
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 7
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 3
to learn and reflect on one's experience has been held against women. Women believe the "real" or valued lessons of life are determined by relationships with friends, life crises, and community involvement. However, women tend to downplay what they have learned in these areas because they have not come through traditional learning.\footnote{Ibid., p. 4}

Feminists attempt, however, to look beyond the traditional ways of learning. Presently, at the local women's shelter with which I am involved, the Board has employed an executive director with no formal education beyond high school. This woman's gifts and insights, which are many, were honed through many years of experience as she worked in a number of shelters in a variety of positions. Her experience and native intelligence potentially far outweigh the abilities of other candidates with formal learning and degrees but no experience.

Women's ways of knowing and relating rely to a great degree on dialogue and the exchange of views which allows individuals to be understood in their own terms. It is believed that mutual understanding will lead to consensus on how everyone's needs can be met. When theories and assumptions are examined through the lens of women's perspectives, new conclusions can be drawn and new directions forged that have implications for both men and women.\footnote{Ibid., p. 8}

In the study for \textit{Women's Ways of Knowing}, only women were asked to participate and because I too am interested in women's human development, including
spiritual growth, inside and outside the church, I asked only women to participate in my study. In past theoretical works, whether in psychology, sociology or educational theory, men’s voices have been powerfully articulated and have been seen as the norm. This is because much of the work in these areas in the past was done by men. However, what these women researchers discovered through conversations with the women they interviewed is that knowledge is constructed, not given, it is contextual, not absolute and it is mutable, not fixed.19 These conclusions are “feminist” conclusions and depart from the traditional understanding of knowledge and how it is acquired. This has implications for the life of the church which we will discuss later.

Part 4b

Feminist Styles of Ministry: Pastoral

I have approached the work of this thesis as well as all of ministry life, from the perspective of feminism. Perhaps I should first say something about my understanding of that much misunderstood word, feminism. I work from the assumption that feminism means equality of the sexes, that is equal rights for men and women, politically, socially, educationally. But more than that, these assumptions also include the belief that women’s perspectives are to be valued because they come from real life experiences as well as traditional learning. These experiences are not necessarily going to be the same

19 Ibid., p. 9, 10
as men's experiences because each gender lives in this world differently from the other due to different socialization processes.

Women's perspectives and life experiences and voices have not been heard equally in North America to those of men. Some may argue that that assumption is false. We see women in the media, women write books, women are competitive athletes, etc. However, this is true only in so far as women have needed to survive as human beings. Women have adapted themselves to the prevailing culture in order to be present at all. Again, this is an example of women being enculturated into the predominant context.

This has been historically true of women clergy in The United Church of Canada. The United Church of Canada has a long tradition, compared to other denominations, of ordaining women. However, the necessity for these women to conform to the prevailing culture of the institutional church was heavy. Women engaged in the same education as men, they adopted the same black clothes and clergy collars as men. Women maintained a plainness in appearance which played down female characteristics. Although it was encouraged for men to marry, women, who felt a call to ministry, were discouraged from marrying. However, with the rise of a feminist perspective in the 1970's some of these practices came into question as women observed and critiqued what they saw. Eventually, changes in the church slowly began to emerge.

In an insightful book called *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches*, reflections on the place of women's leadership in the church are discussed. In a chapter entitled, "Pastoral care as an act of Community", a process is described whereby women have learned to adapt to the dominant culture in ways that have helped
them survive, but at the same time have been harmful and costly to them. And in this whole process, groups of people have learned to believe negative messages about themselves. Learning to adapt in this way is a strength; however, it carries a cost to the well-being of the individual."

How does this adapting happen? Why do women allow it? It is said in the Arts of Ministry that all voices of struggle and resistance are rooted in particular social contexts and specific cultural circumstances.41 This theory can be applied to my particular context in which I have attempted to fit myself into a structure of ministry that I had no part in developing. It is a social context in which women clergy are suspect and in which males are highly regarded. The cost to me of living and working in this circumstance, as though I were an equal, is very high. It consists of living under the threat of termination of my pastoral relationship while my colleague remains protected from that threat because of his sex. My understanding of feminism implies mutual respect and it is clear when mutual respect does not exist. The issues of my context of ministry are not unique; as noted by Kathleen Billman, “there are no personal issues that are not of a piece with public issues. To divide things into public and private is to betray both.”42

41 Ibid., p. 51
42 Ibid., p. 28
From a pastoral point of view, it is important to be aware of the feminist perspective in a congregation, or the lack thereof. Carol Hess notes in her essay, "Education is an act of getting dirty with Dignity", that women often say, "I wish I could find a church where inclusive language is used so that my daughter wouldn't grow up with negative male imagery."43

This quote could have come from a number of women at St. John's United Church. However, it is always said one-on-one, never publicly, because the issue of inclusive language and imagery of God is still highly charged in this church. Hess says we need to correct the theologically driven betrayal of women. We need to encourage women to develop and assert their voices in the conversations of community life and we need to encourage appropriate forms of self-assertion.44 If women are consistently denied these opportunities in community life, to speak openly and to develop their voices, they will quietly disappear from the church, as did the group of women I worked with who call themselves non-church.

From the pastoral ministry point of view, my concern has been with the question, what happens to women after they leave the church? I have heard women say they feel a sense of loss or emptiness. In the research group which came together for this project we had the rare opportunity for theory and practice to come together as they shared the stories of their lives. Carol Christ suggests that, "When women tell new stories to each

43 Ibid., p. 71
44 Ibid., p. 70
other. shape their own stories, they are discovering the shape of women's spiritual quest.\textsuperscript{45}

Story sharing in communities of faith historically centres around biblical narrative. This is an important element in the feminist perspective of Christian Education.\textsuperscript{46} We will say more about that later. And Mary Pellaner reflects in a similar vein in God's Fierce Whimsy as quoted by Christine Neuger, “if there is anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people's stories, listening to them and honouring them and cherishing them, and asking them to be even more brightly beautiful than they already are.”\textsuperscript{47} This whole process of story telling and listening has been called listening women into speech.

This also brings us to a recurring theme of feminist critique and this thesis: women's loss and regaining of voice. Because women have always been lumped with many others as a minority group (regardless of the fact that more than half the population of the world is made up of women) there has been a developmental process in which women have been systematically taught, in a repetitive way, to adopt society's ideas and definition of being female. This process of adaptation has five steps: humiliation, inculcation (learning the rules), retribution, conversion (believing the dominant culture's definition of women) and conscription. For all the women who have "made it" in society, some of this process has taken place. For many other women, it is the means by

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 78
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 79
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 98
which they are kept in their place. This is the process that strips women of voice and pushes them into accepting the loss of potential language and authentic story.\textsuperscript{48}

Part 5

A Feminist Interpretation of the Gospel of John 4

My experience with church groups has been that most people are not comfortable with Bible study nor do they see much relevance for the Bible in their lives. However, as a clergy person who also tries to be a disciple, that is not the case for me. I need to find ways to understand scripture as a living and transforming word. As a result, I turned to Sandra Schneiders and her feminist interpretation of John 4 to help explain this process.

As mentioned above, Schneiders does an interpretation of this chapter of John using the approach of feminist criticism. She chose to use this approach because of her interest in the identity of the woman in the passage. This is the same reason I chose to use this passage as the focus of one of my "action in ministry" gatherings. Schneiders' approach is useful to me. Her interest is hermeneutical. She does not simply discover what the text says, but rather she looks at "the truth claims that are addressed to the believing readers in relation to their discipleship."\textsuperscript{49} This passage can then be seen as one that invites the transformation of the reader.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 96
In a helpful manner, Schneiders takes us through the methodology she uses which begins with a hermeneutics of suspicion. First, she encourages an understanding that the text is biased against women. Her question then becomes “can the biblical text function as a redemptory or a salvific encounter with God for women once their consciousness has been raised?”

Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza has placed feminist biblical interpretation in the category of liberationist hermeneutics, but it differs in one respect. She believes that the biblical text is often blind to the oppression of women in Israel and early Christian communities, as well as the texts themselves being androcentric and patriarchal. Thus, in other words, the text is not a text of liberation for women. It, in itself, is the problem, demonizing women and denigrating them.

Schneiders, like Schussler-Fiorenza, begins with the assumption that the text is not “neutral”, nor are the interpreters “objective”. By this she means, it cannot be assumed that the biblical text gives an accurate account of women in the community. Rather, we get a picture men have created. For feminist criticism then, it must be presumed that this is a distorted picture from which things have been omitted and what is included is unreliable. She does not feel this is academic paranoia but realism.

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50 Ibid., p. 181
51 Ibid., p. 181
52 Ibid., p. 183
It is important for us to remember that no one is neutral because everyone is controlled more or less by his or her social location. This is what contextual theology points out. It is important for any research in the humanities, that the researcher be self-aware and clear about their social location or context and how it affects them. In the case of the group of ten women, for the feminists, there has been a wider, different and more varied experience of life than perhaps for the women who identify with a more traditional understanding of the role of women. Their social location has been different from some of the other women in the group.

However, I want to ask, is it possible for this text to be liberating for women? This is an important question for women although it is not always raised to consciousness. Traditionally, it has been assumed that the biblical text, as well as human history, is mainly about men. Women are visible only as exceptions. Schneiders asks, if this is the case, what does the Bible say about women? Does this imply that women were not present or that women's experience of God was not credible? It is possible to focus on some texts of the New Testament and see what is hidden by most of the text, but what we do see is that women existed in those communities, did participate and were significant.  

We can look at the story of the Samaritan Woman as a model of women in the early church and today. What we see immediately is the traditional interpretation which marginalizes the woman and trivializes her, not to mention discriminates against her

53 Ibid., p. 185
because she has traditionally been seen as “bad”. She is considered to be “bad” because of the number of husbands she has had. This is another enculturated contextual issue and this is not unlike behaviour towards women in the church today.\textsuperscript{54}

As Jesus reveals to the woman what he knows about her, she is impressed by him. But she is impressed not only by his knowledge, but by his attitude, his willingness to have a conversation with her. Theologically speaking, it is a case of God in Jesus seeking relationship with one whom society considers unworthy.

Then the woman questions Jesus. She asks him to clarify the points about which the Jews and the Samaritans differ in their theology. Again, he speaks to her as an equal. Schneiders sees this interchange as an incorporation of Samaria into the New Israel.\textsuperscript{55}

The woman symbolizes the Bride to Jesus and Jesus as the New Bridegroom: she becomes a true theological partner. “gradually experiencing Jesus’ self-revelation as she reveals herself to him.”\textsuperscript{56}

But then the text pushes the gender issue further because it is clear that the woman goes back home to “evangelize”: she tells the good news to her neighbours and they believe her! Schneiders sees this as the writer of the fourth gospel having had some experience with women as Christians, theologians and apostles. There is also an awareness of the tension this caused between men and women in the community.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 188
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 190
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 191
Women were generally not allowed to bear witness, but here we have a woman whose word was a witness to Jesus and who brought people to him.\footnote{Ibid., p. 193} Apparently, she was an effective witness. However, a careful look at the part of the story which talks about the return of the disciples to Jesus, reveals a new side to these men. There is an uneasiness amongst the men which happens when a man talks to a woman too seriously, as Jesus did to this woman. This action, Schneider says, confirms their worst fears. Men are neither the originators, nor the controllers of the Church's mission.\footnote{Ibid., p. 195}

Schneider asks the question, then, that I asked the women in my group. If we look at this text from a feminist perspective, can it be a life-giving word for women? My answer is "yes." Schneider characterizes the mission of Jesus and the disciples in Samaria as a movement toward "inclusiveness" which has been the desire of feminist women in the church for the last twenty-five years. We recognize the story as one of universal salvation that includes women as well as men and that, in this case, it is the woman who was identified as despised, marginalized and excluded, not only as a Samaritan, but as a woman. However, it is the woman who is transformed by her encounter with Jesus and she is the one who brings the possibility of transformation to her community. It is a case of the enculturated context being transformed into a new context which has been effected by an encounter with the Word of God, Jesus made
flesh. This is a spiritual experience which led to a social justice action. This is a truly transforming story, as well as being the liberating word of God for women.
Summary of Chapter Two

In this chapter I have outlined the theoretical understanding and assumptions upon which my theology of ministry is based. Included here as well, are the feminist theories upon which my research relies.

My theology of ministry rests in my sense of call which is found in Luke 4:18,19 and in my understanding of the Baptismal vows of the Christian church. Having noted that this is my foundation, I must acknowledge the feminist perspective through which I do ministry and from which I question assumptions of my denomination. Feminist theology asks questions of us personally in order to bring us to greater self-awareness and greater ability to be faithful disciples. As well, it asks questions of the institutional church to open itself to change for the good of the larger community. I ask my questions from the perspective of feminist theology, sociology, education and pastoral care. This is the framework from which I do my ministry and my research.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Part 1

Introduction

My General Approach to Research Methodology Including the Feminist Approach

This chapter deals with the way I have chosen to collect data for my "Action in Ministry". The means by which I have gathered this information is to be found in the following research methodology.

I am asking a question about the value system which undergirds the relationship between spirituality and social justice actions. In order to gather data, I am applying the methods of qualitative research. For help in understanding this discipline, I looked to Research in Pastoral Care and Counselling: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches, by Larry VandeCreek, Hilary Bender and Merle Jordan. As well, I looked into Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry by James and Evelyn Whitehead.

My interest is in people, their stories, their thoughts and their actions. Since my research is centred on human beings, it calls for the discipline of qualitative research as a methodology. In Research in Pastoral Care and Counselling, there is a helpful definition of qualitative research.

In terms of an objective, the qualitative approach does not intend to test, prove, persuade or argue a particular predetermined point and it would be
appropriately to use it for those purposes. Its purpose is to discover the meaning of human experience and to communicate this understanding to the reader. It does this through narrative rather than through numbers with the understanding that its narrative words evoke the human experience attached to them.  

In this book on methodology, the research process is described as "dialogical". This means that dialogue is engaged in continuously. This is exactly the process used in the "action in ministry" which is included later in this work. In this process, as researcher, I was part of the research activity. I engaged in it as a participant/observer which means that I was in constant dialogue with the participants of the process. The participants and I were mutually and personally engaged in the process of sharing thoughts, ideas, feelings. It is said that, "the two (the researcher and the object) work together in the discovery process on a level of mutual dependence and trust."  

Participants in this process are individuals who have an experience the researcher wishes to understand. In this case, I wished to understand the background and values of the women in this group and to see how their values helped them become involved in social justice issues. 

The authors of this methodology book describe the participants of such a research group. They are intelligent, usually quite verbal and reflective individuals who have an  

59 VandeCreek, Larry et al., Research in Pastoral Care and Counseling: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches, Journal of Pastoral Care Publications, Inc., 1994, p. 77  
60 Ibid., p. 77  
61 Ibid., p. 84  
62 Ibid., p. 84
open and trusting relationship with the researcher. On the other hand, the phenomenon being discussed usually rests within them more as a lived experience than as a reflected one.\(^{63}\) It is the intention of the researcher to draw out the lived experience so that it may be reflected on and understood. This was indeed the case with the participants of this action in ministry. The questions which were asked in the process were not questions that they, the participants, had ever considered before. In fact, the women often said, “I've never thought about this before, I just did it.”

As a participant/observer, I tried to be aware of myself as part of the discovery process during conversations. I recorded data as I observed and listened to the conversations to the best of my ability. However, I was much more caught up in facilitating the conversation than I was aware of my own thoughts and reactions. What I did observe about myself is my bias of both Christianity and feminism. My internal, and sometimes external, interpretation of conversation was consistently from the perspectives just named. It was not possible for me to be unbiased in these two respects.

Recognizing, then, my own biases, and also because the role of participant/observer is complicated, I invited a “strategic informant” to be part of this process. This is also a method suggested by these authors. The person I invited to help me in this role was Janice Murray, an adult educator and one who is skilled at process work. She is also on the margins of church life and was helpful in balancing my perspective from within the church. In addition, she had the ability to be more unbiased.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 84
than I because she did not have the same emotional commitment to the process as I did. Janice was a help to me because she provided me with the opportunity to debrief orally after each session. During this time we talked about the feelings we heard expressed, the body language we observed and, in a general way, how the evening progressed. Janice took few field notes.

The purpose of my research was to discover the experience of a number of others, and begin to understand the meaning that each individual gave to her experience. However, personal experiences are deeply embedded. The researcher hears words, metaphors, stories, and sees facial expressions, body language and vocal tones. Putting that together helps to form meaning and understanding of the experiences of that person. Consequently, the first thing to be done is to look for the expression of human experience.64

In this methodology, typically three sources are used: interview, documents and the observed interaction of the participants and me. My research follows this process exactly.

One of the research methods which I used is the interview. The interview process was a helpful way for me to gather information about the participants and to have a personal experience of these individuals. The interview process in qualitative research is ideographic. This allows for differences between individuals to emerge. Different styles

64 Ibid., p. 99
can be applied to the interview process. These styles are called semi-structured, focused or conversational.

In the semi-structured approach, there are a number of specific and yet open-ended questions asked of each participant. The set of questions is the same for each participant. This is the approach I used and my sets of questions are found in Appendices C, D, E and F.

According to the authors of this book on methodology, the results of this style are more cognitive and informal. The advantage of this method is the ease of analysis because the categories are already there in the questions. The disadvantage, which I experienced myself, is that the researcher is imposing some interpretation on the experience of the participant rather than allowing the participant to interpret her own experience.

A second style of interview is the conversational. The conversational style of research is a free flowing conversation without structure or guiding questions. The researcher later attempts to discover patterns and themes from these conversations.

It was important for me to be involved personally in the conversations with the participants. Therefore I chose the role of participant/observer. The authors of the book, Pastoral Care and Counseling, point out that the participant/observer technique is most useful for the study of social and cultural experiences which have become so habitual or

\[65\text{Ibid., p. 101}\]
taken for granted that the individual participant is incapable of reflecting on their meaning through the interview process. Thus, the question for the participant/observer becomes: “What is the socially shared meaning which makes the interaction purposeful for this group of people?”

The researcher, in this regard, carries a dual role. First, the interviewer hears the participants’ stories first-hand. Secondly, the researcher must become involved in the experience along with everyone else. However, at the same time, the researcher tries to maintain some distance and offer some independent observation.

This indeed is a difficult process. There were moments when I felt as though I had become too emotionally involved in the conversation. At other times, I felt quite distanced in my interactions with the group. There are advantages and disadvantages to both positions. Perhaps the strength of the one who feels distanced is that things can be observed from a fresh perspective. However, in both situations, I feel an objective interpretation of events is difficult. Perhaps this is the major significance of the “strategic informant”. This person who is a marginal participant, is a companion on the journey, helping to translate for the researcher the significance of what is being heard.

“Listening well” is an important component of qualitative research. In the book, Method in Ministry, James and Evelyn Whitehead speak of attitude and skill which are

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66 Ibid., p. 105
67 Ibid., p. 106
68 Ibid., p. 106
necessary in this research. They call this "attending" in order to enable the minister to
learn from the experience of another as well as from his or her own experience. The first
stance of the minister is to listen well because the word of God has already been spoken
in the person being listened to.69

The Whiteheads point out a truth which I experienced with the group of ten
women. Most people today have only non-religious language in which to speak of their
experience. As a result, people like me, who minister to others, need to be able to hear
the religious dimensions of what is being said in their secular vocabularies.70

I found this phenomenon to be especially true in the first evening together as we
spoke of images of God and religious or spiritual experiences. I found myself translating
their experiences into theological language and then wondering if I was over-stepping my
bounds as researcher.

During the group meetings as well as during the individual interviews, a task I set
for myself was to listen for the relationship between faith and action. This was especially
my intent with the women who were church members. For the women who did not
belong to the church, I listened for any nuances of religious motivation. My question for
myself was, "Where do good motives come from?"

69 Whitehead, James and Evelyn, Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and
70 Ibid., p. 86
During the whole process of the action in ministry, I saw myself as working from Karl Rahner's formula, i.e. to uphold Tradition and to overcome Tradition. As a feminist, deconstruction of Tradition is part of the task of reinterpretation. Yet as an ordained minister, upholding Tradition is part of my call.

As conversations with the women unfolded in group settings and between us as individuals, it became more clear to me that for both groups of women, the Christian tradition has been influential in shaping their values in the decisions they make.

The hermeneutical circle which moves from experience to reflection to Tradition, was operative in this process at all times.

\[\text{BIB/THEOL} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{TRADITION} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{PRAXIS/ACTION} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{REFLECTION}\]

\[\text{Ibid., p. 55}\]
Part 2a

Methods of Data Collection

In order to explore the question of the relationship of spiritual experience and social justice action, I used a number of methods to collect data. The first piece of information I collected was in the form of a letter which I asked the participants to submit prior to our first meeting noting the things which are important to them. This was a very brief, one page submission to help focus their thinking.

The next method of data collection was the use of “stickees” which we used to name the things we valued. These were written upon privately by each woman and then collected and categorized during our first group meeting. In addition, that night, we used a large piece of newsprint to draw a collage of “images of God.” These pieces of information were then collected by me. These were the only concrete items which the women worked on or produced.

I, however, collected more data by audiotaping each of the three full group meetings. The tapes were later transcribed and produced approximately twenty-five pages of small print which I referred to as I did my coding process. The second session during which we split into two groups was not taped except for the end part when we came together again. However, the second group meeting was based on material that had been sent to the women prior to the meeting. This mailing included the story of Jesus’ encounter with the “Woman at the Well” and questions for them to think about. These are included in Appendix E. The questions for this evening were used in a semi-
structured way just to help us stay on topic. I took a few notes during that evening. However, I found it difficult to take notes since many questions were directed towards me during that discussion time. I was more involved in that conversation than in most.

The same situation arose for Janice Murray who was in the role of strategic informant. She facilitated the other group and she, too, was able to make only very brief notes. We later met to compare our impressions of the evening.

Following the group meetings in the fall of 1995, I telephoned each participant and set up appointment times for individual interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to allow the women the opportunity to speak privately of anything they may not have wished to share publicly. At the end of the ten interviews, each was taped on an hour long tape and the interview tapes were transcribed. This provided me with approximately 220 pages of transcript. These are all confidential and are in my possession. My brief field notes were kept in a small notebook to which I referred during the process of writing up and reflecting on the procedure.

The transcripts and tapes were vital to my process of categorizing. Following the process of phenomenology, the use of these research methodologies allowed each woman to speak for herself, through the use of writing, drawing and speaking. I had the chance to go back over tapes and refresh my memory and to re-read the transcripts.

The evaluation meetings took place in June of 1996. We had to meet twice in order to accommodate the schedules of the women. I presented them with copies of my analysis of the findings from the taped sessions for their verification. They all felt the
findings faithfully represented what they had said and were comfortable with what they saw. The processes of taping, transcribing, interviewing and note taking provided me with my raw data.

Part 2b

Coding Methods

The coding, or categorizing, for my research was embedded within the three major themes which were the topics I was interested in: values, spiritual experiences and social justice action. These themes provided me with the over-arching theme for each of the three sessions. The first evening concerned values and church background. We also touched on spiritual experiences. On the third evening, the subject was social justice actions. During the discussion of the second evening, we talked about the Bible and their understanding of it as either undermining or undergirding of their sense of spiritual experiences. The third evening was more interactive as each woman talked about what she does in terms of social justice actions.

In listening to the tapes and re-reading the transcripts, I was able to pull out key words such as "values", "spirituality", and "social justice" and focus on how the women used these words. The women used a variety of descriptive phrases and words in regard to these themes and these are to be found in Appendix G.
Part 3a

The Participants

My explorations, thoughts and research in regard to my research question have all centred on a group of ten women from my community of Alliston. The women represent a cross section in terms of education, age range and background.

I invited ten women to be the focus group for the exploration of my question concerning values and social justice work. I chose the number “ten” and the gender “women” for two reasons. First, I think that a small group of ten is a good number of people with whom to work. It is large enough for a diversity of opinions and yet small enough for everyone to have a chance to talk. The reason I chose all women is that I believe women can more easily get to the point of a discussion than a group composed of both women and men. Some of the reasons for this are comfort and the potential for intimidation. Women’s issues, perspectives and ways of dealing with concerns are different from men’s ways.\(^\text{72}\) There is a variety of cultural, anthropological and sociological reasons for this.\(^\text{73}\)

However, there is also another reason why I asked only women participants. I wished to give women a forum in which to discuss issues. As far as I am aware, there are


\(^{73}\) Unfortunately, we do not have time to explore this thoroughly; I ask the reader to accept my assumptions that this is fact.
no study groups that allow for this kind of depth discussion. I know there are none in St. John’s United Church and I have never heard of any in the community. I am also aware that no one has ever asked questions of these women such as, “Why do you do the community work you do?” and “Do you have any beliefs about what you choose to do?”

The third reason I asked this particular group of women to speak together is that they are all known to me. Some of them previously knew each other as well, but not many. Amongst the group are women I have known for more than twenty years and others for only two or three. However, I was aware of contributions that each woman had made to community life.

Although the group of ten women functioned as a unit, the group was actually made up of five women who are active church members and five women who do not belong to the church. The reason I chose to work with a “mix” of women is to see if they functioned from a different set of values. I wondered how and if church women were motivated to do social justice activity by their religious background and what is the value system of non-church women.

The mix of the group worked well. Sometimes the conversations were challenging, sometimes inspiring and sometimes we found ourselves in agreement. The women represented a religious spectrum from atheism to traditional Christianity. The age range was from late thirties to early seventies. However, the group does share a similar socio-economic background. I would like to introduce you to the participants, beginning with the five non-church women followed by the five church women.
Part 3b

Non-Church Participants

Eileen

Eileen is someone I have known for more than twenty years. Presently, she is a Ph.D. candidate working in Sociology. She is a Teaching Assistant at York University. Eileen is an immigrant to Canada coming here from Great Britain in the early 70’s with her husband and baby son. She now has four grown children.

One of Eileen’s great contributions to the group is her ability to analyze social situations, her honesty at naming issues and her feminist perspective. She is one of the non-church members of the group. Although Eileen was raised in Ireland by a Catholic grandmother, she left any church involvement because she has many questions about the way the church treats women. She questions a transcendental God and the authority of the Bible which has been used to control women. Her analysis is also historical as she questions how Tradition has treated women including the burning of wise women in the middle ages as witches. She sees this kind of discrimination continuing today.

Shirley

Shirley is also in the category of “non-church.” She, like Eileen, was raised in a Christian home. The church of her childhood was described by her as “fundamentalist”. By this she means the church was theologically conservative and believed in biblical
literalism. She stopped attending church in university days. Her church life had left her feeling dissatisfied and with more questions than answers.

Shirley is now in her mid-fifties and is about to retire from teaching. Her area is Family Studies. She has an expectation of doing some family therapy counselling after her teaching career.

The approach to social justice that Shirley takes comes from her experience of teaching young women and seeing how hurtful and unfair traditional models of patriarchal family life dynamics have been towards the formation of young women. She, too, describes herself as a feminist. Shirley is a spiritual person in non-orthodox terms. She believes in reincarnation and explores witchcraft and native spirituality.

Liz

Liz, in her late sixties, is one of the oldest women in the group. At the time of the formation of this group, I invited Liz as a non-church person, however, she does experience a feeling of ambivalence towards the church and has asked to have her name put on the adherents’ list.

Liz represents a part of the spectrum which includes the more “traditional” woman as opposed to the “feminist”. She has worked but has seen herself mostly as a caregiver. Because of her late husband’s profession, she had the opportunity to live in other cultures and other parts of Canada. Because of her experiences of travelling and the reading she has done, Liz has an exceptionally wide world-view which has encouraged non-traditional religious understandings.
Jan R.

Jan, like Eileen, comes from Great Britain. When she was young, she trained to be a nurse. Now in her mid-forties, she has a degree in Women's Studies from York University and has completed the certification for Midwifery.

Jan's religious life has gone through some changes. She was raised in traditional English Anglicanism. However, for a number of years, she, like Eileen, questioned the church's treatment of women and withdrew from it. Now she finds herself longing for ritual from time to time. Nevertheless, I have considered her as a non-church participant.

Sylvia

Sylvia, in her thirties, is one of the younger members of the group. She is one, however, who defies categorizing. Sylvia comes from a family of strong United Church ties with a grandfather who was a past moderator and a number of relatives who are clergy. However, she is ambivalent in her feelings towards the church. Again, the issue for her, as with others, is the traditional, patriarchal functioning of the church and its attitude towards the role and contribution of women.

Along our spectrum of atheism and tradition, I put Sylvia in the middle. She is an avid reader of feminist theology and is disappointed that this interpretation of the Bible and approach to church life has not made a bigger impact.

For a number of years, Sylvia was not connected to the church in any way. However, recently she has become involved for family reasons. Sylvia is a mathematics
and science high school teacher and therefore brings analysis and insight to the discussion.

Part 3c

Church Participants

Kathy

Kathy is one of the younger members of the group. She and Sylvia are of a similar age and academic discipline. Kathy, too, has been a high school teacher of mathematics and science. Now she is home with her small children and does community work.

Kathy comes from a Roman Catholic background. For a variety of reasons she left the Catholic church in unhappiness. Part of her unhappiness was due to the absence of women in leadership roles. She has found a place to call "home" in the United Church. She is a very active member of the church. Kathy wonders if her place in the future will be in some kind of ministry in the church. In part, as a result of Kathy's participation in this research group, she is now a student at Emmanuel College.

Jeannette

Jeannette, along with Kathy and Sylvia, are amongst the youngest in the group. Jeannette's background also is Roman Catholic and her ethnic background is Native Canadian and French. I add this piece of information because it may help the reader to
know why I see her as a seeker. All three of these young women have started to come to St. John’s United Church in recent years. In this congregation, they feel they are able to explore issues in a more open way than previously. Jeannette is working on certification for Early Childhood Education. She has been very involved with church life since she came to St. John’s United Church.

Joan

Joan is a friend of long-standing. She is an active church member as a member of the St. John’s United Church choir for more than twenty years. I would characterize Joan as more traditional in her understanding of religion.

Joan has been involved with a number of community projects over the years. Besides Rotary, her major involvement has been with “My Sister’s Place”, the local women and children’s shelter. She believes in giving back or giving in thankfulness for the things she has received in life. Obviously, Joan believes in and acknowledges the equality of women and men and celebrates the gifts of women. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that she would call herself a feminist. Joan is a high school vice-principal and one of the first women members of the Alliston Rotary Club. She is now serving as its first woman president.

Marjorie

Marjorie is also a long-time church goer. She is careful to say she is not a church member since she was confirmed in The Anglican Church and never “officially” joined
The United Church of Canada. Nevertheless, Marjorie takes an active part in church life and makes a great contribution.

Marjorie, like Liz, is a more traditional woman. She is a trained musician and taught voice for many years, privately. She has not worked outside of the home, however, she helps her husband in his travel tour business and often travels with him. Marjorie has been a supporter of the Alliston Rotary Club for many years since her husband has been very involved with the life of this organization.

In religious terms, Marjorie has a traditional approach and understanding of the role of religion but her insights into the dynamics of church life are astute. She displays great wisdom in handling difficult situations.

Jean

Jean is the eldest of the group. Although early life left Jean feeling somewhat ambivalent towards the church, a personal crisis helped to solidify her relationship to the church. She is an active and involved church member, especially during the last twenty years. Her activity has included being a founding member of a new United Church of Canada in Don Mills and then transferring her involvement to a small church just outside of Alliston, where she and her husband moved in retirement.

Jean is the only member of the focus group who was also part of my Ministry Base Group. She asked to be part of this discussion group because the thesis proposal and my questions raised questions for her, as well, that she wished to explore. Jean has
always been intensely involved with caregiving in her family and in community endeavours.

**Janice Murray**

Janice was a member of the Ministry Base Group which I gathered together. She is also an adult educator who works in a hospital setting as well as doing consulting work. Janice is particularly gifted at asking questions that encourage people to talk and is good at group facilitation. I asked Jan to be part of this process as a co-facilitator because I felt it would be too difficult to be a participant/observer without this kind of help. It did improve the process to have someone who understood what my goals were and be able to help accomplish them as well as to have the opportunity to de-brief after the full sessions.
Part 4

A Feminist Perspective on Research Methodology

As noted earlier, the approach used for this research is a phenomenological approach which is both structured and open-ended. However, to begin at the beginning, when I made my decision to work with a focus group of women, I decided ten was a manageable number. From past experience, I found that ten allowed each person to be able to take an active part and to be able to build relationships with each other. At the same time, if one or two women were missing for an evening, there were still sufficient numbers to keep the conversation going.

I chose to work with ten women I know. Some I know well, others less well. Some also knew one another previously. Once I had made my decision about who the women would be, I contacted them by telephone, explained what I was doing, the kind of involvement I hoped for from them and asked them to take some time to think about being a part of the group. I then sent each woman a letter which is found in the Appendix B. One woman declined after considering the proposal because she felt there were too many calls upon her time. However, I found a replacement fairly easily.

There were varying degrees of enthusiasm over the project. Most saw themselves as doing me a favour by agreeing to take part and all expressed concern over the time commitment required.

Once I had received a Participant’s Consent Form, (Appendix C) I sent them a schedule of meeting dates, an outline of each meeting and the time I expected we would
be finished with the research, followed by a date for an evaluation meeting. I hoped the project would extend from September 1995 to June 1996. I have included all of the material in terms of outlines of the evenings, in Appendix D, E and F as well as the questions for the individual interviews.

Each group session was tape-recorded as were all of the individual interviews which were transcribed. Each woman was able to speak in her own words from her experience and to reflect on these experiences with each other. As the researchers in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* noted, we listened to each other with open ears. We shared thoughts and experiences which had never been voiced before. They said, at the end of the first evening, how pleased they were to have the opportunity to think about their lives and to talk about their lives in a setting that was caring, interested and encouraging.

As in the process used in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, the categories that I was concerned about were embedded in the questions I asked. Perhaps this could be considered a bias. I had no preconceived ideas about what I would hear. Each woman’s story was her own, as well as each perspective expressed. Because this was the case, because of the uniqueness of each woman, the context of each story varied. The context varied by geography, culture, time period and educational background. In some ways, the common denominator was that all had ended up in Alliston and all did some kind of community work based on compassion. Belenky and her associates speak of the “silence” of the women they interviewed and indeed this was the case for these women. They had not told these stories and in the telling they gained a voice they had not had before. My interpretation of this is that it is not sufficient for women just to have a voice.
They also must be heard by those around them. And in that hearing, acceptance is implied.

As I read over the section in Women's Ways of Knowing on research methodology, I felt affirmed in the process I chose to use because they were similar. The researchers for that important book chose a style that they characterized as "open and leisurely" which established a rapport with the individuals and which allowed for presuppositions and frames of reference to emerge. I hoped for the same. My belief was that as long as the questions allowed for as much or as little intimacy to be shared as desired, the women would feel comfortable in sharing what they wished. In some cases, the participants shared very deep, personal struggles which were life altering. Other women shared more generally and both were acceptable.

Another similarity between the two research methodologies was that, embedded in the questions, were the epistemological positions for coding. I call these "categories". I used key words in my questions such as image of God, spirituality, social justice, and values. These words meant different things to each woman and yet we could also hear the overlap in what they talked about. However, later by listening to the tapes and re-reading the transcripts, I was easily able to assign categories.

For me, one of the most important parts of the process is that it allowed women to say who they are, where they come from, what formed them, how they see themselves

Women need to talk about themselves in this way. All of them expressed gratitude for having been asked to share a part of their lives this way. It appears that we rarely ask each other these questions and therefore we tend not to know each other deeply or with mutual understanding.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE ACTION IN MINISTRY

RESEARCH STATEMENT

IT IS MY INTENTION TO EXPLORE THE VALUES WHICH
UNDERGIRD COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTS AMONGST
CHURCH AND NON-CHURCH PEOPLE. I WISH TO DISCOVER
WHAT KIND OF CONNECTION EXISTS BETWEEN AN
INDIVIDUAL’S SPIRITUALITY, VALUES AND ACTIONS.

Part 1

My Theology of Social Justice

My own interest in social justice issues came into being in the mid 1960’s. I was a student at Michigan State University during the time of the Vietnam War. In that era, one could not escape an awareness of the war, of the massacre of the student protesters at Kent State University, and the social unrest in the United States. I was personally uncomfortable with values espoused by the government, by the military, and by the members of my immediate family. The result of my discomfort was my move from the United States to Canada in 1968. My sensitivity to individual and communal rights had been awakened by events in the United States.

At that time in my life, I did not have the words to explain or name what was happening to me internally. Now, I can look back at that time and place myself in the tension between my “enculturated” context and my desire for a “transformational”
context. The enculturated context included values I was not comfortable with. Those values were patriarchal. They did not include the voice of women or even Christian values of the sanctity of life. They did not include a theology which accepted all of us as children of God. The values were exclusive and judgment filled. It was a context in which some were highly valued individuals while many were not.

Because of my personal background I have developed an interest and involvement in social justice awareness and action. My area of concern has been advocacy on behalf of women, particularly in opposition to violence against women and children. I became involved with a small group of women from Alliston and the surrounding area in 1979/80 during a study of the number of cases of violence against women and the need for a safe house.

This project idea was not well received by the town council and we did not get approval. However, we persevered in a slightly different direction. We established an "information centre" and this was the vehicle by which we managed to assist women who needed help. The information centre included a "telecare line" and a used clothing store.

Eventually, five years later, a new group came into being called "People in Transition". This was the group that actually got the safe house established. It is known as "My Sister's Place". I sat on the board for one year but because of pastoral duties, had to resign. I have remained interested in this social justice and compassionate project, and have now returned to the board and have become deeply involved with it.
Social justice activity for me is based on the pursuit of economic, political and social equality for all people. There is little difference for me between social justice and feminism. Because of my Christian perspective, social justice also includes the belief in salvation. By this I mean the well-being of individuals and communities in terms of wholeness and right relationship with God and neighbour. My understanding is that Christians need to pursue activities which will ensure salvation for ourselves, our society, and the world. I do not believe in salvation as a triumphalist doctrine that says Christianity is the only way. Rather, my understanding of salvation is more broad and includes well-being for all. Social justice activities are essential in regard to women’s rights in all cultures because of the hidden discrimination which is practised against women. One of the ways this discrimination happens is through acts of violence against women: in the media, in various forms of entertainment, in the workplace and in the home. A pursuit of social justice for me is to advocate on behalf of women’s rights to safety for themselves and their children and also for the possibility of their economic, political and social equality.

At the present time, my experience tells me that kind of pursuit for well-being for individuals and communities of people is not being practised wholeheartedly by the

75 My interpretation of this term is based on my understanding of ethical and compassionate behaviour towards “the other.” “The other” may be a human being, a living creature or the earth itself. This is a mature response to the issues we see around us which are evidence of the destructive behaviour of human beings. I understand the ethical and compassionate response to be both individual and communal. For a discussion of this position see In the Service of God, by William Willimon, chapter 2, “The Work of Ethics.”
church. In this century, perhaps especially since the early 1970’s, there has developed a theological split in the church. I do not know how to characterize this split except to call it privatized Christianity versus prophetic Christianity.

In her book, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, Maria Harris discusses this theological split. She quotes Jurgen Moltmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer amongst others who have used these terms, "privatized Christianity" or "privatus cultus". My understanding of this term as used by Moltmann is that people come to church on Sunday morning for their own personal reasons, to help them feel better, to be restored spiritually, or perhaps even to feel they have been personally “saved.” In other words, the needs of the individual are paramount. Moltmann describes this as moving away from serving God to serving the needs of the individual.

Two women who are members of the Wednesday morning Bible study have spoken quite regularly of the reasons which motivate them for coming to church. They both subscribe to the theory of privatized Christianity, i.e. the motivating factors for their coming to church are to fulfill their personal needs. However, when we engage in more conversation about how we might put our faith into action, we find it is difficult to move from theory to action. I call the “action” the social justice component of our faith. My understanding of social justice concern is very broad. I do not include only actions such as the old style peace marches and study groups. Social justice for me means an

awareness of concerns or issues of injustice. Social justice actions can include intentional intercessory prayer which is concerned with alleviating the pain and suffering of people close to us or far away. My observation, however, is that it is difficult to broaden our understanding of social justice concerns and to become personally involved.

It has come to my attention, through interaction with friends and acquaintances of the wider community of Alliston, that there is social justice being done by people who are not related to the church as well as by people who are "churched". In one case, a husband and wife have opened their home to a series of young people who are emotionally troubled. In another case, there are women who volunteer their time and efforts at the local women's shelter in various support roles. In a third situation, another woman counsels women concerning their rights as they disengage from marital relationships. All these helping people were members of the church at one time but are no longer. For various reasons each has felt disenfranchised by the church.

My research interest concerns addressing a common question to both groups of individuals, those who are church members and those who are not. Amongst the questions to be asked are the following:

1. What is the common experience of both groups that has motivated them to be concerned with social justice actions?
2. What part does spirituality or relationship to God play in our actions?

I am using this word as meaning any relationship, belief or understanding between a human being and a divine being. This does not necessarily mean a belief in the Christian God. This may include an experience of the numinous which results in a belief that there is more to life than what our senses and rationality tell us. This is an awakening to the mystery of life.
3. At what point in their life experience did they become inspired to act on issues of perceived social injustice?

These questions form the link between spirituality and social justice. I now wish to explore how an individual’s spirituality informs and forms a motivation to do social justice acts. But more specifically, I want to know about women’s spirituality and their work in social justice issues. In an even more focused way, what is it that women understand social justice issues to be?

Foundational to the above questions is a question about values. How and where do women learn values? Especially, what kind of value system is operating in the culture of a small town in Ontario, specifically the town of Alliston? Further to the exploration of values and where women learn them is the question of the role of religion in the formation of values. Are the teachings of the church an important or formative factor in the development of an individual’s spirituality or are the values we learn not connected to church teachings?

These questions that I bring to this study come from a life-long struggle to understand myself and the United Church as we “seek to do justice and resist evil” (The United Church of Canada Creed, Rev. 1994) in our complex society. I ask these questions of myself and others because of my own life experiences in my family of origin and of my experiences in the church, both as a lay person and ordained.

The reason I chose to do research with women is that I believe the experiences, thoughts and beliefs of women are rarely heard in a public way, especially in church life. My research work is done from the perspective of feminist theology. I chose to do this
work from this perspective firstly because feminism bases its assumptions on the equality of women and men. Feminism demands that women be given equal respect with men, politically, economically, educationally and this includes all aspects of church life.

Secondly, I chose feminist theology as the lens through which I see this work because feminism takes seriously the life experiences of women as they are put in dialogue with scripture and tradition.

Anyone who has spent any time in a congregation can readily see the presence of women and the contribution they make to the well-being of the church community and to the wider community. This is true of St. John's United Church in Alliston. Often these contributions are made under great hardship as women seek to be the best mothers they can be, take some or the entire responsibility for the financial well-being of their families and still find time and energy to commit to others and to worthy causes. We see women in worship, at social times and in committees, but often the contributions of women remain invisible.

The role of women, particularly in the small town congregation, is complicated further by the fact of gender. Instead of their gifts and contributions being celebrated, they are kept under wraps so they do not appear to be "too pushy", maybe even too capable because there is a feeling of animosity towards women who are too vocal or too powerful. In the society of the small town congregation, women's voices are often silent at board meeting and congregational meetings. Women are not encouraged to take leadership roles outside of the traditional ones connected to The United Church Women's organization. Unspoken encouragement goes to directing women into places of support.
for the structure: i.e. teaching Sunday School, nurturing and caring for members of the congregation. These are worthy and important tasks in the Christian community. But they are also stereotypical of the female role of care-giver and nurturer. We may also ask the question: Is this true for women in our society as a whole?

In light of the restraints with which women live, in this particular value system, how do they still manage to live out their ministry as faithful servants of Christ? For the women who are part of this study and are not church members, how do they do their social justice activity under the constraints of small town society? It is my intention that as I describe the process in which we engaged in our focus group meetings and consequently in individual interviews, some clues will emerge that will partly answer my questions.

These women' s lives are not easy to categorize. Sometimes, in our discussions. I could not tell whether or not we were on topic. I think this is the way of feminist research. It does not always fit into neat categories. Of necessity, this part will be narrative, as the lives of the women are a narrative.

It is said that women keep inventing themselves as they tell their stories and interpret their lives. This has certainly been true for myself. As I have reflected on my life, with the help of reading and scripture study, I have gradually grown to know myself.

78 Shawchuck, Norman, and Heuser, Roger, Leading the Congregation: Caring for Yourself While Serving Others, “Women in Church Leadership: An Emerging Paradigm”, Carol Becker, Abingdon Press, Nashville, p. 262
better. I, too, to some degree, have re-invented myself. I think for a number of the women who took part in these discussions, the same thing happened.
Part 2

The First Evening: A Discussion of Values and Spirituality

Before we actually had our first meeting at the end of September in 1995, I asked each woman to write one paragraph on the topic, "What matters to me most?" (See Appendix D) The purpose of this little exercise was to help focus our thinking on the things and values which we hold dear in our lives. This also helped the women focus their thoughts on the topics of discussion for the first evening. This one page exercise has been kept confidential by me. If the women wished to share something of it verbally, that was left to them. In fact during our discussion time, none of the women referred to their one page of thoughts. However, when we started to talk about values' clarification, the same issues surfaced as they had written about.

After we had gone around the circle and introduced ourselves and said what our involvement in church life was or was not, the co-facilitator, Jan Murray, explained what the activity of the next thirty or so minutes was to be. Jan called this "values' clarification". Each woman was given a stack of "stickees" and asked to write one thing on each page of stickees. These are the things she values most. After we were all finished, including Jan and myself, we put them in a place that all women could see them and I grouped them by category. The categories were family life, professional life and spiritual life.
This exercise helped the women articulate the things they hold dear but may not talk about often. In our walk-about time, we saw that we shared much and agreed on much. As Jan invited us to reflect on this exercise she made the observation, “When we talk about what we value, we often don’t think about things that are very important unless we lack them, such as health or freedom.” We were all surprised that none of us had noted these basic items to our well-being.

From this discussion on values, we moved to another area, images of God. These may be images that we currently hold or are from our childhood time. The women were invited to draw the images on a large sheet of paper with coloured markers. Not all women wished to participate and their wishes were respected.

The images that were shared were both traditional ones and very personal ones. By traditional I mean images such as God being pictured as an old man with a white beard, like Celie imagined God to be in The Color Purple. Other traditional symbols were the cross and crown, the cup and paten that hold the bread and wine. On the non-traditional side was an image of a happy face, brightly coloured yellow, a shiny tin can out of which God emerged, a rainbow, a storm cloud with lightening coming from it, also rolling hills and beautiful scenes of nature.

Interspersed with much laughing and joking about what our images of God meant to us was a more serious side to our discussion of how those images connected us to the idea of religion. We talked about where our symbol/images came from, what they mean to us, and whether they have positive or negative connotations. This discussion led us easily into the area describing experiences we would call spiritual.
The Place of Scripture in our Lives

The second meeting of our group was held in late October 1995. This meeting had a slightly different format from the others. At the beginning of the evening, we met as a full group for about half an hour. I used this time to refresh our memories of the first evening. By this time I had a transcript of the first evening and so was able to use that. I also took this opportunity to introduce the story of Jesus and the woman at the well from John 4. I did a short exegesis on the relationship of the Samaritans and the Jews and the place of women in that society. We then divided into two groups with five women in each. The groups were mixed, having both church and non-church women in them. Each woman had been given the questions for discussion in advance of this meeting. We then spent one hour in discussion of this story.

This meeting provided me with some surprising reactions from the women. The first surprise was that none of the women was very familiar with this story. There was some confusion over the story of the “Good Samaritan” and the “Woman of Samaria”. I found, from the questions asked of me, that the women wanted much more background than I had expected to give them. Their questions not only concerned this specific story but also the gospel of John. Since the women did not know the story, and only Joan had ever heard it preached on, the story was not as meaningful at first glance as I had hoped it would be. I am declaring here an assumption on my part.
Another surprise for me was the emotional response elicited by this story. For the few women who felt comfortable identifying themselves as feminists, there was anger that the church did not preach this passage at all, let alone as a woman's story. It was not preached on as a story of liberation for women, for sure. For the more traditional Christian women, the passage was seen as one promising universal salvation.

In talking about the passage as a whole, everyone became caught up in a discussion on feminism. We almost became "stuck" on this topic. It was difficult, as a result, to see how scripture and life relate. The kind of emotion that was being expressed was about feminists being male-bashers and taking jobs away from men. The discussion pointed out to me how easy it is for us to become caught up in our inner contradictions. It also said that we suffer from a fairly high degree of biblical illiteracy. I am applying this statement to those who are connected to the church on a regular basis.

Both Jan M. and I found it difficult to bring the women back into a full group again when our time was up. There was reluctance in each group to share with the other what their comments had been. However, after a few minutes of silence, someone from each group did speak. They then discovered that each had had similar thoughts expressed.

We ended this evening by singing together a song which was written by Carolyn McDade, "Come drink deep of Living Water." Jan M. and I had both baked dessert and we had dessert and coffee before we left each other that night. I think this helped the evening to end positively.
Religious Experience/Social Justice Experience

On the third night the women met, we talked about the questions which are found in Appendix F of this document. The questions are experientially based and the intent of the questions was to encourage the women to reflect on their religious life and see if there was a movement from that experience to a decision to act on social justice issues. We used an action/reflection model for this conversation.

I found that there was a difference, between the women who are presently church attenders, and those who are not. However, it was during this meeting that I realized that all of the women had a church background. The consequence of this realization made me think of their other similarities. All came from roughly the same kind of socio-economic background and all have had some kind of post secondary education. As we consider these contextual issues, the answers to the questions were more similar than they would have been for a more mixed group.

The first question about which the women talked was a general one about their church background. This led to why they attended church presently or why they stopped attending church. Further, we talked about whether or not the church experience had provided them with any kind of "values formation."

Although Jan M. was facilitating the discussion this particular evening, I interjected the idea of "context" and how our context forms who we are and how we
respond to situations. Perhaps all of us are identifying a heightened awareness of issues in our present context that we simply were not aware of in the other places we have lived. We have all come from many different contexts in terms of geographical locations. Some have lived in other countries, or provinces, some in very big cities and some from small towns. All of these background experiences which we have had and which have formed us have sometimes made it hard for us "to lose our baggage."

The context in which women live allows for certain kinds of behaviour. An example is wife-beating which has been accepted practice for centuries in many cultures including our own. In addition, Sylvia mentioned the way children are desensitized to violence because of the media. It is then relatively easy to translate this into male/female relationships. Joan added that advertising helps to objectify women.

Our conversation then moved on to a deeper level of what we mean by "social justice." My own definition is given on the bottom of Appendix F as a footnote, but each of the women seemed to have a variation on the theme. Jan M. then wondered whether the church taught us anything about compassion and love or if we are more likely to learn these concepts from our "contexts".

Our time together on this evening ended rather abruptly. I did not feel a sense of closure for this discussion. We left things with my making appointments with the women to have confidential interviews. I do not feel that we followed the questions or topics very closely. However, we did speak extensively about our experiences and feelings about the church. This included all of the women whether or not they are presently attending a church.
I felt perhaps there was some weakness in my questions for this evening. But even after much reflection, I cannot think of a different way to approach this. The goal of honesty and comfort in sharing thoughts we do not usually speak of, was accomplished and for that I am pleased. I think, too, it was useful and stimulating for the women.

In the next section, I will present the outcomes of our individual interviews as a corroboration of much that we shared in the full group discussion.
Part 5

Individual Interviews

The last part of my action in ministry involved having interviews with all of the participants individually. The discussion questions which we used for this process were exactly the same as those used in the third plenary session. (see Appendix F) The purpose of the individual interviews was to allow the women to speak confidentially, if they wished, and also to see if different issues arose for them in an intimate setting as opposed to a group setting.

The process included taping each session and then transcribing the material. Each conversation was a minimum of one hour. After the interviews were transcribed, I categorized the main points from each conversation according to themes suggested by the questions. I looked for three main themes: values, spiritual experiences and social justice actions. I noted each of these in their respective categories as I went through the transcription. These were further divided between the two groups represented, the church women and the non-church women. I wondered whether or not there is a difference in what the non-church women value as compared to the church women. Is there a difference in the two groups in regard to spiritual experiences or in the decisions made around social justice actions? My findings are discussed in Chapter Five and the categories are included in Appendices G.
CHAPTER FIVE
WOMEN FINDING THEIR VOICES:
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

In this chapter I intend to report what the women talked about in our evenings together. This information came from the taping of those evenings and the subsequent transcriptions. I have permission to report the women's comments using their own words. I will also offer some analysis based on my theology of ministry and theoretical framework.
Part 1

The First Evening

Discussion of Values and Spirituality

During our first evening together I asked the women if they had ever had an experience they would call "spiritual". They responded to that question with the following comments which occurred in conversation with each other.

Eileen was the first to respond to this question of spirituality from her end of the spectrum of the women who were represented. Eileen's comments were that she felt spirituality to be outside her and that it is a notion that is connected to a belief system and since she does not have a belief system she cannot relate to the concept. Eileen did not contribute an image of God. However, Jeannette challenged this understanding of Eileen by suggesting that her inner strength and resources are her spirituality.

Shirley started her comments about spiritual experiences by telling us about her life in traditional religion. "When I started...I thought it was all bunk because most of the church members and I, thought the minister was an idiot. He couldn't answer any questions that I had and, you know, I just thought it was totally silly." But then Shirley went on to tell us about learning astrology and deciding there was a God who had some kind of plan for this universe and for the place of human beings in it.

Jeannette, in her searchings for identity and Christianity, then talked about her sense of a guardian angel who has watched over her in hard times. Liz, too, commented
on her non-traditional understanding of spirituality as she has become interested in reincarnation and what the purpose of our lives is.

Other women, Joan and Jan R., in particular, told about spiritual experiences involving loved ones. They felt as though there was a protecting presence available to them during difficult times. Jeannette, also, expressed the belief that she has been protected and led into a direction for her life.

Kathy, too, has strongly felt a spiritual compulsion in her life. She told us a story of having visited Stonehenge and the powerful impact that place had on her. In fact, as a consequence of her experience there, and our discussion on spiritual matters, she has decided to return to Stonehenge for a pilgrimage. Kathy's sense of this being a strong spiritual experience has never left her and she believes it is rooted in a past life experience.

It turned out that although the women started off drawing pictures or images of God, when they actually started to talk about experiences of God, we heard of other images such as animal figures, birds, stones, sensations from nature, the feelings experienced when in nature or at times in our lives which we consider "holy" such as the birth of a child.

In drawing some broad generalizations from this conversation, I would say that the connections between God and religion as experienced in church were more negative than positive. The exception to this is the experience of Communion. I believe that I heard some unclarity concerning God and spirituality. It was as though some of the
women could not quite believe that they could experience God in nature but when they realized that this is possible, there was a feeling of satisfaction.

When asked questions about the relationship between God and morality, they had a common understanding of the God of the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments. This is a judgmental God who speaks to us of right and wrong. However, the sense conveyed to me by the women in subtle ways is that although that may be the kind of God they were taught about in their religious upbringing, this image is not who they want God to be. There is an effort to see God and experience God in broader ways that are more life-giving for them.
Part 2

Analysis of “Images”

Similar to the women in the research group, Celie the central character in *The Color Purple*, replies to a question of her friend, Shug, by describing what she thinks God is like. She says, “God is an old man, with a gray beard, wearing a long robe and is barefoot.”

Celie’s description of God tells us much about her image of God and how that image formed her experience of God. Celie experiences God as she does white people in general and white men in particular: above her, oppressive, judgmental, non-involved. This God was transcendent, non-personal, and far away from her.

Perhaps we who are involved in the focus group feel the same way or a similar way to Celie. Celie thought that the Bible described God that way and that is why she believed He looked like that. However, it is more likely that the cultural tradition has planted certain images in our minds of what God is like. In my own early religious education, this was what I thought of God, as well. These images which we carry with us do have an impact on how we think of God. These understandings of who God is for us either encourage or discourage life in the church and also life in social justice activities.

As the women engaged in conversation concerning their images of God, the group heard echoes of Celie’s reference to God as an old man. For example, Kathy, like Celie, said,

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“A man with a beard who lives in the sky! I’m sorry. When you say God, it’s God the Father and that has been ingrained in me since…”

For much of our conversation, we flowed between what we understand as images of God, or who God is for us, and what some of our spiritual experiences are. Jan M., the strategic informant, facilitated the part of the evening where we talked about and drew these images. She found that it was a little slow getting the women to respond to the invitation to draw an image. Consequently, she suggested we think of other terms besides “God” such as faith or spirituality. She encouraged the women to broaden their understanding of God. This helped us talk about how we keep God in a “Box.” We may have an image of God from our childhood such as Kathy’s and we just keep it.

When the women were invited to draw images of God, after awhile, a sense of playfulness emerged. As mentioned earlier, the images were more non-traditional than traditional. Liz’s image of God emerging from a tin can was especially unusual. For her as a child, this conveyed the beauty and mystery of God. For Jeannette, a happy face is what she wants children to experience of God. This is important because of all the participants, Jeannette had the most negative feelings about God when she was a child. He was a God who was judgmental, oppressive, an old man. For her to see God now in such a different way is a radical conversion.

The image of the rainbow may be a reminder of God’s promise to Noah, but it is also simply beautiful. The more traditional images also were present. There was the crown reminding us of Christ the King, the Cross, the Communion cup and plate. While some of the women drew a couple of things, a few did not contribute a drawing at all and
that was acceptable. One who did not participate in the drawing was Eileen. It is important for us to know why Eileen chose not to take part and what her reasons were:

"It wasn’t tough for me though because I think God is a something… He’s a work of imagination. I don’t think there’s any such thing as God or Goddess. I don’t believe in any such thing. I think God was created at a time when we human beings needed some kind of commandment rules to follow. Conveniently created and all this built around this mythology, you know. And to me it’s…I get really sort of…that’s why I feel so uncomfortable here because you obviously all have some kind of belief system and I don’t have any. And to me it’s incredible that intelligent, educated and enlightened people would ever dream about believing in such a thing. I mean, to me it’s so far out in the imagination…”

Shirley responded to Eileen’s comments by saying, “But it is…there is a purpose. We’re not here randomly playing out this little game, you know. That’s endless, pointless. Otherwise there’d be no reason for me to be good. You know, if I were just going to die like I’ve got to work towards something.” Shirley had a noteworthy image of God for us to think about. It is an eyeball. For her, this signifies how God is all seeing, watchful and caring.

With some further encouragement from Jan, Kathy was soon able to talk about God using the symbol of wind, as in the Holy Spirit blowing through our lives. Kathy likes the sense of freedom this symbol conveys and this is truly a big shift for her from her image of God as an old man with a beard in the sky.

The conversation concerning the images was very insightful. The women who had come from the Roman Catholic background had what they called the most “negative baggage.” They meant by that that God was judgmental and oppressive. The other women from other denominations, Anglican, Baptist or United, seemed to have fewer
negative feelings and also were freer to express God in different ways. For the previously Catholic women, the issue of identifying male priests with God was important.
The Second Evening

Biblical Reflection and Discussion: “Jesus and the Woman at the Well”

Introduction

The second time the group of ten women met was one month after our first meeting. This took place on the last Sunday of October, 1995. Since we had become acquainted a little in September, the purpose of the second meeting was to have a serious discussion on a particular Bible story that I feel is relevant to women today.

Background

About two weeks prior to this meeting, I mailed the questions which are found in Appendix E in this document. I asked the women to read chapter four of the Gospel of John in advance of our meeting and to think about the questions. I chose this particular story because I read it as a story of women’s liberation, the story of a woman being accepted as an equal by Jesus and her consequent transformation. I wondered whether or not this story would appear differently to women who were not church members in contrast to those who are. In researching this story, I chose to use Womanword: A
Feminist Lectionary and Psalter, by Miriam Therese Winter. This book was helpful in formulating questions.

When the group gathered that evening, we divided into two smaller groups with five women in each. Each group had a mixture of church and non-church women. The reason for the mix was that at least two possible perspectives could dialogue with each other. However, I find it hard to judge whether or not that was a good process.

The small group discussions were not taped as the plenary discussions were because they took place in two adjoining rooms, simultaneously. Jan Murray, the outside co-facilitator, directed the questions for one group and I for the other. In both groups, the conversation was very free-flowing. Perhaps the greatest value of the evening was the opportunity to discuss biblical and theological issues in general terms.

The evening was divided into three unequal parts. In the first fifteen minutes, we quickly reviewed what we had done the first evening. I then talked briefly about the context of the story of Jesus and the Woman at the Well. I did not give a detailed commentary or lengthy exegesis, partly because I did not want to influence the discussion. I mentioned the split between the Samaritans and Jews, and also the social roles of men and women which prevented them from speaking to each other in public. I did ask the women to look at the story from the perspective of being “a transformative” experience. We then spent one hour in the small groups talking about the questions and ourselves. At 9 p.m., we spent fifteen minutes on feedback in a plenary session.
The Outcome of the Discussion

Since Jan and I could not tape the full session, we each took brief notes and conferred afterwards. However, we both found this hard to do because we were participant/observers. We each found it difficult to keep the women focused on the questions. In fact, as we shared information, the word that came to both of us which characterized the evening was "resistance."

Although the questions which the women were discussing did not include the word "feminist", this was the topic to which the women kept returning. Instead of seeing the story as a narrative for a possible way for women’s lives to be transformed, they saw no connection with our lives today and the story. On the whole, they said it was an irrelevant story for women and its main meaning for today is that it proves that Christ offers liberation to everyone.

As I reflected on the evening, I am left with bewildering questions. Why did the word "feminist" elicit so much negative passion? Why was it so difficult for us to allow ourselves to enter the story? And why is it so hard for us to see connections between such a story and ourselves?

As I listened to the taped portions of the evening, I was surprised by some things I heard. There are two women in the group of ten who have a background in Catholicism. That early training deeply affected their understanding. This meant that initially the women saw the story as Jesus saving a woman of great sin. If this is a traditional
understanding then it is not a woman's story, but an "anyone" story because the point is the salvation or redemption of the sinner, not who the sinner is. Another member of the group, Sylvia, saw this exchange as Jesus "grilling the woman." She was on the hot seat and was "getting it."

However, another more conservative church woman saw this interchange as symbolic. The notion of "living water" or inner spring was a way to understand God. It was clear to Joan that the woman's proclamation was spontaneous. We then wondered what the difference was between proclamation and social justice action.

Kathy thought that Jesus made the woman feel as if she were someone important because he treated her with dignity. Sylvia, who questions much of scripture, saw the woman as having been given strength by Jesus to go and do social justice. Jean, who is one of the older church members, saw her as a charismatic individual. She was a changed woman through this encounter and as a consequence, people were attracted to her. Jan M. made the observation that we are all attracted to or influenced by powerful people. They can change our lives and our actions. Perhaps that applies to the woman as well as to Jesus. We are told in the story that the woman went back to town and told the people about Jesus and they believed her. This is what we call "evangelizing". None of us felt comfortable with this concept whether we are church or not.

The idea of telling or evangelizing brought us back to the discussion of feminism and what bothers us about that message. Kathy said her reason for having so much trouble with the word is that it implies "man-hating". When asked why she feels that
way she said she learned this from her husband. They both very much dislike women who are termed “militant.”

Sylvia agreed that we have a great deal of trouble with words that are so emotionally laden and perhaps by now, overworked. Kathy again mentioned the idea that women are better than men, as a perception talked about by feminists. Shirley and Jan R., who are non-church women suggested that sometimes we need extremists to get things started in order to make a change.

When I asked the group what is the connection between “feminism” and “social justice”, Sylvia responded by saying that feminists are talking about basic injustices done to women which have caused a separation between men and women. It is deeply embedded in our value system. If we try to connect this with loving our neighbour as ourselves, it would be wonderful, but it does not happen. Joan observed that since so many of us do not love ourselves, “how can we love others?”

It was a very touching evening, leaving everyone feeling drained. However, we ended by singing together, “Come drink deep of Living Water”, by Carolyn McDade. In my reflection on this evening, I found myself wanting to include thoughts from the perspective of feminist research methodology. This includes the kinds of questions women bring to the text. It also includes the suspicion with which we approach scripture.

It was my intention during this evening to follow a process of feminist critique of this scriptural passage. Sandra Schneiders suggests that feminist critique looks for what is missing in the text. Who and what is being left out? What remains invisible to us?
These questions that Schneiders brings concerning this text apply also to the women in the group. What were they not saying? Were there issues in their own lives they were refusing to see that might have connected them to this passage or to the woman at the well? Why is it that the word "feminist", for the whole group, implied a type of woman who is unpleasant rather than someone representing an ideological perspective that might be transformative?

I have wondered whether or not this was the best process to use for this discussion. I regret that we did not begin with a guided meditation because I have wondered whether we would have focused differently if we had. However, this is not a technique many in the group have experienced.

I have also tried to observe and take note of my own feelings regarding these two evenings. At the end of the first night, I was pleased that things had gone so well. There was a feeling of well-being. On the second evening, there was more of a sense of restlessness or contentiousness. The women did not name this themselves, but during our de-briefing time, both Jan M. and myself felt it. The data for the second evening came from a portion of the evening being taped and a few notes taken by myself. Jan M. and myself were engaged in the discussion of each small group. As a consequence, only a few notes were taken.
The Third Evening

Making the Connections: Spirituality and Social Justice

Introduction

The third meeting of the women took place in late November 1995. The intention of this evening was for us to listen to each other talk about how our experience of being members of the church influenced our decision to do social justice actions. It, of course, included listening to the women who are non-church members talk about their motivation. The process was conversational. The women talked among themselves with little direction from Jan M. or me. The following is part of their conversation.

The Third Conversation

As we began to make connections between church teaching, spirituality and our actions, Jeannette said it appears that morals and values are found at the bottom of social action. We talked, then, about how each of us has a slightly different understanding of what social justice is. The women read my definition which we used for purposes of my discussion with them and were caught by the phrase, "compassionate behaviour". This was more meaningful to them than "ethical behaviour". The feeling expressed by a few
of them, especially Eileen, is that ethics are cold and rational whereas compassionate behaviour conveys more humanness.

Eileen talked at great length about her understanding of social justice acts as acts which begin at home. She nursed three parents through cancer and inevitable death. This is the kind of compassionate behaviour she sees as social justice: that people are treated in a way in which they deserve to be treated. She also taught her children to be caring and compassionate individuals.

Jeannette and Shirley agreed with Eileen. Shirley learned to be a caring person from her parents who always cared for others and who still do. Jeannette believes we must be prepared to look after our elderly family members in the future as much as we do our own children.

Kathy felt that her motivating principle for social justice came from being treated unfairly as a young adult. She never wanted to see anyone else treated the way she had been. Jeannette, like Kathy, did not feel her family had been particularly formative in instilling values or modelling behaviour for her. But she felt she had been deeply influenced by her teachers in high school, her peers and other adults around her. Jeannette reminded me of some of the women who had been researched in Women's Ways of Knowing because a number of those women mentioned these same influences in their lives. Jeannette was the only woman who said she saw things when she was young that she thought were strange or she wondered about, but she thought she was "too young to have a voice."
When asked if the women had learned anything of social justice from the church they all said, "no". The church is not seen as a place where social justice is either taught or modelled. Jan M. said that she sees evidence of much more social justice action taking place outside the church.

Sylvia, whose grandfather was James Endicott, a past moderator of The United Church, said that her grandfather was thrown out of the church because of his social justice stance. She is one who believes compassion has little to do with social justice. Rather, it is a political, intellectual decision. For her, empowering people to transform themselves or some aspect of society is what is vital. She believes that the root of social justice was found historically in scripture.

Marjorie asked a rhetorical question. "Does Christianity come between people and God?" She feels strongly that the church does come between people and their relationship to God. By "church" she means doctrine, committees, the politics of the church and the egos of church leaders.

When Eileen asked Marjorie what we need the church for, Marjorie replied, "Maybe we need it to teach the gospel stories to children and then move on from there." There was a general feeling expressed that a certain kind of self-righteousness which is sometimes found in our church interferes with our relationship with God. The women moved on to talk about "community." Generally, the church is where they find community which is why it has been labelled a "social place."
As we talked a little about what brought us to the church, I began to do a little reflecting on my own journey to the church. I realized as I listened to the women talk, that for me, the church experience happened at a number of levels. As a small child I was taken to church. Then at thirteen I was Confirmed, after attending Confirmation catechism. I continued to go to church fairly regularly during high school. When I went to university, I attended the campus church. But I knew what I was looking for there. It was the time of Vatican II and since I was a practicing Catholic, I was curious and excited by the changes. I sang in the choir and enjoyed worship. I also was looking for community and found some. At that time, as well, many religious people were involved with civil disobedience and I began to understand that these actions were part of our biblical mandate if we are a practicing Christian. But it is clear that my experience of church was quite different from that of the other women in the group.

Joan said what motivated her to put her faith into action is a deep sense of optimism. Things can be better. We talked for awhile about the difference between optimism and hope. A number of people thought hope to be too weak a word. It has been taken over by our society too much. Consequently, I invited the women to think about Paul’s letter to the Romans where he talks about suffering producing character and character producing endurance which leads to hope. If we wish to transform society by social justice actions, we need this kind of hope.

The women spent the last part of the evening rehearsing the histories of the communal actions in which they had taken part. However, when Joan spoke of her involvement with “My Sister’s Place”, she spoke glowingly of the men who were part of
that first board. It was interesting to hear her memory of that because in a few cases some of these men were the same who questioned whether we needed such a place. These comments from Joan encouraged the women who are connected to the Rotary Club and the church to talk about men’s behaviour towards women. The women were most supportive to the men they know. The comments made me wonder if in a small town it is possible to be honest and critique men’s behaviour in terms of power and control. Joan’s closing statement was most insightful when she said, “It all comes from men resenting women being able to control their own lives.” I think that she is right.

When we talked more about why some of the women go to church, Joan spoke first about needing the structure of the church in her life. She likes to have the regularity of church life and she finds that this helps her to regulate all of her life. One may call the church a “touchstone” for her. She enjoys being in the company of ethical, compassionate and caring people “who fit into a conventional structure”. This allows people the opportunity to do “good works”. Joan talks about herself being a “service oriented person” because of her profession as a high-school vice principal, and also because of her involvement in Rotary.

Shirley used the word “hypocrite” in describing some of her early church experiences and presently has this impression of many people she knows who attend church. Shirley characterizes such a person as one who never misses church, is always smiling while there, but may engage in gossip and acrimonious behaviour the rest of the week. We may say that this individual has not internalized the teachings of the church
sufficiently for those teachings to have made a difference to that person's life. Shirley emphasizes that this is simply her experience of some church people.

Liz talked about the church in her growing up years as being the centre of her life. Her grandfather built the Anglican Church in Charlottetown which she attended as a child. All of her family's activities were focused on church life. She loved it as a child because it gave her a sense of belonging and comfort, and like Joan, a regularity to her life. When Liz and her family came to Alliston, they came to St. John's and she was happy with The United Church of Canada because she did not feel "smothered." She enjoyed the openness she experienced here. Much later when she was experiencing difficult times in her life, it was the people from St. John's United Church who supported her through it.

Sylvia's experience of church life was quite different. For her, the church was the social justice network to which she belonged. The church was the focal point of her family's life, as well, but the purpose of the focus was different from the other women. The church was not meant to be comforting but rather was to be a transforming agent for society. Sylvia's family lived out of a context of transformation rather than enculturation. They did not wish to keep the status quo alive and well.

The women then talked about how they learned values and ethics and what has become their motivation for living in such a way. Joan, again, was the first to offer her reflections. She believes her motivation is based in a deep optimism that "what we do, will make a difference." Sylvia asked if optimism is a strong enough word - "is it really faith we are talking about?" We all agreed that at some time in our lives, we will all
suffer and from that we hope to learn to persevere and that will teach us to hope in a Christian way. We all agreed that to have such a hope is no easy task.

Eileen's response was that values and ethics need to be pragmatic. She feels "the need to do something" about an issue and that is social justice action for her. She broadens this understanding to mean that it can be every moment of every day for women. And for Marjorie, who is a church person, this doing of action is not necessarily connected to the church. She said, "why don't we just do the action instead of making ourselves sound so good?"

We then spent a few minutes sharing concrete examples of how women we know go ahead and do things which need to be done. We talked specifically about getting the Women and Children's Shelter in Alliston started. Jan R. remembered going to the town council and being told that there was no problem of abused women in our community and such a shelter was not needed. Yet, once the shelter was established, men in political office had no problem with sitting on the board.

The present issue which the women talked about is sexual harassment which needs to be dealt with. The women ended the evening feeling energized. I believe that the women were experiencing a sense of pride as they realized the contributions they had made to the well-being of the community.
Part 5

Findings of the Individual Interviews

Introduction

I spent approximately one hour with each of the women in the focus group in private conversation. The conversations were taped and were later transcribed. The purpose of the interviews was to allow each woman a time to say things she may have felt uncomfortable saying in the full group. We followed the same question pattern as was used in the third meeting of the full group. I checked with each woman about confidentiality. None of them had any concern over my reporting elements of our conversations in this document. What follows is a brief report of each woman's sharing with me.

Part 5A

The Five Non-Church Participants

Eileen

When Eileen was 28 she started to feel that there was something that she could and should do with her life. She decided to start by going to university. Education became the motivating factor in her life.
Eileen did have a religious upbringing. She was raised by her grandparents from birth until age seven. Her grandmother had had nineteen children and then Eileen to raise. They were staunch Irish Catholics. It was her grandmother who did everything. She baked bread, looked after her family and did much community work, especially at the hospital with the very sick and dying. Twice a day, there were family prayers and giving thanks for everything. Eileen’s mother was not at all like that. She was a “modern” woman who worked in an office and did nothing else.

Eileen saw herself as a cynical child and one who asked a lot of questions. She thinks her sense of morality is because of her upbringing by her grandmother, but it is also innate. She sees herself as someone who is concerned about everyone.

Part of what keeps Eileen from the church is her strong feminism and belief that the church has not done anything for women. She feels that there are thousands of questions in life with no answers and for the church to pretend that there are answers is not honest.

One of the biggest influences in Eileen’s life has been her husband. He has given her every opportunity to develop herself and be who she is. Her volunteer work has been with other women, helping them empower themselves. Eileen has been a volunteer for “My Sister’s Place” as many of the other women have.

Shirley

Shirley’s parents went to church because everyone else went to church; it was the thing to do. But even as a child Shirley was a questioner and too intellectual for the
church which her family attended. She felt constrained by restrictions that made no sense to her. What did God care if you played cards or danced?

As a young adult, Shirley began to explore other forms of spirituality. This was not only a spiritual quest, but an intellectual one. This journey had an effect on her teaching career, as well. She started teaching in the Home Economics Department, but after some years this evolved into Family Studies. This change in emphasis required her to take some courses in sociology and psychology. She also took courses in family therapy. All of this influenced the way in which she approached teaching young adults.

In this teaching process, Shirley became very aware of the effects of dysfunctional family life on teen-agers, especially girls. This led her into being able to identify her social justice awareness by fighting for "the underdog." She is aware of power differentials and how abusive that is to relationships. Some of the programs that Shirley has developed at the high school where she teaches are to help change those situations and empower young women to deal with their lives. It is important for Shirley that her work be done quietly and altruistically.

Liz

During this interview time, Liz did not speak of her early childhood experiences of religion. Instead, she started by telling me of her experience of living in India and the impact that culture had on her life. She and her family, her husband and four children, lived in India for two years. That time was a real spiritual awakening for her. She learned to appreciate and value other ways of worshipping and other reasons to worship.
For example, she told me of one couple who worshipped the god of education because that is what they most valued in their household and this was their household god. She also learned about meditating. Her religious experience of India opened her mind. She found the Anglicanism in which she was raised "stultifying." Liz said that this is where she learned tolerance. She feels that people really practice loving their neighbour.

Many years later, Liz feels that this learning of tolerance and loving stood her in good stead when she found that her son had AIDS. Because she was so non-judgmental, she was able to help many other parents who were having difficulty accepting their sons' sexual identities. (This son was the same individual who caused such a controversy in Jan's time of working at the hospital.) (See page 116)

Another emotional and spiritual impact which Liz experienced in India was the begging of the children and the sometimes deliberate maiming of them for money. This left her feeling powerless and sad. So many had so little.

Liz has a unique understanding of the connection of reincarnation with social justice. She believes that we are meant to help each other through life and that this life is a testing ground for us. If we help each other, we grow spiritually; if we do not, "we are in trouble." One of the ways we can find out if we are doing the right thing is by listening to God. We do this as we are quiet in prayer. Unfortunately, we are seldom quiet enough for long enough.
Jan R.

Jan also has had a background in the Anglican Church since she was born and raised in England. She remembers being a child of nine or ten and organizing a charity party in her back yard to raise money for a worthy cause. She cannot remember now what the cause was, but she does remember that as a young person she did quite a lot of working for causes. Her life always was involved with the church and since she sees herself as a helping person, it was natural for her to go into nursing.

As Jan got older and she found herself at home with small children, she felt the need for intellectual stimulation. She went to York University and took a degree in Women's Studies. At the same time, she kept up her nursing. During this time, an incident came up at the local hospital involving an AIDS patient. One of the nurses at the hospital, who was also a member of St. John's United Church, said that care should be withheld from this individual because this disease is a judgment of God. Jan was horrified, and as she was feeling anti-church because of what she was learning at university, she decided to distance herself from the church community. She is upset over people who lack compassion and sees evidence of that amongst church people. Jan thinks her gift is to empower women, to help them understand that they can make their own choices in life and discover that they do have options.

Sylvia

Sylvia does not feel the church had much to do with her involvement in social justice activities. Doing social justice was simply what Sylvia's family did. Her
inspiration for social justice came mostly from her grandfather who was an activist. She believes the Bible did have something to do with her formation in regard to having a social conscience, but that seemed normal to her since the Bible permeated life in general in the past. Sylvia believes that it was the values that her parents taught her which gave her a preparation for social justice work. Interestingly, she was also influenced by her father who is an atheist. However, he was the son of a Baptist minister. The split between the members of the family who attend church and those who do not is an intellectual difference.

Sylvia remembers that as she was growing up the members of her family were not interested in providing “band-aid” solutions to social ills. Rather, they wanted to change the whole world order. However, Sylvia now feels that one must do some band-aid help, such as food banks, as well as social transformation.

Sylvia thinks that she had spiritual experiences as a child, but she had no context for them and did not know how to name them. However, when she started to read feminist theology, she started to have a number of “Ah-ah” experiences and things began to make sense to her. She said, “I think spirituality has become increasingly more important to me... in terms of social justice, I think this ties in very strongly, that the more you get your own house in order, your personal life feeling strong and grounded, the more you are able to go out and have energy to do social justice.” She has observed that if people try too hard to change the world, it becomes self-destructive: it is too much pressure on an individual.
From a spiritual point of view, Sylvia suspects that we have lost many beautiful rituals which the Christian church considered too pagan. Consequently she mourns that we have lost a part of a cultural heritage as well as a religious experience. We have been left with a dour religion rather than a joyful one. Included in this is a denigration of sexuality which is a beautiful gift from God but is not celebrated that way. She fears that religion has made us unbalanced rather than balanced people.

To connect her spirituality and social justice, Sylvia sees her decision to enter the teaching profession as based on a desire to do social justice. She also believes that the small town setting is a good place to do social justice. People are more needed simply because there are fewer to do the work. It is a more direct approach.

Part 5b

The Five Church Participants

Kathy

For Kathy the church means intensive support from the people around her. She feels that the last few years have been a special time of awakening which is changing her life. She has become very close to a number of people in the congregation. (However, in the last two years since this taped discussion, her feelings have changed. She is now experiencing anger and resentment more than support. There has been significant break down in communication.)
One of Kathy's strengths is that she believes in positive reinforcement which she learned to be a valuable tool in teaching. This kind of reinforcement is not what she has experienced in the Roman Catholic Church, however. She still carries baggage that says, if you are a woman you are never good enough.

Kathy was taught in her family home always to put the needs of others first. This, too, has been a cause for resentment. At the time of the break down of her first marriage, she was awakened to the way in which the world treats women. Kathy has become very committed to helping individuals when she has seen a need. However, too much helping wears her out. She has felt taken advantage of on a number of occasions. She is experiencing being a woman whose well has run dry.

**Jeannette**

Jeannette's background was a strict one, in her words, in terms of religious upbringing. She was raised in the Catholic church and did all her preparation for religious life such as First Communion and Confirmation. She also attended Catholic schools. When asked about where her motivation for behaviour came from, Jeannette replied that it was the fear of God which controlled her.

"I think it was definitely the fear of God as being somebody who could control my... my ends, came from the church. My morals and values and such, I think they're pretty much within my family but remembering that my family was very strict and part of religion was part of them so therefore, in a way, you couldn't say it wasn't part."
When in high school, and even younger, Jeannette was involved with a group of kids who were into drugs and other bad habits. But she always felt as though she was being protected by the kids and her “guardian angel.” They seemed to need her as a symbol of good. This is one of the experiences that Jeannette talks of as being spiritual. It had nothing to do with church or religion and was much more personal. The “angel” helped her with decisions about what was right and what was wrong. Jeannette also talked in depth about her explorations into native spirituality as part of recovering her native ancestry.

As I listened to Jeannette, it seemed to me that I was listening to someone who is remarkably well integrated, personally and spiritually. It is all one within her. Jeannette sees her actions in life or her role as putting morals and values into the lives of young children. She does this through her volunteer time as the “storyteller” at the local library and in her plans to enter early childhood education.

**Joan**

Joan had no church background before she was eleven or twelve. At that time, her family moved to New Jersey and started to attend a Methodist church. When she returned to Ontario in her late teens, she joined the Anglican Church because of the music. She was interested in singing and so was part of the choir. In 1979, after she and her husband had been in Alliston a few years, they started to attend St. John’s United Church. Soon they became the youth group leaders. She has remained at St. John’s
United Church because of the importance of music in her worship experience although there are other aspects of church life with which she is not pleased.

Joan had what she describes as a spiritual experience on a Good Friday while she was attending a service in the Anglican Church. She had a vision of Christ rising from the cross and going heavenward. She was very moved but also nervous and afraid and has never told anybody until now. She then decided that she needed to do some kind of ministry in the church which is why, later, she chose to do youth ministry.

In terms of social justice actions, she has always wanted to be of help to others. She is heavily involved with the local Rotary club but thinks that this is mainly because her husband is. Being in the club together allows them to work and to be together more.

Joan’s decision to go into teaching as a career also was based on her desire to help others. Now that she is in administration, she hopes to have some influence on structures as well. Her need to help was apparent in her involvement with the establishment of the safe house in Alliston. Joan keeps in touch with a number of community improvement committees. She said that she has never felt held back from anything that she has wanted to do although she did admit that she needs validation from people around her.

For Joan, there is no doubt that there is a connection between one’s religious understanding of loving one’s neighbour and being involved in a service club. Since she is more comfortable in the company of men, this seems a natural place for her.
Marjorie

Marjorie's family were not church people. They ran a hotel in Alberta and because they sold liquor, the local United Church took a rather dim view of them. But Marjorie said that her parents were very community minded people. This may explain why Marjorie values community service clubs so highly.

When Marjorie was in her late teens, she chose to join the Anglican Church and was confirmed. She has been attending The United Church of Canada for forty years, but still considers herself an Anglican. When Marjorie joined the church as a young person, she felt greatly committed to it. She and her friends thought that they would save the world. Now she believes that as people get older, religion becomes much more private. Life becomes concerned with relationship to God and how we will die.

Justice for Marjorie happens when people help others. An example is donating food to the local women’s shelter, or any other community project, or whatever Rotary is sponsoring. Marjorie’s response to these community needs comes from her feeling that she and her husband owe something to the community.

Most of Marjorie’s comments were around her concerns for the church and why people come to church. She is worried over losing such things as what she calls “the old hymns”, prayers, etc. She dislikes entertainment in church. This was the main part of her conversation.
Jean

Jean was baptized in the Church of Scotland because everyone had to be, but Jean does not consider her family as being religious. She describes her mother as more of a spiritual person. Jean knows that her mother felt connected to God and the universe. However, Jean, as a young person felt attracted to the church, mainly because of the music and the activities for young people. Her husband always has been closely connected to the church as well. When her children were small, Jean felt a little disillusioned with the church and went less frequently. This caused her to feel guilty. She then joined an ecumenical Bible study and her perceptions of the church changed. She felt that she now belonged to a community.

After a family tragedy struck one of Jean's sons, she sensed being carried through dark times by faith and the support of the people in the Bible study group. Jean expressed thankfulness, too, that she was never bitter over the accident which changed their family's life forever.

Jean learned a sense of social justice from her father who was not a church person, but one who cared for people and justice issues. She downplays her contributions as a Girl Guide leader, Sunday School teacher and her association with the Head Injuries Association. However, she left the group because they were not interested in lobbying for changes in the law which would require greater safety measures be taken with vehicles. From there she moved into working with handicapped people in sports.
Part 6

Conclusion

The women shared with me in an intimate and honest way and I very much appreciated their openness in our conversations. I did find that to some extent my questions about the differences between the women were answered. However, if we look only at the category of "values" there is little difference between the two groups. While the women may have used different words from each other, the basic sense of what they conveyed was similar. If I may make a rather broad generalization regarding the women's values, I would say that the formative factors which produced these values were the influence of families, the kind of people they associated with and some kind of internal ethical integrity. The context of their lives in terms of economics, education and inter-personal relations was important in making them who they are. I had wondered whether the church had a specifically positive or negative effect upon their beliefs and way of life. This is seen somewhat in what the women talked about as spiritual experiences.

A good example of how differently the women experienced spiritual events is seen in Liz. I categorized Liz as a non-church woman because she does not come to church in a regular way, but mostly because Liz has had other religious experiences which have formed her. The first of these happened when she lived in India and where she first encountered a wholly different cultural and religious life. These cultural
"shocks" of seeing people living and dying in the crowded streets and also seeing the very devout way people lived religious lives were an awakening to her. But in addition to this kind of non-western spiritual awakening, Liz also became very interested in reincarnation because of events which happened to her at the time of family members' deaths. For her, it was these encounters with other ways of seeing life which have shaped her decisions for social justice and compassion.

In contrast to Liz, I would see Joan as a more orthodox Christian woman. Joan has always been upheld by the ritual of the church, especially in the years she attended the Anglican Church. But elements of the ritual are particularly important for her, for example communion, seeing the bread and wine as well as tasting it. One time, Joan had a vision while contemplating the Cross on one Good Friday.

For other women in the group, the church had little impact if any on their lives in terms of decisions they made about how to live. If there was any impact, for a few, it was negative. The women chose to do good things for society, "in spite of, not because of" the church. For a couple of others, like Marjorie, there was a feeling of not being allowed to do what one wanted. There is constraint placed on us by the church bureaucracy. This means not the national church, but the local congregation which is so run by committees. For others, who came from a Roman Catholic background, there is the issue of women not being seen in ministerial leadership roles. This combines with the lack of feminine images for God in all traditions and consequently a sense of the role of women being devalued.
I think that the awareness that dawned on all of the women was that if they wanted to do something about societal issues, they would not choose to work through the church, but find a community based way of working something out. This is what Sylvia has done in working to provide a good setting for children and mothers to play and learn together in Alliston.

My learning in this experience is that perhaps this is the way things should be. It may not be the local church’s role in the community to be heavily involved in social justice activities. However, it may be that the church’s role is to prepare its members to do this kind of ministry by providing the spiritual nurture which people need through worship and study. I think that it is important to help the church membership to see God working in the world, in many places and in many ways. Part of our task is to equip people to do the work in society that needs to be done to transform society into the commonwealth of God.

As mentioned earlier, the categories I wanted to cover were embedded within the questions themselves. At the time I broke down the responses of the participants to the questions, I came up with the following results. I first divided my data into two groupings which reflected the two groups of women with whom I worked, the one group being church members and the other group non-church. The categories I arrived at have been mentioned earlier, but to repeat they are: values, spiritual experiences, and social justice actions.

I was specific with my questions and key words because a major concern of mine was to keep the data as clear as possible and not cloud them with more issues than might
be helpful to the conversation. The data, which include the coding and categorization of my findings, are found in Appendix G.

My conclusion based on the responses to the questions is that we have a small sampling of a particular perspective of a certain group of women. It is by no means comprehensive, but indeed is very limited. The life circumstances, ages and backgrounds of the women all helped in some way to "cloud" the issues of human development. What we saw was both a degree of uniqueness and a degree of universality in the individuals. It was each woman's response to universal questions from within her own context.

Belenky et al., in Women's Ways of Knowing, noted that in their interviewing process, the women all gained a voice. I think that happened for some of the participants in this research as well. I am aware of two for whom this group discussion made a change in their lives. We also discovered in our group experience that wonderful interplay between women listening respectfully to each other and then as talk becomes more passionate, words and ideas tumbling over each other in excitement. I identify this as another way women gain a voice.

In our process, what we discovered was that some of the experiences and information the women shared were not particularly new to the world. But previously it had not been spoken out loud in this context. It had been intuited by the women and then ignored. This seems to be another "way of women".

This group confirmed for me the positive attributes of having only women in a group setting such as this. When women are in a mixed group, they are interrupted more often and therefore speak less. In this forum the women were mutually respectful. People spoke as they felt the need. We noticed that at different evening meetings, different women took turns in leadership discussion. Eventually, all had taken turns. It was gratifying to see this process in which everyone took a turn naturally without any planning. I think that this gives us an indication of how women treat each other in this particular context. They are mutually caring, supportive, and respectful. These are the values which we noted were important to us and this is the way in which we functioned.
CHAPTER SIX
HOW THEORY AND EXPERIENCE HAVE MET IN A NEW PRACTICE:
IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY IN THIS CONGREGATION

Part 1

My Learnings

I asked a number of questions of myself throughout this process and throughout the writing of the thesis. Amongst these questions is one of the first I wondered about: why is it that so few people in this congregation appear to be concerned with social justice issues? What I learned from this small sampling of women is that social justice for them seems to be integrated into their lives. Their actions are based in their belief that we are to act compassionately towards one another. I learned that compassionate behaviour is highly valued amongst all of them. This behaviour is what I would call “loving our neighbour”: Jesus’ great commandment for us is to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The value of compassionate behaviour was learned by most of the women in their family homes. But it was reinforced by the people who were in their lives, as well. These people include teachers and friends mostly. In addition, some of the group, such as Liz, learned this kind of behaviour by observing others in terms of her own spiritual awakening. The value of compassionate behaviour has the potential for being the connecting link between one’s personal spirituality and one’s movement into social
justice actions. This value holds in tension what we know as “enculturation” in individuals. It also holds the possibility of “transformation” in individuals. The enculturated values which we all hold are intimately connected to and include the patriarchal assumptions which are held by many of our mothers and fathers. And these are the same values which are deeply embedded in our cultural context. It is therefore difficult for us to disentangle ourselves or to distinguish ourselves enough to challenge values which may impede our attainment of full personhood while at the same time holding the value of compassionate care and behaviour towards others which was learned in our old familial structures. We see here in this dilemma that there is a permeable boundary between enculturation and transformation.

Furthermore, in my learning, I discovered there was virtually no difference between church women and non-church women. Again, I am mindful of this being a very small sample, however. As I suspected before I began this research, all of the members of the group were along a spectrum which ranges from orthodox religious beliefs to that of atheism. However, this had little impact on what the women valued or felt was important. The values held by the whole group included truth, honesty, relationships, friendships, the beauty of music, art and education, to name only a few.

During my time of reflecting on the process of the research and the writing of the thesis, I am aware of how my categories of values, spiritual experiences and social justice actions have been points on a hermeneutical circle. These three points inform each other and influence each other and when we add the component of reflection, it can be seen how each of us moves from one point to another. However, this is not simply an exercise
of going around a circle, because upon reflection, all the participants in the group gained an insight which allowed them to move to a different place of understanding so the movement was more of a spiral. Each of the women had had some kind of spiritual experience and each was affected by these experiences. For Eileen, who said she did not have any spiritual experiences, my observation is that she had a spiritual experience through observing her grandmother's deeply religious life. Eileen did say that her grandmother was one of the most influential people in her life. This experience of Eileen's held within it the values which Eileen cherishes and lives out, her commitment to compassionate behaviour. And it is this behaviour which informs Eileen's social justice actions.

I believe a similar analysis can be made for each of the women. As we spoke together, it could be seen that each moved around the hermeneutical circle and spiraled to a new level of understanding or action. Each of these moments of understanding can lead us from our position of enculturation to one of transformation of ourselves and our context.

Since doing this research, I have become aware that indeed, I am an enculturated individual because I, too, have been formed by the patriarchal context of our society. In addition, I have chosen to minister in a mostly patriarchal context. Yet, I am able to stand within this structure, which is not always invitational to women, and I have been able to invite women into it in order to help change it. I have invited them to tell their stories and I have invited them to empower themselves. I do not believe it was the hidden power structure of St. John's United Church which allowed me to do this as much
as it was a decision on my part simply to do it. This unusual position has allowed me to
see myself both inside and outside The Tradition at the same time. I can choose to
uphold what I feel is valuable in the Tradition such as an interpretation of the Gospel
which is liberating. At the same time, I can challenge that within the structure which is
oppressive to women such as the use of exclusive male language and imagery and the
more insidious but subtle. “We’ve never done it that way before”.

Although, at the point at which our meetings stopped in 1995, things seemed to be
static in the external lives of the women, subsequent events have proven otherwise.
These events have had implications for the life of this congregation and for the
community. I will include these observations in the next part where I will discuss the
learnings of the women.

**Learnings of the Women**

At the beginning of this process, the women said they had never before been
invited to reflect on or speak about their lives. This experience which we shared, enabled
them to talk about their spiritual lives, their beliefs, their life experiences. Through this
dialogue, they learned to appreciate their own and other women’s stories in a new way.
For some, like Joan, previously, there had been discomfort with women’s groups because
they had seemed trivial to her. But all of the women commented on how much this
experience had meant to them. I took them seriously and the process took them
seriously.
Further, the women told me they were challenged by the questions and by the conversations. Sometimes, what I experienced as a somewhat negative response to an issue actually turned out to be a learning time for the women. They reflected on issues for months after a challenging conversation and kept coming back to me with their thoughts. All began to see themselves in a new way. Some began to relate to others in the congregation in a new way as well. Others questioned their place in the society of Alliston and their community involvement.

The women discovered their voices and learned to use them. All of the church women have been empowered to take leadership roles within the church. In addition, they have encouraged other women to do the same. For the non-church women, they too have become more actively involved in community work and feel a network of support from the other women. These learning have resulted in greater comfort in their ability to challenge the norms, i.e. the enculturated context, in order to become agents of a transformative context.

For me, from a spiritual point of view, I am pleased to see how all the women have become willing and open to new experiences and images of God and ways to speak of spiritual experience. Kathy and Jeannette are both good examples of moving from a rather oppressive sense of who God was in their lives to now experiencing God as liberation and joy, as well as challenge. For Kathy, she moved to feeling God as the Holy Spirit, as breath of God, moving freely throughout the world. And for Jeannette, the change in relationship with God is symbolized by the bright, happy face. Religion changed for these two women from dourness to celebration.
Part 2

The Changing Place of Women in the Church:

Implications of this Study

Introduction

The influence of my research group has spread beyond its ten members. As I mentioned above, the women who were part of this group have been encouraged to take new roles and they have. But these women also engage in activities in many areas of church life and in the community beyond the congregation. They have taken their new perspectives with them to all of the work they do.

In addition, some of the research group belong to another new women’s group in the church. From within this group I see emerging some of the needs expressed by the women for new language, new images of God, new liturgical material and new rituals. I wish to share something of this new group so that the wider church may see that there are implications for such a dialogue as was started by this research.

A New Thing

Part of the importance of this discussion is in understanding the role of women in the congregation of St. John’s United Church. Besides the contribution of lay women, my role as an ordained woman in this congregation has had some influence, as I have come to understand.
I have mentioned a number of times that the congregation in which I minister is one of a traditional disposition and theologically conservative. At the time I was called to minister at St. John's United Church, there was considerable controversy raised over my call because I was considered to be a feminist who would bring division and hardship to the congregation. While this is perhaps an unusual position for a United Church to take, it may be common for other denominations which are characterized by a conservative nature. The attitude which was exhibited towards me, also, says something of the place of women in this congregation. It appears that the place of women is ambiguous, at best. There is great support for women to teach in the Sunday School and to be active in The United Church Women, but beyond that, women speak carefully.

In the midst of this community of traditionalists has emerged a small group of women, for the most part women between the ages of 27 and 47, who meet on a regular basis for spiritual discussion, faith discussions, prayer, Bible study and worship. For the last two years, this group and I have gone on retreats together at which time we shared worship which may be considered "womanist" or innovative. By "womanist", I mean it is centred on women's experiences and uses feminine images of God. Different symbols are used during worship such as stones, art, folk music. There is an effort made to connect the traditions of the church with the activity of the women's lives. We do this especially in making the bread for Communion and then sharing in this important ritual action. We share a more embodied spirituality which includes dance and healing or therapeutic touch as well as prayer.
These times of retreat and prayer have become very meaningful to all who have taken part in them. We have shared a deepening of faith. We have received wisdom from our study of scripture and true Christian bonding in our support of one another in difficult times as well as good times.

Our experience in this small group has been born out of a theory of Letty Russell and other feminist theologians who have written on the gifts that women bring to the church. In *Church in the Round*, Russell speaks of the insights of women in their struggle for full humanity which is key to women's interpretation of the gospel. These insights which women gain may contribute something new to the self-understanding of the whole church. It may be that in the lives of these women, in this particular congregation, who struggle constantly to understand what it means to be faithful within a specific tradition, a new kind of faithfulness can be found which will mean that one day the Christian community will not be split, but will be able to worship together in hope as these young women do.81

The younger women in this small group of twenty are pointing, not only to a different way to be “Church”, but to a new contribution that women’s voices make to the church. When these women come together, it is to tell their faith stories, their journeys, and to interpret them and re-interpret them in the light of the Gospel. Rebecca Chopp calls this “narrativity”, women telling stories. “Narrativity” is the agency of writing

one's own life: the on-going contribution of one's own life in the context of human and planetary relations. From a cultural point of view, the dominant stories of what it means to be a woman have changed and are changing.82

Although I do not have the statistical information for Canada, Rebecca Chopp quotes statistics for the United States which may not be significantly different in terms of how the role of women is changing in society. Women's roles have changed over the last generation simply by the number of women who work outside the home. In the United States this is 78% of women. Another major factor which has changed women's lives is reproductive technology. Women may now choose when to have children and how many. A third cultural trend which has changed life style is sexual practices. This includes some elements of choice which were not present before such as the decision to marry or not and the inclusion of the possibility of lesbian partnerships. Lastly, there is a changing perception of what is family.83

In my present context of small town, rural Ontario, these four issues which have been named above are not major factors operating in the lives of the women I know. Although one member of this new group is a woman who has chosen to have children and remain a single parent. These influences of the wider society are, nevertheless, felt in the small town. Most of the women in the spirituality group do stay home to raise their families. But there is no closed-mindedness over the need for us to be more open in our

83 Ibid., p. 24
understanding of the changing roles of men and women in our society and consequently in the life of the church.

The women do have an awareness that "the normative and homogeneous values of the past have become an ideology to cover and silence a diversity of practices, narratives, and roles for women," as Chopp says. All women have never fit into the dominant narrative of wife and mother who stays home. And for those women, such as myself, the knowledge of that not fitting in has been hurtful.84

We have learned over the last generation from the work of feminists, that the investigation into gender has shown a form of social/personal construction based on who we are and a power distribution that is based on gender.85 As we become more and more aware of the changing patterns of work, lifestyle and cultural forms, we will be required, as pointed out by Chopp, to be skilled at new beginnings. We must learn the art of composing our lives anew and in that creativity new forms of bonds, community and identity.86 I think that this is what it means for women and men in the church to find the salvation we all seek, the salvation that is present and yet to come.

It is not news to say that women's work and presence in the church have been profoundly important in every way. And yet that work and presence have been taken for granted. As this congregation celebrates its 125th Anniversary, the old pictures which are

84 Ibid., p. 25
85 Ibid., p. 27
86 Ibid., p. 22
lining the walls of the hallway are not of the women who baked and sewed and knitted and quilted to keep the church open and functioning. Rather the walls are lined with pictures of men who led the Sunday School and who were on the boards. Chopp says the depth and power of women's lives in the church can be understood quite differently from the position of women washing dishes after a pot luck as compared to men running church business in a board meeting.\textsuperscript{87} At this time in the church's history, Christian feminism is beginning with the struggle and dreams of all people in order to anticipate the transformation of all.\textsuperscript{88}

From within these small groups of people who gather together for support, for study and for worship, comes the possibility for a new way for us to be the Church. This new way does not need to be confined to women working together as in the research group. I believe that the research group, however, could be a model which can be used for men's groups as well as for committees within the church. If members and adherents of a congregation can join together and discuss what they value in life, what they call spiritual experience and what they understand as social justice, it would benefit all individuals and the community. If we can begin to see how these three components interact with each other in our lives and then reflect upon that, I believe the church would be able to move beyond a concern for private or individual religious experience into something broader and more life-giving for the whole community. We have the

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p. 3
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p. 4
opportunity to learn how our Baptismal vows have meaning and relevance for our lives.

We can learn that the Gospel is liberating for all. In conversation with each other, we can learn to be trusting and respectful of other opinions different from our own. Ultimately, the implication for the greater life of the church is that we can learn to question our enculturation, our socialization. We can question our context and challenge it in order to bring about a transformative context for all. The transformative context then is the place where the works of the Holy Spirit are seen by the compassionate behaviour we have towards our neighbour. Those compassionate acts are called social justice.
APPENDIX A

An Exploration of the Values That Undergird Commitment to Social Justice Amongst “Church” and “Non-Church” People in a Small Town Context

A Doctor of Ministry Thesis Proposal Submitted to The Doctor of Ministry Programme Committee

Toronto School of Theology

Carol Gierak
St. John's United Church
56 Victoria Street East
Alliston, Ontario
L9R 1L5

Thesis Committee
Prof. Gary Redcliffe - Faculty Advisor
Rev. Young Key Min - Collaborative Learning Group
Margaret Quigley, D.M. - Ministry Base Group
Dr. Richard Tanner - Advisor

Draft Five
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As I consider how I experienced a call to discipleship and eventually to ordained ministry, a number of images come to mind. They are diverse vignettes of times in my life when I was touched by someone else's ministry. Some of those times were profoundly disturbing for me, in a negative way. As I moved along in my faith journey and life's experiences, however, the images of ministry changed and become invitational, and nurturing. I will begin by relating my earliest childhood memories of church and ministers because they are foundational to my sense of being drawn to the church in order to offer my own gifts and style of ministry. There are definitely turning points in my life which stand out for me.

In The Color Purple, Celie, the central character, replies to a question of her friend, Shug, by describing what she thinks God is like. She says God is an old man, with a grey beard, wearing a long white robe and is barefoot. ¹ Celie’s description of God tells us much about her image of God and how that image has formed her experience of God. Celie experiences God as she does white people in general and white men in particular; above her, oppressive, judgmental, non-involved. Her God was transcended, non-personal, far away from her.

Perhaps a number of us, of a certain generation, started life by having a similar picture of God in our minds. Celie said she thought the Bible described God this way. It is more likely it is a cultural tradition which has planted this idea in our minds. This was my earliest image of God

¹ Walker, Alice, The Color Purple, p.176
which shaped my experience of God. For me, too, God was in the clouds, all-seeing, all-powerful, a being who instilled fear in me. I dreaded the thought, as a child, of dying because I knew there was no way I could do anything to be good enough to make it to heaven. God watched every move I made, knew my every thought and was going to pounce on me like a cat when I was not prepared. The best I could do was to go to confession and hope when I die I would end up in purgatory. Then I had a chance.

This was not a God, therefore, in whose image I was made, nor was this God in my image. I did not make God, someone presented “Him” to me. There was no vulnerability, no fear, nor any need for love in this God. I do not know whether other people, older or younger than me, felt the same or otherwise because I never talked about God to anyone. When I started to read theology, it was feminist theology and then I was surprised to find that my experience was not a unique one for women. Somehow, it has been culturally bred into us that we are not quite good enough, just as Celie was never quite good enough.

My personal experience of God, therefore, was not one of a loving and trusted parent. Indeed, that was not my experience of parents. My father left the family before I was born so being loved by a father was not an experience in my early childhood. So the heavenly father image of God is not one to which I can relate.

Some years went by without any connection to a faith community. However, in 1972, I was invited to come to St. John’s United Church, which is in the town in which I live. I was asked to join the choir and to play my flute. Earlier I had briefly thought about going to church but had not done so. However I was honoured by the special invitation. I was also impressed by the woman who asked me. She is an example of someone who takes the ministry of the laity
seriously. She recognized her own ministry and asked me to share my gift with other lay people in the worship of God.

My action in ministry will take place in the very same congregation where I started my United Church connection. It will be conducted in the context of my present ministry base as well as with members of my community. This congregation base is found in a small town of about 6200 people. I am one of two ministers in the town's United Church. The church has 680 members which translates into 1330 members and adherents under pastoral care. 2

St. John's, by United Church standards, is considered a thriving ministry. The social and economic make-up of the congregation is composed of merchants, farmers, teachers, lawyers, other professionals, and industrial leaders. However, this is not a description of the entire congregation. There are some single women with children and some separated fathers who are having financial difficulties. A few people are unemployed, but by far the greatest number are socially well off. A significant portion of the congregation is composed of people who have recently retired and who live in Green Briar, a retirement village on the edge of Alliston. The people who have come to St. John's from Green Briar have generally been active people in city congregations and have brought with them new ideas, new ways of doing things and a great deal of energy. This occasionally sets up a situation of tension between the more recent membership and those who have been long time members.

2 When I say "member" I mean those who have been confirmed in the United Church or by one of our denomination's ecumenical partners. We have church members, therefore, who have been baptized and confirmed in the Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic and Convention Baptist Churches. Adherents, on the other hand, may or may not be Baptized members of the United Church or other Christian denominations, but who choose to worship on a regular basis with this congregation.
There are also a significant number of people who are elderly and who expect and require a great deal of pastoral care. There are about eighty who fall into this category.

In this church setting, I am the minister responsible for education and pastoral care. In the education part of my job description I am responsible for the Wednesday morning Bible study, Confirmation class for young adults, membership discussion group for adults who wish to join the Church for the first time or transfer from another denomination. I also facilitate short term educational programs such as marriage enrichment, family life, and special seasonal studies during Lent and Advent. In this regard I am the staff person who relates to the Christian Education Committee and to the Sunday School.

For my pastoral care work, I do regular hospital visiting as well as visiting the retirement and nursing homes in this area (there are four). I also visit new people who have come to the church, anyone who is seriously ill and anyone who requests a visit. In addition I do some counselling and pastoral care in times of bereavement, other life crisis events and preparation for marriage and baptisms.

I am the resource person who facilitates peer group counselling for separated adults. Administratively, I am the staff person who relates to the Membership Committee which is concerned with the over-all pastoral care of the congregation. Recently, this committee has set up a sub-committee which is called the Pastoral Care Visiting Team. I am its resource person.

In addition, I am responsible for intergenerational worship eight times a year and I preach approximately once a month.
As mentioned earlier, I have had some relationship with this congregation for twenty-three years. At times my involvement has been more intense than at other times. From 1984 to 1994, I was absent because I was ministering in other Churches. However, I was called to St. John's in August 1994. This is my first involvement with this congregation as an ordered person.

Over these many years, I have engaged in conversations with people in a variety of ways; sometimes as a member of The United Church Women's organization, sometimes as a committee member, or a participant in a study group, sometimes in conversations with friends. In these times, I have observed that some people become deeply committed to the life of the church, while others stay on the edge of the church community. I am curious about these different levels of interest and commitment. What is there about church life that attracts some people and leaves others cool towards the church?

From a theological point of view, I think this is an important question because we are all baptized into the mission and ministry of the work of Jesus Christ. We are empowered into the priesthood of all believers by the action of baptism. But we choose to live that out in varying degrees of commitment. My question about church members, then, is what is the motivating factor in people that either causes them to be involved in church life at a rather deep level or on the other hand to choose a more distant relationship?

2. Statement of Research Interest

IT IS MY INTENTION TO EXPLORE THE VALUES WHICH UNDERGIRD COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTS AMONGST CHURCH AND NON-CHURCH PEOPLE. I WISH TO DISCOVER WHAT KIND OF CONNECTION EXISTS BETWEEN AN
INDIVIDUAL'S SPIRITUALITY, VALUES AND ACTIONS.

My own interest in social justice issues came into being in the mid 1960's. I was a student at Michigan State University during the time of the Vietnam War. In that era one could not escape an awareness of the war, of the massacre of the student protesters at Kent State University, and the social unrest in the United States. I was personally uncomfortable with values espoused by the government, by the military, and by the members of my immediate family. The result of my discomfort was my move from the United States to Canada in 1968. My sensitivity to individual and communal rights had been awakened by events in the United States.

Because of my personal background I have developed an interest and involvement in social justice awareness and action. My area of concern has been advocacy on behalf of women, particularly violence against women and children. I became involved with a small group of women from Alliston and the surrounding area in 1979/80 on a study of the number of cases of violence against women and the need for a safe house.

This project idea was not well received by the town council and we did not get approval. However, we persevered in a slightly different direction. We established an "information centre" and this was the vehicle by which we managed to assist women who needed help. The information centre included a "telecare line" and a used clothing store.

Eventually, five years later, a new group came into being called "People in Transition." This was the group that actually got the safe house established. It is known as "My Sister's Place." I sat on the board for one year and due to pastoral duties, had to resign.
I have remained interested in this social justice and compassionate project, although at a distance. The women who will be invited to participate in my action in ministry are all aware and involved, to some degree, with "My Sister's Place." attempt to define what I mean by this.

Social justice activity for me is based on the pursuit of economic, political and social equality for all people. Because of my Christian perspective, social justice also includes the idea of salvation. But this I mean the well-being of individuals and communities in terms of wholeness and right relationship with God and neighbour. My understanding is that Christians need to pursue activities which will ensure the goal of salvation. These activities are essential in regard to women's rights in our culture because of the hidden discrimination which is practised against women. One of the ways this discrimination happens is through acts of violence against women; in the media, in various forms of entertainment, in the workplace and in the home. A pursuit of social justice for me is to advocate on behalf of women's rights to safety for themselves and their children and also for the possibility of their economic, political and social equality.

At the present time, my experience tells me that kind of pursuit for well-being for individuals and communities of people is not being practised wholeheartedly by the church. In this century, perhaps especially since the early 1970's there has developed a theological split in

3 My interpretation of this term is based on my understanding of ethical and compassionate behaviour towards "the other." "The other" may be a human being, a living creature or the earth itself. This is a mature response to the issues we see around us which are evidence of the destructive behaviour of human beings. I understand the ethical and compassionate response to be both individual and communal. For a discussion of this position see In the Service of God, by William Willimon, chapter 2, "The Work of Ethics."
the church. I do not know how to characterize this split except to call it privatized Christianity verses prophetic Christianity.

Jurgen Moltmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer amongst others have used these terms privatized Christianity or privatus cultus. My understanding of this term as used by Moltmann is that people come to church on Sunday morning for their own personal reasons, to help them feel better, to be restored spiritually, or perhaps even to feel they have been personally “saved.” In other words, the needs of the individual are paramount. Moltmann describes this as moving away from serving God to serving the needs of the individual.

Two women who are members of the Wednesday morning Bible study have spoken quite regularly of the reasons which motivate them for coming to church. They both subscribe to the theory of privatized Christianity. That is, the motivating factors for them coming to church are to fulfill their personal needs. However, when we engage in more conversation about how we might put our faith into action, we find it is difficult to move from theory to action. I call the “action” the social justice component of our faith. My understanding of social justice concern is very broad. I do not include only actions such as peace marches and study groups. Social justice for me means an awareness of concerns or issues of injustice. Social justice actions can include intentional prayer which is concerned with alleviating the pain and suffering of people close to us or far away.

4 Harris, Maria, Teaching and Religious Imagination, p. 82
My observation, however, is that it is difficult to broaden our understanding of social justice concerns and to become personally involved.

It has come to my attention, through interaction with friends and acquaintances of the wider community of Alliston, that there is social justice being done by people who are not related to the church as well as by people who are "churched". In one case, a husband and wife have opened their home to a series of young people who are emotionally troubled. In another case, there are women who volunteer their time and efforts at the local women's shelter in various support roles. In a third situation, another woman counsels women concerning their rights as they disengage from marital relationships. These helping people all were members of the church at one time but are no longer. For various reasons each has felt disenfranchised by the church.

My research interest concerns addressing a common question to both groups of individuals, those who are church members and those who are not. Amongst the questions to be asked are the following:

What is the common experience of both groups that has motivated them to be concerned with social justice actions?

What part does spirituality \(^5\) or relationship to God play in their actions?

At what point in their life experience did they become inspired to act on issues of perceived social injustice?

3. Theoretical Framework and Assumptions

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\(^5\) I am using this word as meaning any relationship, belief or understanding between a human being and a divine being. This does not necessarily mean a belief in a Christian God. This may include a numinous experience which results in a belief that there is more to life than what our senses and rationality tell us. This is an awakening to the mystery of life.
I have always had a need to understand history and how it forms us. The same has been true for me in regard to theology. I need to know where we've been to figure out where we are going. In order to have some sense of a traditional or orthodox view of ministry, therefore, I looked to the document produced by the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982). My denomination, the United Church of Canada, has made this document one of the primary tools in the formation of those preparing for ordained ministry. As well, it has been used as a resource document for materials which prepare young people for confirmation, adult baptism, and parents who are wishing to have their children baptized.

A second document published by the United Church which has been formative for me is the United Church Creed. This creed was accepted by the General Council of the Church in 1968 as our profession of faith. Within this creedal statement are found the beliefs of the Church and our call to live out those beliefs. It is as follows:

**WE ARE NOT ALONE, WE LIVE IN GOD'S WORLD.**

**WE BELIEVE IN GOD:**

WHO HAS CREATED AND IS CREATING
WHO HAS COME IN JESUS, THE WORD MADE FLESH, TO RECONCILE AND MAKE NEW,
WHO WORKS IN US AND OTHERS BY THE SPIRIT.

**WE TRUST IN GOD.**

**WE ARE CALLED TO BE THE CHURCH.**

TO CELEBRATE GOD'S PRESENCE,
TO LOVE AND SERVE OTHERS,
TO SEEK JUSTICE AND RESIST EVIL,
TO PROCLAIM JESUS, CRUCIFIED AND RISEN,
OUR JUDGE AND OUR HOPE.

**IN LIFE, IN DEATH, IN LIFE BEYOND DEATH,**

GOD IS WITH US.

**WE ARE NOT ALONE.**

**THANKS BE TO GOD.**
Another part of my theoretical and theological assumption and my theory of motivation for social justice lies in my need to understand how we live out our baptismal vows. The following questions, with variations, are the ones used in the United Church of Canada in the sacrament of baptism:

1. Desiring the freedom of new life in Christ, do you turn away from the forces of evil and renounce their power?
2. Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him as saviour, redeemer, Lord?
3. Do you commit yourself to the mission and ministry of Christ’s Church?

My assumption is that each of these vows has the implication of social justice embedded in it. And it is part of the teaching ministry of the Church to help church members uncover those implications. For example, a possible implication of the first baptismal vow would be the redemption of women who turn away from violent situations and seek new life. The resulting actions of the baptismal vows are understood by me to be both individual and communal. While an individual takes the baptismal vows, it is usually a parent who does this on behalf of a child. The community also has the opportunity to reaffirm its vows at the celebration of baptism. The consequence of the vows if fully understood by all, is social action.

Holding in balance the values and motivations of both “church” and “non-church” individuals I must make an assumption on behalf of “church persons.” My assumption is that social action will not occur unless people are well-grounded in scripture, worship and study. To be awakened, to see what is happening, needs an awareness of the gospel and an awareness of how we are each called to discipleship. What is required of us is to make use of the hermeneutical circle which involves biblical/theological study which moves us to action, which moves us to reflection.
While I can make this claim for Christian people I cannot speak for the motivation of "non-church" people. I must assume that individuals who are not part of the church live out of a different belief system.

An important component of my theoretical framework is my interpretation of Luke 4:18,19.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

This passage grounds us as members of the Body of Christ and participants in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ through our actions. In this passage from the Luke, Jesus clearly describes the intention of His ministry. These verses all speak of liberation from various forms of
oppression. And it is in our efforts to free ourselves and others from different kinds of societal oppression that we do participate in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

My assumptions, therefore, are that we are called to do social justice for the following reasons:

1. Because of agreement to our Baptismal vows.
2. Because as disciples of Christ we follow His example as outlined in Luke 4:18,19.
3. Because we are told to love one another as brothers and sisters and as we love God and ourselves.

In the letters of Paul, the well-being of the community is uppermost. I interpret that as meaning “community” in the widest sense of the word.

However, while I believe the above statements to be theoretically true, I also hold the assumption that while the United Church of Canada has been historically perceived to be a church which is concerned for social justice, this is no longer the case. My concern is that we as a congregation within this Christian denomination are in danger of not keeping a balance between faith and action. I believe we are a congregation which is more concerned with privatized Christianity or personal salvation. The theoretical basis for this assumption is found in the writings of Douglas Hall in Canada and Wade Roof and William Willimon in the United States.  

6 The theory of privatized Christianity is also addressed by William Willimon in his discussion on the relationship of baptism and ethical actions in the world in his book The Service of God.
While for the Christian, there are values espoused because of our covenantal action in baptism, people who are not "church" members are not bound by the same vows. I wonder, therefore, what set of beliefs or what kind of a value system "non-church" members live out. I believe that to some degree they are inspired in their work by the Holy Spirit because the fruits of the Spirit are not confined to the institution of the church. In this statement I am assuming that there is a spirituality operative for both church and non-church persons. Furthermore that both sets of individuals do what they do because of values they hold.

4. Action in Ministry

The participants for my action in ministry will be drawn from "church" members and "non-church" people who are active in social justice in Alliston and the surrounding area. 7

All of the women I intend to invite are people who have been known to me for many years. They are engaged in social justice activity as volunteers or are moving into caring professions. This includes women who are "church" members as well as those who are not. I have chosen the participants on the basis of their involvement with social action and other acts of compassion.

I plan to invite five or six women from the congregation and five or six from the community so that the whole sample group will be ten to twelve women. I believe this is a good number for dialogue. All of the participants will be women because I have an assumption that

7 Since this is a rural community it is difficult to confine people or actions to the town alone.
women find a trust level and ease of communication more quickly if the group is composed of one gender. 8

In the group experience we will begin to uncover, through the use of personal story, the individual’s motivation and understanding of social action.

Prior to the first meeting which will be in late September, the women will receive a focus question from me. The question will be, “what matters to you in life and why?”

The participants will be asked to reflect on this question and write a short paper on their thoughts. This can be perhaps one page. I will ask for this reflection to be brought to our first meeting so that we may begin to share our life stories meanwhile uncovering deeply held values as we share. I anticipate that the first meeting will be two and a half to three hours long allowing time for coffee and informal talk and then allowing for each woman to speak.

The next stage of the action in ministry will be done as one to one interviews using the suggested questions in Appendix E. The full session and each interview will be tape recorded and upon completion of the interview process will be transcribed. The transcriptions will then be analysed by myself and a member of my ministry base group, Janice Murray. We will organize the data looking for commonalities and differences. There will be a time of evaluation and assessment of the process in a full meeting of the participants in February 1996.

8 For a discussion on stereotypical male and female values and communication styles, see The Chalice and the Blade by Riane Eisler, page 137.
I intend to invite each woman to participate by telephone call and letter. I will explain the purpose of the discussion groups and the time commitment which will be involved. There will be an informal covenant for the participants to sign. The covenant, or participant consent form, is included here as Appendix B.
5. Research Methodology

My research will be conducted through the process of a focus group. I will be a participant/observer and I will prepare the questions or topics for us to cover. The topics will include questions concerning the participants relationship to God, or their understanding of their lives in a spiritual sense. I am curious about where their energy and inspiration comes from which fuels their work. Has there been a specific event in their lives that has turned them to actions of love and justice?

During the time of the focus group and during the personal interviews I hope to uncover the values that people hold. In order to do this, I will rely on various processes described in the book, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. This is a detailed text which describes process for small groups and individuals for the purpose of values clarification.

In this process, I will be working in partnership with Janice Murray who is an adult educator and works specifically in the area of values clarification and leadership training.

This will be an open-ended method with much ambiguity. In light of this, my ministry base group has agreed to a test run of this process in June of 1995. As mentioned earlier the process will be the following: in advance of the meeting, people will receive a question to reflect upon "what is important to me and why?" When we meet we will begin with a social time and then proceed to sharing our thoughts on the prepared question. I will do the interviews with the ministry base group as well, so that the whole process is rehearsed and refined by September.

The process which will be used is included here. The details of the process are found in Appendix C, D, E.
1. Participants to be invited by letter. (See Appendix A)

2. In advance of first meeting participants will receive a letter asking them to write a one page reflection on "what matters to me the most."

3. At first meeting the women will have an opportunity for meeting in a social time prior to beginning the process found in Appendix C.

4. In advance of second meeting, participants will receive material on the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. The second evening of discussion will begin with a social time.

5. Individual interviews will be scheduled in the winter time. This is to allow for the possibility that people may talk about issues on a one to one basis that they may not say in a group setting.

6. Another full meeting will be scheduled in late winter or the spring for participants to read transcripts and to discuss the findings and to hear evaluations.

The intention of this process is to be research. However, the expectation is that certain learnings may happen for the women involved as they reflect and interact. Confidentiality will be maintained.

6. Risks and Limitations

The limitation of my study is that I will be working with women only and so will not be taking account of men's experience. However, I feel that if I work with mixed groups there will be too many issues to take into consideration. I think having women only will focus the study.

Another limitation is that the information I gather may be useful only in terms of my own congregational setting. A further risk is that it may be difficult to find people who will make a time commitment to this action.
7. Contribution of the Study

I hope this study will be useful to the Christian Education Committee of St. John's and to the Outreach Committee. I hope we will have new understandings emerge which will help us identify how to balance social justice and spiritual or faith development. This work may give me insight in how to do my own ministry more effectively by identifying these gaps. For example, there may be a gap where people are not well equipped in preparation of baptism and therefore do not understand fully what commitment to the church involves. Another possible outcome may be that both the Christian Education Committee and the Outreach Committee may become more clear on their mandates and how to go about encouraging others to partake in both faith development and outreach ministry.

A possible outcome of this study will be to discover that the “non-church” group is working out of a Christian value system. Perhaps they can be called “The Anonymous Christian” as described by Karl Rahner. Since these women are not now connected to the faith community, something has caused them to be disconnected from that particular structure.

In the wider church context, this study may become a model which other congregations can use. There may be a wider application of this study for the National Church as it discerns where God is leading us to do ministry in the next century. This process may help us discover what the important values are and what motivates people in their commitment to justice work.
APPENDIX B

Dear ...

Over the last two years, I have been enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry programme in the Toronto School of Theology. Part of the requirement for the programme is to engage in an “Action in Ministry” component. This action in ministry becomes one of the practical aspects of my thesis.

In order to fulfill this requirement, I have designed a group process for discussion purposes. I would like to invite you to be part of this small group discussion. The broad topic which will be discussed is: an exploration of the values that undergird commitment to social justice amongst “church” and “non-church” people in a small town context.

The time commitment would be two evenings and one interview followed by one more full session. Recognizing that you all have busy schedules, I propose we meet on the fourth Sunday of the month from 7PM to 10PM. We will begin meeting in late September. I propose that each session be tape recorded. If anyone is uncomfortable with this proposal, we can negotiate other alternatives.

The composition of the groups will be women only. I believe most of you will know each other.

I would very much appreciate your participation in this project. You have the experience, the interest and the insight which would enhance my work.

If you agree to this proposal, I invite you to sign the consent form enclosed here. At a later date, I will send material which will be used by us in our group discussion time. Please look it over. I hope you will agree to be part of this process. I am enclosing my business card and will await your response. Thank you.

Yours,
APPENDIX C

Participant Consent Form

I agree to participate in the Toronto School of Theology Doctorate of Ministry project being undertaken by the candidate, Carol Gierak.

I understand that I will be one of ten women who will compose a group, some of whom will be church members and some not. In the first two meetings, we as a group will engage in a discussion on "what matters to me." This is to discover what I value. In the second meeting, I agree to discuss the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. I also understand that I will be asked to do a short piece of writing which I will bring to the first session.

I also agree to take part in an interview of approximately one hour in length. This will be a structured interview following prepared questions. I retain the right not to answer any question with which I feel uncomfortable.

I agree to take part in a fourth meeting which will involve the full group. I understand that I will receive a printed transcript of the prior sessions. I am willing to use this fourth meeting as an evaluation time.

I understand the material which will be shared is confidential and all sharing that is done within the group will be handled with respect and sensitivity.

I understand that all sessions will be recorded on tape. The candidate (Carol Gierak) will transcribe the tape. Confidentiality will be maintained whenever portions of the sessions are used in either written or oral form. I will be given the opportunity to add or delete material from the transcripts. The transcribed material will be analysed with respect to both content and context by the candidate.

I understand that I may withdraw at anytime from this process. I have read this "consent form" and agree to the conditions which it contains.

Signature: __________________ Date:

P.S. PLEASE RESPOND TO ME BEFORE SEPTEMBER 10, 1995.
## APPENDIX D

### Process for First Focus Group Meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SECTION A</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1. What matters to you in life? What are the most important aspects you can think of? | -write on sticky notes, quietly, those parts of your life using one or two words  
-without talking, stick on the wall  
-arrange with others into categories or themes  
-label these |
| 2. Let’s discuss this for the next few minutes. | -everyone in pairs shares what they have chosen to put on stickers |
| 3. Any surprises? Any thoughts that strike you as we talk? | -Group discussion |

| **SECTION B** |
| 1. What does the word “God” mean to you? | -draw this on a large piece of flipchart paper with coloured markers, everyone to contribute to the picture, cannot use any words, must be symbols only  
-each person to share with group why they drew what they did  
-again look for themes, negative vs positive images, like images |
| 2. What about religion? How do you feel about that? Use words to describe. | -On the flip chart, put the word “religion” in the middle  
-word associations  
-look for themes and unusual associations  
-ask why-where did these come from? |
**SECTION C**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you ever had an experience you would describe as spiritual?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Pairs to interview each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-share in a large group (for those whom are comfortable)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SECTION D**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you see any connections or dichotomies between the following sets of words?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-God and religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-God and spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-God and morality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-morality and justice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

Second Evening Meeting of Focus Group

1. Continue any items of agenda left from first meeting time.

2. Read the story of Jesus and the samaritan woman (woman at the well)
   a) Reflect together on this story. Considering this story as a turning point for women then and now we see Jesus ignoring the social prejudices of his day and religious restrictions and entrusting His word to a woman. She is divorced and a foreigner, but this makes no difference to Him. How is this story a turning point for women today?
   b) The women at the well asks for “living water.” What does this mean for her? For you?
   c) Have you had a similar kind of experience which has nurtured you toward a new way of life?
APPENDIX F

Suggested Questions for Individual Interviews

1. What church background, if any, have you had? This would include a formalized time in church life such as attending Sunday School, worship, being confirmed, etc.

2. Have you ever had an experience you would call “spiritual”?

3. Has there been an event in your life that you feel altered the course of your life? This might be connected to a “spiritual” experience.

4. What feelings have motivated your interest or concern in social justice* issues?

*My interpretation of this term is based on my understanding of ethical and compassionate behaviour towards “the other.” “The other” may be a human being, a living creature or the earth itself. This is a mature response to the issues we see around us which are evidence of the destructive behaviour of human beings. I understand the ethical and compassionate response to be both individual and communal. For a discussion of this position see In the Service of God, by William Willimon, chapter 2, “The Work of Ethics.”
APPENDIX G

FINDINGS OF THE INTERVIEWS

First Theme -- Values

AMONGST CHURCH MEMBERS

tolerance
equality before God
education
hospitality
truthfulness
traditions of the church
  a) architecture
  b) hymnody
the necessity of encouraging others
acceptance
courage
compassion
friendship
communication
music
respect
community service
study and education
trust
lack of animosity
compassion and care for others
valuing strong women
nurturing relationships
empathy
fun
health
positive reinforcement
being accepted as a woman
female images of God
responsibility
non-judgmental attitude
being useful
morality

NEGATIVE VALUES

fear of God
punishment
control
contradictions in theology

AMONGST NON-CHURCH MEMBERS

caring
ethics
fairness
non-judgment
altruism
education
curiosity
freedom
nurturing of others
positive reinforcement
tolerance
openness to other cultures
love and compassion
practicality
positive attitude
independence of thought and action
supportive marriage relationship
intelligence
free thought
the gift of a good mind
Second Theme – Spiritual Experiences

Amongst Church Members

-a feeling of a Guardian Angel being present
-exploring native spirituality as a formative experience ie: the significance of sacred stones and feathers
-the incarnation of unconditional love in the marriage relationship
-personal crisis that leads to nurturing of children
-continuous conversion
-spirituality becoming integrated into everyday life
-life experience leading to an understanding of feminism political and theological
-the attraction of music in the church
-allowing oneself to be part of community deepens one’s religious life
-crisis of family member brings on a deeply spiritual experience recognizing the presence of God
-the result of crisis brings greater commitment to God
-growth of faith strengthens
-a strong sense of a visionary experience leads to a greater commitment to the church
-feeling called to a ministry through music
-personal validation and encouragement which gave life new direction (incarnational theology)
-steady faith development
-joining the church as a young person is seen as a pivotal event
-commitment to church and to the ideals of society are the beginning of social justice concerns
-a sense that religious life as opposed to spiritual life places conditions on people
Second Theme — Spiritual Experiences (continued)

Amongst Non-Church Members

-feminist spirituality put life into context the result being a conversion experience
-desires to integrate spirituality into the everyday actions of life
-the feeling of energy in non-traditional worship
-sex as a spiritual experience
-a vision of evolving spirituality
-does not believe in spirituality or religion
-ethics and morals are partly learned and partly innate, this is what gives structure to life
-feels one is part of universe but insignificant
-life is full of questions but no answers
-education as a spiritually evolving experience
-midwifery as a spiritual experience
-a reaction to judgmentalism leading to life decisions
-a belief that spirituality is not based in the church
-that the intellectual and spiritual journey are meshed together
-our work is to integrate spirituality into our personality
-the taking in of others problems as a spiritual response
-being awakened to different kinds of spirituality in India where it is more integrated into everyday life than in Canada
-has learned to become more spiritually integrated through the experience of re-incarnation
-the importance of learning to be a more compassionate person
-ongoing prayer and meditation
-recognizing the opportunities to be spiritual in places other than church
Third Theme — Social Justice Actions

Amongst Church Members

-a belief that those who have strong religious convictions when young continue throughout life to make the world a better place
-the need to accomplish good deeds can be accommodated through groups such as Rotary when one is motivated to help others
-teaching as a means of helping others
-to give to others out of an awareness of what we have received
-the importance of a sense of service to others ie: Rotary as a way of being involved with issues
-the question of how do we really help people when money helps in a limited way only
-the value of community work done for disabled people
-is the concern that society is becoming less just
-is mentoring young women
-anger at the structures of society that treat woman unjustly resulting in challenge and advocacy
-working in the community in areas of responding to others needs
-the care and nurture of children, instilling a sense of morality and the teaching of the whole child
Third Theme — Social Justice Actions (continued)

Amongst Non-Church Members

-experiencing the poor brings about compassionate work
-helping families cope with the shock and experience of death through Aids
-hospice work
-showing hospitality to others
-teaching as a social justice action
-providing daycare for student mothers
-work and family therapy
-righting power imbalances
-helping people until they are strong enough to cope on their own
-awareness of hypocrisy leads to social justice concern especially in family life
-nursing as an act of compassion and caring
-having experienced judgmentalism shown to women who have had abortions has been moved to help women in crisis
-empowering women to improve their self-esteem and to help them make their own decisions
-recognizing having been given much, feeling there is much to give to others
-volunteer work as a justice action in public education and family mediation
-instrumental in starting “My Sisters Place”
-the importance for social justice to be rooted in spirituality
-political convictions issue in social justice actions
-the aspect of social justice actions which stems from a desire to transform the world
-actions focused on the social service network for children and education especially in mentoring young women
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