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PRACTISING GOD'S HOSPITALITY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF LETTY M. RUSSELL TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Submitted by: Eleanor Epp

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INTRODUCTION

Hospitality is an expression of unity...because unity in Christ has as its purpose the sharing of God's hospitality and justice with the stranger. Hospitality becomes a style of interaction with the other pieces that make up the whole of God's creation.'

The universal message of God's love for all humankind will continue to be heard through the power of the Holy Spirit, but the fashion in which it is heard depends on our willingness to speak and act the Word in ways concretely addressed to the struggles and longings of women and men today. Today, that speaking and acting can no longer ignore the existence of women as part of the people of God. Women are no longer willing to be invisible partners either in the work and life of church and society or in the interpretation and proclamation of the gospel. The Word must be concretely addressed to their journey toward freedom as well as to that of others.'

My understanding of the mission of the Church is directly related to my experience of God receiving me as cherished, and my knowledge of God's love that all of creation is beloved of God.' God's message of self-giving love, that I have come to believe, extends throughout the world and to the ends of the

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3 In this dissertation Church will be capitalized for emphasis.
universe. The mission of the Church is uniquely identified with those who struggle and suffer in the world.

To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.¹

As a community privileged to participate in the mission of God, the Church shares in God's liberating activity of extending hospitality toward all creation.

With this dissertation I want to participate in the theological discussion of God's mission. I am particularly interested in hearing and joining the perspectives of women developing their own theological voices as partners in re-visioning the Church.

Concerns of the Author

My interest in theology and ecclesiology has evolved over a lifetime. Beginning in my early years a strong awareness of God's love for me and my desire to share that love was developed. My parental home was a welcome place for those on the margin, the stranger, the prisoner, the poor. My parental home fostered a call to proclaim this love and thus I experienced, through witness and action, participation in God's mission of reconciling women and men to Godself through love. My high school and college years brought questions about the Church's seeming inability or

lack of interest in a ministry of reconciliation, and the Church's ability to effect transformation in the world.

During my seminary studies in the early 1980's, I began reading the works of feminist theologians and feminist biblical scholars. My Christian feminist convictions were challenged and significantly influenced during this time of theological reflection and construction. My experiences in pastoral ministry and subsequent doctoral studies led me to read and reread the works of Letty M. Russell.

This inquiry resulted in meaningful connections with Russell's re-vision of the Church. Russell anchors the Church in the *missio Dei*; as Russell states, "The life of the church is derivative from God's Mission." Her understanding of the Christian Church proceeds from a christological perspective, "a community of Christ, bought with a price, where everyone is welcome."

Like Christian theology, Christian ecclesiology is a unity in which the various parts are simply different perspectives on the same whole. Our understanding of Christian community begins and ends with Christ, for

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1 Letty M. Russell, "Tradition as Mission: Study of a New Current in Theology and Its Implication for Theological Education" (Th.D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1969). Russell points out the purpose of the Church is mission not ministry. Ministry is a means or function of the Church fulfilling its purpose.


3 Ibid, 43.
it is in Christ that God has revealed His love for the world and called men and women to proclaim this love to all men."

Russell's prophetic call for renewal of the Church is evident with her overarching theme of the Church as a sign of the coming fulfilment of God's promise of New Creation. She advocates a feminist interpretation of the Church as means of constructively framing changes in what it means to be a witnessing community where women and men are in solidarity with each other and with God. Russell provides clues about paradigms of authority and about creating partnership. Her theological method relates practice and theory from a feminist liberation perspective. She begins with the communities of faith and struggle who are acting in new ways, and then asks how this experience leads to new questions and ways of thinking. Russell's work is based in her experience and in the experience of many women and men who are critical of the hierarchical structures in the Church and society.


9 Letty M. Russell, The Future of Partnership (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 167, 198. For Russell this is an eschatological concept of God intervening in history and in the lives of people to establish a New Age through Jesus Christ. Russell capitalizes New Creation for emphasis; this dissertation will do the same.

10 Russell, Church in the Round, 14.

I have spent thirty-five years trying to find out how to subvert the church into being the church!" ¹²

My identity as a Christian feminist woman from a Mennonite background informs the interests and direction of my theological work. The experiences of being excluded, of having my gifts ignored or taken lightly, of gender stereotyping, and of struggling with scripture and tradition from a Christian Mennonite perspective have affected my theology. I have come to understand and appreciate the mission of God, in which the Church is privileged to participate, as the extension of all that is necessary to promote the full humanization of women and men. These experiences of exclusion and struggle, as well as freedom and celebration in the Church have inspired me to be part of a contemporary movement of ecclesial transformation.¹³ I join

¹² Ibid, 88.

a chorus of women and men passionate about the Church, committed to rethinking its nature and mission. Although this dissertation will not address my context explicitly, many of the concerns and questions which it addresses arise out of my reflection upon it. It is my hope that this study will stimulate subsequent investigations of the mission of the Church in relation to Christian feminist contexts.

**Statement of the Thesis**

I maintain that Letty M. Russell provides a significant contribution toward our understanding of the mission of the Church. This dissertation is an exploration of the theology of Russell as a resource toward the development of a theology of the mission of the Church. It will draw out of Russell's theological writings her significant contribution to an understanding of the mission of the Church as: a spiral of theological engagement, fresh images of the Church, the paradigm of authority in community, and mission as practising God's hospitality.

The starting question for this study is: What is the contribution of Russell's work in understanding the mission of the Church? This study probes two subsequent questions: In what ways does Russell's contribution relate to the theological enterprise of mission? How would her contribution re-vision the Church?

My choice of Letty M. Russell as a resource is not arbitrary
given that she is a pioneer in feminist liberation theology. Through her writings, teaching, editing, and pastoral ministry Russell continues to have a prominent impact on the development of feminist theology in North America and globally for over thirty-five years. Russell, a feminist liberation theologian from a Reformed tradition, is currently the Professor of the Practice of Theology at the Yale University Divinity School, a position she has held for over twenty years. Prior to the position as Professor, she was a Christian educator who served as educator and pastor in East Harlem for twenty years, ordained by the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. She continues to be actively engaged in ecumenical dialogue on a worldwide scale. She has written extensively on ecclesiology and has developed her thought in dialogue with various disciplines and groups of people. Not only has Russell produced a large body of literature on a myriad of topics, but she has exhibited incredible theological vision. Her theological commitment is demonstrated both by her production of a large body of literature on a myriad of topics and by her practice of the Word in the world. Together with these reasons for studying Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church, I have been encouraged by her

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commitment to reflective theological scholarship along with active participation in academia and communities of faith, and the significance of this for the mission of the Church. Russell is engaged in scholarly feminist theology as well as "churchly" feminist theology.\textsuperscript{15}

Research Methodology

This study will offer a description, a synthesis, and an evaluation of Russell's contribution to a contemporary understanding of the mission of the Church.

I will describe Russell's articulations of the mission of the Church and situate her work within other studies of the Church's mission. Since she is still actively engaged in the theological enterprise, this study of the theologian's work cannot be totally comprehensive. Russell's *Christian Education in Mission* (1967)\textsuperscript{17} and *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (1993)\textsuperscript{18} will serve as temporal boundaries for the dissertation. To understand her work it is necessary to consider her theological mentors and to set her within the broader scope of feminist theologies.


\textsuperscript{17} Russell, *Christian Education in Mission*.

\textsuperscript{18} Russell, *Church in the Round*. 
The synthesis will consolidate the various articulations of Russell's understanding of mission as clues to her concept of the mission of the Church. I will highlight her understanding of the Church by focusing on four significant contributions.

The evaluation will examine the way in which Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church contributes to the contemporary conversation, in light of an emerging missionary paradigm and with special consideration to feminist perspectives on the mission of the Church.

My study of Letty M. Russell will include an examination of the several books and articles which she wrote between 1967 and 1993. Russell has written over one hundred articles, books, and resource materials over a twenty-six year span. Her major publications form the basis for this study. In addition to these primary sources some secondary literature on Russell will be considered including reviews of her works. To my knowledge there is no study of the contribution of Letty M. Russell toward an understanding of the mission of the Church from a theological perspective.

Preview of the Chapters

This Introduction serves as a preface to the study and

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19 See Dissertation Selected Bibliography.

provides the context of this dissertation's inquiry. The parameters and methodology of the project will be defined in this section. This prelude will also contain a sketch of the chapters which make up the dissertation.

**Chapter One** will situate the dissertation in relation to contemporary theological discussion on the mission of the Church. First, I will draw with broad strokes an outline of the evolution of Protestant and Catholic theology of mission since World War II. Missiologist David J. Bosch's historical and theological scholarly work *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Mission* will form the basis for this section. Second, I will highlight contemporary understandings of the mission of the Church from two prominent feminist theologians. The work of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza will be the focus for this section.

**Chapter Two** will consist of an introduction to Letty M. Russell, an overview of her life to date. It will consider significant theological influences on the work of Russell and study her theological movement in selected works. Finally, the chapter will examine Russell's theological method.

**Chapter Three** will present Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church. It will comprise two main sections. The first will provide a theological overview consisting of five subsections: a feminist liberation ecclesiology, images and
metaphors of the Church, Tradition\textsuperscript{21}, eschatological perspective, and paradigm of authority. The second will present Russell's clues to understanding the mission of the Church. These will be explored in six subsections: missio Dei, journey to freedom, advocating justice, partnership in the household of God, transformative hermeneutic, and practising hospitality.

Chapter Four will offer an evaluation of Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church in relation to the contemporary conversation about the mission of the Church. It will consist of three parts. The first part will consider Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church in dialogue with the six elements of an emerging missionary paradigm, as presented by Bosch in \textit{Transforming Mission}. The second part will reflect on Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church in dialogue with the feminist perspectives of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. The final part of this chapter will explore what I consider Russell's contribution toward an understanding of the mission of the Church.

Conclusion will gather the learnings together and suggest areas for future work. It will bring the study back home to my Mennonite faith tradition with a specific application.

\textsuperscript{21} See Russell, \textit{Church in the Round}, 36-39. Russell's understanding of Tradition, tradition, traditions, traditioning process and her understanding of Christology will be included in this subsection.
CHAPTER 1
CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGIES OF MISSION

In order to situate Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church it is necessary to trace with broad strokes some of the major elements of an emerging missionary paradigm. This chapter, therefore will outline an emerging missionary paradigm and will highlight feminist understandings of the mission of the Church.

An Emerging Missionary Paradigm

This outline will consider both Protestant and Roman Catholic reflection on mission. Russell's theology has developed in the context of ecumenical and global dialogue. In this section, I will draw on the historical and theological work of missiologist David J. Bosch in his book Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Mission. Using Bosch's six elements of mission I will briefly explain the different ways in which the Christian Church understood its mission: missionary by its very nature; God's

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pilgrim people; sacrament, sign, and instrument; Church and world; rediscovering the local Church; creative tension.

Missionary By Its Very Nature

During the twentieth century the most important development in Catholic and Protestant theologies of mission has been the widespread recognition that mission grounds the Church's very existence. Jürgen Moltmann suggests:

What we have to learn...is not that the Church 'has' a mission, but the very reverse: that the mission of Christ creates its own Church. Mission does not come from the Church; it is from mission and in the light of mission that the Church has to be understood.

Unique to this time was the recognition that Church and mission belong together comprehensively. The focus for mission moved beyond the Christian community towards "God's salvific work which precedes both Church and mission." The missio Dei, which unites and inspires communities to extend God's love toward all people and work for the promise of God's reign, became the overarching concept.

According to Bosch, we have witnessed a "shift from an emphasis on a church-centered mission to a mission-centered

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4 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 370.
church. The Church-centred approach to mission assumes that the aim of mission is for Church planting in the midst of foreign communities and cultures, and for the conversion of souls. The mission-centred approach "seeks to look at the world from the perspective of commitment to the Christian faith," using extensive formulations of what mission is all about. The Church's missionary practice remains an act of faith, participating in witness to God's love. I Peter 2:9 is the biblical model behind the conviction that the Church is essentially missionary. This understanding is evident from the Second Vatican Council. The Church's existence characterized as missionary is also prominent in Protestant thought. "The church can exist only to the extent that it is mission."

This shift in understanding of Church and mission within Catholic theology can be found in The Papal Encyclicals. For example, the 1957 Fidei Donum expresses a missionary understanding of the Church:

From the beginning holy Church by her very nature has been compelled to spread the Word of God everywhere, and in fulfilling this obligation to which she knows not how to be unfaithful she has never ceased to ask for a three fold assistance from her children, namely,

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1. Ibid, 370.
2. Ibid, 9.
3. Ibid, 372.
prayer, material aid, in some cases, the gift of themselves."
The Second Vatican Council affirmed this important principle, that "the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature."\(^{10}\) The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* asserts that mission is at the heart of the Church.\(^{11}\)

While a mission-centred ecclesiology is articulated in the Catholic Church documents, there continues to be references to the former ecclesio-centred notions of the Church and its mission. Mission is primarily treated as foreign missions and "the specific purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization and the planting of the Church among those peoples and groups where she has not yet taken root."\(^{12}\) The 1992 edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* demonstrates the coexistence, in Catholic theology, of mission-centred ecclesiology with an ecclesio-centred missiology. It states: "The Church is both the means and the goal of God's plan."\(^{13}\)

During the twentieth century Protestant theology has also moved toward a more missionary ecclesiology. This shift can be

\(^{9}\) *Fides Donum, The Papal Encyclicals*, vol.4, art.48, 327.

\(^{10}\) *Ad Gentes*, art.2, 585. All references to Vatican II documents are from Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966).


\(^{12}\) *Ad Gentes*, art.6, 591.

\(^{13}\) *Ibid*, art.852.
found in the contributions of the world missionary conference, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the International Missionary Council (IMC). In 1948 when the WCC came into being, the originators made no effort to join with the already existing International Missionary Council. Both organizations proceeded in an independent manner presenting mission in terms of foreign countries and cultures. A new mood from both organizations began to challenge this understanding of mission. In 1961, at the New Delhi conference of the WCC, the IMC was integrated within the structure of the WCC. As a result a mission-centred ecclesiology assumed a central place within the restructuring:

The spiritual heritage must not be dissipated; it must remain, ever renewed in the hidden life of prayer and adoration, at the heart of the World Council of Churches. Without it the ecumenical movement would petrify. Integration must mean that the World Council of Churches takes this missionary task to the very heart of its life.\(^1\)

IMC literature written after World War I emphasized the missionary nature of all Churches. At both the Jerusalem Conference (1928) and the Tambaram Conference (1938) the relationship between older or sending Churches and younger or receiving Churches became a prominent issue and was discussed at great length in a theological manner. Bosch observes a significant advance over earlier

positions:

For the first time the recognition that church and mission belong together indissolubly began to dawn in a way that could no longer be overlooked.\(^2\)

At the IMC assembly, at Willingen in 1952, a new model was emerging. It no longer subordinated mission to the Church nor the Church to mission; rather, "God's salvific work precedes both Church and mission."\(^1\) The missio Dei became the overarching concept. A statement affirmed at the IMC assembly in Ghana in 1958 professed: "The Christian world mission is Christ's, not ours."\(^4\) This evolution occurred over several decades and meant a pivotal shift in the understanding of Church and mission.

**God's Pilgrim People**

The Church understood as the people of God has biblical roots, in the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament.\(^5\) This image in scripture identifies God's relationship with humanity. Scriptural references are of a wandering people, a people on the way, a pilgrim people. The Church is a pilgrim because it is "called out of the world, and sent back into the

\(^{15}\) Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 370.

\(^{16}\) Ibid, 370.


world." The experiences of exodus, being a foreigner and on the margins, are central to the Church. According to John Power, "God's pilgrim people need only two things: support for the road, and a destination at the end of it." 

At the Second Vatican Council, the phrases "pilgrim people" and "pilgrim Church" are used to speak of the Church. By drawing on the image of the people of God, Vatican II recognized the human and communal aspect of the Church. Catholic theologian Yves Congar was influential in promoting the notion of the Church as the people of God.

In the Protestant theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Church as the people of God was an emerging theological concept. The people of God represented the unity which should exist among all Christians.

Christendom is the community in which people stand for each other, as a brother stands for his brother. Christendom is one great people composed of persons of every country in concord in their faith and their love because there is One God, One Lord, One Spirit, One Hope. That is the marvellous mystery of the people of God.

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19 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 374.
The notion of the Church as the people of God was prominent at the 1952 Willingen meeting of the IMC and has continued to be used.

**Sacrament, Sign, and Instrument**

Contemporary theologians increasingly speak of the Church as sacrament, sign, and instrument. This terminology is used more extensively in Catholicism than in Protestantism. It has roots in the writings of the Church Fathers and has been revived by theologians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Karl Rahner has been largely responsible for the current popularity of this image of the Church. In 1955 he wrote:

> The Church is the abiding presence of that primal sacramental word of definitive grace, which Christ is in the world, effecting what is uttered by uttering it in sign. By the very fact of being in that way the enduring presence of Christ in the world, the Church is truly the fundamental sacrament, the well-spring of the sacraments in the strict sense. From Christ the Church has an intrinsically sacramental structure.

Vatican II was the impetus for the widespread use of the notion of Church as sacrament. In the first paragraph of *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, the Church is called "a kind of sacrament -a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God"

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21 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 373.

22 Ibid, 374-376.

and unity among all people." The 1975 Apostolic Exhortation states:

While the church is proclaiming the kingdom of God and building it up, it is establishing itself in the midst of the world as the sign and instrument of this kingdom."

There has been considerable integration in Catholic theology regarding essential elements of the Church: its institutional reality and the mystery it conveys.

The WCC Commission for Faith and Order officially introduced sacramental language into ecclesiological discussion, and incorporated the terminology within Protestant documents. At the Uppsala Assembly in 1968 key references emerged: "The Church is bold in speaking of itself as the sign of the coming unity of mankind." Günther Gassmann has studied the terminology of sacrament, sign, and instrument within Protestant circles and he concludes:

The remarkably wide reception of the ecclesiological use of the terms sacrament, sign and instrument in ecumenical debate suggests that this terminology is found to be helpful in describing the place and vocation of the church and its unity in God's plan of salvation.25

24 Lumen Gentium, 9.

25 Evangelii Nuntiandi, 59.


Günther Gassmann, "The Church as Sacrament, Sign and Instrument: The Reception of this Ecclesiological Understanding in
These images emphasize the outward focus of the Church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote concerning the importance of the Church being outward directed:

"The church is the church only when it exists for others....The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving."

The nature of the Church as a sign means that it must be committed to the ultimate goal of its mission. The Commission of Faith and Order meeting at Louvain in 1971 added important qualifications for the use of this terminology:

"The church...is a sign. But it is also no more than a sign. The mystery of the love of God is not exhausted through this sign, but, at best, just hinted from afar."

A study paper for the 1973 Salamanca meetings stated:

"The church dares make the claim to be a sign or even sacrament of the coming unity of humankind only by virtue of its relationship with Christ, who is the real sign of unity."

As a sign, the Church most clearly points beyond itself: God chooses the Church to be in Christ the sign of the unity of the reign of God.

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1' Ibid, 5.
Church and World

For centuries a static idea of the church prevailed; the world outside the Church was perceived as a hostile power. The sinfulness of the world refers to the "massive and wrongful orientation of human society." In Liberating the Church, Howard Snyder writes:

In far too many churches the unmasked assumption is that the church exists for itself and that people in the surrounding community are "prospects" to be won rather than persons to be served.

A shift in Catholic thinking regarding the relationship between the Church and the world was inaugurated with Vatican II. Present in The Pastoral Constitution on the Church are expressions of ambiguity toward the world.

For a monumental struggle against the powers of darkness pervades the whole history of man. The battle was joined from the very origins of the world and will continue until the last day, as the Lord has attested. Caught in this conflict, man is obliged to wrestle constantly if he is to cling to what is good. Nor can he achieve his own integrity without valiant efforts and the help of God's grace.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church also recognizes

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" Gaudium et spes, art.37, 235."
a close connection between the Church and the world. It expressed a hope that the world could yet be "fashioned anew according to God's designs". In this document, the bishops claim an understanding of the Church's relation to the world that goes beyond evangelism and Church planting:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men.  

The liberation movement within the Catholic Church continues this conversation. It directs theological critique and construction of the Church toward its relation with the world. The Latin American liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez writes:

The Church must turn to the world, in which his Spirit is present and active; the Church must allow itself to be inhabited and evangelized by the world.  

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century has had a profound impact on the relationship of the Church to the world. The Reformation shattered the unity of the Church; instead individual Christian communities defined themselves over against other fragments. Clear boundaries distinguished the true or pure Church. A sixteenth century definition of Church found in the

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1" Ibid, art.2, 200.
2" Ibid, art.1, 199-200.
Augsburg Confession of 1530 describes the Church as: "the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." The Protestant preoccupation with right doctrine meant that they did not define themselves in terms of mission but ended up creating divisions among Christians. Bosch observes that this emphasis on pure doctrine encouraged the emergence of "a church without mission, and a theology more scholastic than apostolic."

After the Second World War, Protestant theology shifted its orientation of the Church toward the world. The World Missionary Conference meetings at Edinburgh in 1910 portrayed the Church as conqueror of the world and Christians as "finely tempered weapons in a world described as hostile and dangerous." The IMC at


Some scholars of Reformation history and theology argue that although there was no organized mission program in the sixteenth century, this does not mean that there was no sense of mission nor that a sense of mission did not find expression. Franklin Littell contends that the Anabaptists were the first to make the Great Commission central for the Church. Littell writes: "The Anabaptists represent thereby an early Protestant vision of a world mission unrestricted by territorial limitations, and in a unique fashion foreshadow the later concept of the Church as a community of missionary people." Franklin Littell, The Anabaptist View of the Church (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), 32. See also Donald K. Durnbaugh, The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985); Guy F. Hershberger, The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957).


Whitby in 1947 became the Church in solidarity with the world. At Whitby it was suggested that Christians should act as agents of change.

In a world where physical distress and suffering are more widespread than ever and cruelty, deliberate or callous, has mounted, the church must give relief both to body and spirit by sacrificial, unostentatious, compassionate self-giving. It must also pioneer in devising and demonstrating methods for the removal of at least some of the bases of that suffering—in rural reconstruction, in the right kind of education, and in the lightening of tensions among groups, races, and nations. 13

Reflecting on the developments in Protestant theology, Bosch writes:

Just as one could not speak of the church without speaking of its mission, it was impossible to think of the church without thinking, in the same breath, of the world to which it is sent. 14

Renewal and restoration of the missionary task of the Church embraced an understanding of the Church, evident from the beginning, as theo-political. 15

Rediscovering the Local Church

According to Bosch, "The church-in-mission is, primarily,

1910), 109-110.


1 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 377.

1 Hoekendijk, The Church Inside Out, 71.
the local church everywhere in the world." This change promoting the local Church as the agent of mission has been met with renewed interest. This perspective which is grounded in the New Testament insists that no local Church should maintain authority over another local Church.48

In Catholic theology the rediscovery of the local Church has been dramatic. Throughout the centuries Catholic missionaries established mission Churches which resembled the Church in Rome; at best these Churches were affiliates of the universal Church. Many Catholics continue to identify the centre of their Church as being in Rome rather than within the local worshipping community.

Vatican II recognized the reality of the local Church.

This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament. For in their own locality these are the new people called by God, in the Holy Spirit and in much fullness.49

In the years following the Council, the importance of the local Church has influenced Catholic ecclesiology.

The fundamentally innovative feature of the new development was the discovery that the universal

47 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 378.


5 Lumen Gentium, art.26, 50.
church actually finds its true existence in the local churches; that these, and not the universal church, are the pristine expression of church.\textsuperscript{56}

This shift was particularly evident in Third World ecclesiologies. Leonardo Boff writes concerning an understanding of the Church that is:

\begin{quote}
  a Church of and with the poor....This is a call to the whole Church to be more evangelical, more at service, and more of a sign of that salvation that penetrates the human condition.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

In the Protestant tradition the tension was between older and younger Churches.

The younger churches continued to be looked down upon and to be regarded as immature and utterly dependent upon the wisdom, experience, and help of the older churches or mission societies.\textsuperscript{58}

The older Church of the West sent missionaries to Third World countries with a guardian approach, deciding the fate of the younger Church. Naturally, Christians living in these Third World countries resented and resisted the Western Churches' claim. Mission was understood as for others, operating in a one way direction: rich for poor, west for non-west.

A shift began to take place in Protestant missions. The IMC Jerusalem conference in 1928 and the Tambaram conference in 1938 recognized the equality of the younger Churches. The Tambaram document states:

\begin{quote}
  
  
  Bosch, \textit{Transforming Mission}, 378.
\end{quote}
Our task is a united one. Our need is mutual. To discuss some technical questions we may need to use such terms as older and younger churches, but our whole emphasis must be on the universality and the solidarity of the Church of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{53}

At the Whitby conference in 1947, participants expressed the conviction that the distinction between "younger" and "older", "dependent" and "autonomous" was preposterous.\textsuperscript{54} The Ghana conference in 1958 of the IMC concluded that it was no longer valid or helpful to speak of older and younger Churches. There was movement to recognize that "every Church, everywhere, was understood to be in a state of mission."\textsuperscript{55} The Church-for others was gradually turning to the Church-with others. The whole world is a mission field, there are no distinctions between sending and receiving Churches. Churches need one another "as witnesses of solidarity and partnership, and as expressions of mutual encounter, exchange, and enrichment."\textsuperscript{56}

The development of the local Church as an agent of mission has important implications for our contemporary understanding of the mission of the Church. A redefining of mission is taking place in the local Church context. Dorothy Ramodibe from South


\textsuperscript{54} Bosch, Transforming Mission, 379.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 379.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 380.
Africa shares this commitment for a re-newed mission:

The Bible tells us that the church is the body of Christ (Eph. 4:16). We are to be embodied in this church, which has its wholeness (1 Cor. 12). Therefore this type of church cannot be "improved" but must be "born again". We create a "new" church which shall be the real body of Christ....Women and Men Re-creating a New Church Together in Africa -a church that will be a source and agent of liberation, justice, and peace in all respects.57

Creative Tension

Many contemporary theologians are attempting to construct a new paradigm, which Bosch refers to as a creative or abiding tension, between views of the Church.26 One perceives the Church as having a social mission, contributing to the humanization of society. Another maintains the Church as the bearer of a message of salvation, a partial realization of God's reign on earth. A third is attempting to transcend the perceived contradictions between these two positions.

There is tension between those who emphasize one or other of these positions. In traditional sending communities Church growth is essential, with achievement in mission measured by the growing sum of baptized believers. The counter pattern identifies itself completely with the world and determines the mission of the Church based on the world's agenda. These


26 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 381.
positions and the tension they pose within Christianity have a long history.

Vatican II documents reflect both perspectives. The differing positions of the Church were left to further deliberation, with hope of future clarification. More recent Catholic theology has begun to integrate the different positions, with transformation of the world at the very heart of the Church's mission. The Synod of 1971 declared:

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."\(^1\)

This significant passage creatively integrates the Church's mission of evangelization and social justice.

The integration of the IMC and the WCC, in 1961 at New Delhi, seemed to promise new relationships in Protestant Church and missionary circles. The New Delhi conference commissioned a study on "The Missionary Structure of the Church".\(^6\) At both the Uppsala and Bangkok conferences, in 1968 and 1973, delegates supported a position that:

revealed a holy impatience with any complacency on the part of the church. For the first time a world Christian body squarely faced structural evil and made no attempt

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\(^1\) The Pope Speaks, XVI (1971): art.6, 377.

\(^6\) Bosch, Transforming Mission, 382-385.
at spiritualizing away its responsibilities by seeking refuge in a sacrosanct institution."

By the mid 1970's there was movement in Protestant theology away from strong criticism of the Church and its mission, toward a view of the Church gathering for worship of God and dispersing to serve God. "The Church's identity sustains its relevance and involvement."

Theologians have given a great deal of thought to these views of the Church and their interrelationship. Many contemporary theologians believe there are significant connections between evangelism and the social mission of the Church, and question the misleading notion that these images of the Church are mutually exclusive.

Feminist Perspectives of the Mission of the Church

This section will establish Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church in the larger context of feminist theological understandings of the Church and its mission. I will present a summary highlighting contemporary understandings of the mission of the Church in feminist perspectives. The views of two prominent feminist theologians, Rosemary Radford Ruether

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Rosemary Radford Ruether, Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology,
and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,\(^5\) will be used for this summary. These theologians propose alternatives within the Church, namely "women-church" and an "ekklesia of women" respectively.\(^5\)

It is generally understood that there is no such thing as a single feminist theology but rather feminist theologies. As an emerging field, there are many different points of view or perspectives that are arising both within and beyond the Christian tradition.

The nuances of the definition of feminism are almost as various as feminist writers themselves. Since a normative canon of feminist tradition is neither available nor desirable, and since a creedal formulation, by allegiance to which one could be judged orthodox or heterodox, is precisely the kind of oppressive structure feminism rejects, a broad spectrum of views should be expected. All would probably agree that, at the very least, feminism, like other liberation movements, attempts a critique of the oppressive structures of society.\(^5\)

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(Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).


\(^6\) For post-Christian feminist approaches proposing an external critique see Carol P. Christ, Women's Spiritual Quest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Daphne Hampson, Theology and Feminism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

In the *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, it is noted that feminist theologies are usually understood as:

> a reflection of the meaning of God's self-revelation in our lives from the perspective of advocacy for the full humanity of women of all races, classes, sexual orientations, abilities, and nationalities."

Feminist perspectives depend on a variety of factors, including the racial, economic, national, sexual, and political background of the feminist theologian.

Because women's experience has so often been ignored, the beginning point for almost all feminist thought is a recovery of women's experience. "Women's experience has become a valuable source for theology." Women's experience of the Church, as it shapes their reality, is basic to feminist theology and feminist ecclesiology. Women who have studied the Church have focussed almost exclusively on women's experience, and "grope for words to express experienced realities which men in power are too often glad to deny." "Instead of focussing on a theoretical

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formulation about the Church, understandings of the Church from feminist perspectives begin with the actual, real-life Church. A critical feminist theology of liberation calls for a change in theological and ecclesial self-understanding.

In the last thirty years, many feminist theologians have been writing about the nature and purpose of the Church. Their thought develops out of experiences of the Church and is sustained by a dedication to reform the Church and therefore transform the mission of the Church. A feminist perspective calls for a renewal of the whole Church, and accordingly, the mission of the Church. It envisions a conversion from a patriarchal pyramid of domination, of authoritative ministry exercised by fathers from the top to the discipleship community of equals that Jesus initiated and the apostolic Churches continued. Many feminist theologians are writing about and supporting "women-church" and "the ekklesia of women" which "seeks to bring to consciousness that women are Church and always have been church." Thus they reclaim the human and ecclesial authority and power of women for the Church and for its mission.

Contribution of Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a Roman Catholic feminist

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Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 240.
theologian, includes in her work a range of topics from feminist religious history and constructive feminist theology to feminist revisioning of society. Ruether sees feminist theology dealing seriously and explicitly with questions of theological method and norms. She is committed to challenging patriarchal theology at its very roots, as a means of promoting the full humanity of women.

Ruether writes about Christian feminist liberation communities or women-church as feminist base communities or exodus communities. She describes these communities as existing within and on the edges of existing Church institutions. In these communities, women gather for the purpose of "reflecting upon, celebrating, and acting in the understanding of liberation from sexism." Feminist base communities search for "a meaningful union of inward spiritual growth and social praxis," thereby contributing to the broader goal of the liberation of all life." These, primarily North American, autonomous communities of protest are located in women's struggles against patriarchy. Like many

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2 Ruether changed the spelling from woman-church, in *Womanguide: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), to women-church, in *Women-Church*, because of the essentialist overtones of the singular.

3 Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 206. Ruether understands feminist base communities as not restricted to women only but open to all who want to experience liberating community. See also *Women-Church*.

African American and Latin American liberation theologians, Ruether interprets contemporary experiences of oppression and the determination for liberation in relation to the Hebrew’s story of exodus and exile. She explains that “we are not in exile, but the Church is in exile with us,” having fled together from the idol of patriarchy. She finds that existing Churches often operate as counter-signs to women’s hopes for wholeness and God’s reign of justice:

Women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and eucharistic famine. They can no longer nurture their souls in alienating words that ignore or systematically deny their existence. They are starved for words of life, for symbolic forms that fully and wholeheartedly affirm their personhood and speak truth about the evils of sexism and the possibilities of a future beyond patriarchy.”

For Ruether, Church is envisioned as redeemed humanity, a community of liberation from oppression, a community where the Spirit rules and where patriarchy is no more.

The Church is where the good news of liberation from sexism is preached, where the Spirit is present to empower us to renounce patriarchy, where a community committed to the new life of mutuality is gathered together and nurtured, and where the community is spreading this vision and struggle to others.”

The women-church movement sustains the tension between the radical critique of Christianity and the positive experiences of

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1. Ibid, 3.
2. Ibid, 3-4.
3. Ibid, 213.
women. It provides a religious safe place for women who have been spiritually abused in patriarchal Churches. Their mission would be to create liberation within the context of the Church. Ruether maintains that such an exodus from the Church into a freer space of women-church is not a sectarian movement. Rather, such free space must remain related to the historical Churches in a creative dialectic. Ruether seeks to correlate the community of women-church in a creative dialectic with the Church.

One must learn to make creative use of existing institutions without being stifled or controlled by them. This is precisely what is meant by the positive working of the dialectic of spiritual community and historical institution.

Ruether insists that the task of women-church consists in liturgy and myth making as well as in consciousness raising and political action. Its mission is "based on a vision of a transformed world beyond the alienating isms of exploitation and oppression." Ruether envisions strong base communities of celebration and resistance. Committed to love, base communities begin to live


Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 212.

an ecologically healthy life: a concrete community of love. Learning and consciousness raising embodies the mission of these base communities.

**Contribution of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza**

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a Roman Catholic feminist biblical scholar, also points to the authority of women-church. Schüssler Fiorenza uses biblical texts in the struggle for liberation, and she accepts as useful only those portions of the Bible that fit her criterion.

A feminist theological interpretation of the Bible that has as its canon the liberation of women from oppressive sexist structures, institutions, and internalized values must, therefore, maintain that only the non-sexist and nonandrocentric traditions of the Bible and the nonoppressive traditions of biblical interpretation have the theological authority of revelation if the Bible is not to continue as a tool for the oppression of women.

Schüssler Fiorenza writes of her "attempts over the years to reclaim and rename women's spiritual powers in very concrete particular situations." She argues that those who have experienced

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spiritualities and corporate liturgies; 2) utilizing local institutions over which there is some control; 3) building organizational networks that reach out.

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Ibid, 273-274.


Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 1.
the liberating power of religion must claim or reclaim this power as one's own inheritance. Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that:

Christian feminists may not give up their religious authority to define biblical religion and the Christian church. We must never abandon our religious power to articulate a feminist religious vision of justice and liberation."

Her struggle is over the power of naming, primarily within the context of biblical religions. Her vision is of a collective of the women's movement reclaiming spiritual authority. By asserting the power of feminist theological naming, Schüssler Fiorenza seeks to transform patriarchal religions. She seeks to articulate ekklesia as a discipleship of equals:

that can make present the basileia, the alternative world of justice and well-being intended by the life-giving power of G-d as reality and vision in the midst of the death-dealing powers of patriarchal oppression and dehumanization."

The disciples of the basileia are to be like Jesus, called to proclaim the good news of a world of justice and love. The disciples are to make this world a present reality, inviting and gathering all people, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and liberating the oppressed. "The discipleship of equals must be a basileia discipleship."8 According to Schüssler Fiorenza, the basileia vision constitutes the mission for the Church.

" Ibid, 3.
" Ibid, 12.
" Ibid, 12.
Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the Jewish basileia vision of the gospels cannot be adequately proclaimed in a patriarchal Church. She maintains that such a vision can be affirmed and actualized only where women attain full spiritual power of naming and shaping religious imagination and community.

Schüssler Fiorenza claims that the vision of a different world of justice makes one a dreamer. She dreams of an ekklesia of women that inspires the struggle for ministry in the discipleship of equals. Schüssler Fiorenza's vision derives strength and courage from the memory of foremothers' and foresisters' struggles.

Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that the ekklesia of women begins with the recognition that as long as we live in a world of patriarchal oppression there is no exodus from patriarchy and no leap into freedom. Until all nonpersons are liberated, no one is liberated; this applies to women-church communities. According to Schüssler Fiorenza, a critical feminist theological vision of the Church and the mission of the Church calls for daily struggle and responsibility. She understands this vision of struggle not for exodus but for hope.

Facing increasing patriarchal repression in society and church, the ekklesia of women must develop a politics and spirituality for survival and change.

Schüssler Fiorenza emphasizes that the ekklesia of women is a rhetorical space for feminist interpretation of the Bible. She

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1 See Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said; In Memory of Her.
2 Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 331.
seeks to construct the *ekklesia* "as a feminist counter-public-sphere from which a feminist biblical rhetoric can speak." \(^9^2\) Schüssler Fiorenza claims there is greater freedom of movement, with the *ekklesia* of women, for feminist biblical interpretation moving back and forth between different rhetorical strategies of interpretation. She envisions a feminist rhetorics and ethics of biblical interpretation attending to: how biblical texts are read, how worlds of vision are constructed, how women's biblical stories are told, how women's agency in biblical times are constructed, and how biblical values and visions are chosen.\(^3\)

Schüssler Fiorenza envisions a rainbow discipleship of equals giving voice and celebrating differences because common ground is found in their commitment to the liberation struggle and vision of God's *basileia.*\(^4\) She suggests that the Church as the discipleship community of equals must be:

...the enabling, energizing, creative authority of orthopraxis that not only preaches the gospel of salvation but also has the power to liberate the oppressed and to make people whole and happy.\(^5\)

The mission of the *ekklesia* of women, a rainbow discipleship of equals, is the struggle and vision of God's intended community of

\(^3\) Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 7.

\(^4\) Ibid, 131-132. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes such feminist rhetorical strategies are: rhetorics of liberation, rhetorics of differences, rhetorics of equality, and rhetorics of vision.

\(^5\) Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 331.

\(^6\) Ibid, 247.
well-being for all.

Summary

In this chapter I have described six elements of an emerging contemporary missiology. In addition, I briefly highlighted contemporary understandings of the mission of the Church from the views of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. This material provides a framework for considering Russell's theology of the mission of the Church.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT FOR THE WORK OF LETTY M. RUSSELL

The beginning of partnership in dialogue is "digging in your own garden," so that you know what gifts you can bring to the global table talk with your sisters and what parts of your life might be harmful to others. Once we have understood the oppressive and liberating social structures of our own reality more clearly, we are better able to understand the social structures that affect other people's lives. Then we are able to include those data in reflecting on the meaning of the Christian tradition and the clues for liberating action and celebration we find in dialogue with others.

In this chapter I will reflect on Letty M. Russell; digging in her own garden. This chapter consists of four parts: the context for Russell's work; the theological mentors influencing her thought; a brief review of her theological journey; and finally, Russell's theological method.

Life Journey

The pioneering work of Letty M. Russell explicitly and implicitly gives voice to a myriad of influences, environments,
and experiences on her pilgrimage. Russell's work seeks a way to weave theology and life story. She is attuned to life giving energy coursing through her body, mind, and heart in relation to the world pulsing all around. In *Church in the Round*, Russell writes:

My goal is to talk about the church in such a way that those who read this book from a Christian perspective can say, "Yes, I recognize this as the church for which I long, and for which I struggle."  

Russell has been engaged in theological action and reflection in a variety of settings for over thirty-five years. Her reflections on the Church are in light of the insights from the communities of faith and struggle with whom she has shared this search.

Letty Mandeville Russell was born in Westfield, New Jersey in 1929, where she grew up and became a member of the Presbyterian Church. Russell asserts that she has always found it difficult to walk away from and to walk with the Church, describing it as a love/hate relationship with the Church.

I was baptized and raised in the Presbyterian Church of Westfield, New Jersey. From the time I was in kindergarten until I went to College I was expected to be at church school or church every Sunday. However, there were times when I found it rather unexciting. When I was in kindergarten, for instance, I ran away from church school and walked home to announce to my astonished and horrified mother that my class was boring! Some sixty years later

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5. Ibid, 11.
I still find that attending church is often alienating. It is this alienation that I face as I begin a journey to seek out what church might mean from a feminist perspective.

Russell describes herself as a white middle class North American woman. In Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective, Russell expresses the difficulty she experiences with the emphasis on inheriting: "I have inherited benefits that accrue to me disproportionately because of the social structures of racism, classism, and imperialism." She finds a need to confess her "inherited benefits" and that a great deal of this inheritance results from her father's garden binding her to patriarchal family and societal structures out of which she has come.

Russell grew up in a one-family house in a New Jersey middle class suburb. Her first conscious role model was her grandmother Letty, on her mother's side, for whom she was named. It was from this Grandmother that she learnt to love the Church through acts of service. She graduated from Wellesley College in 1951, where she was active in the Student Volunteer Movement and the Student Christian Movement of New England. After graduation

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6 Ibid, 11.
7 Russell, Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens, 143.
8 Russell's grandfather was an associate of John D. Rockefeller, head of the legal division of Esso. See Russell, "From Table to Garden," in Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens.
in 1951 Russell married." From 1951-1952 she taught third grade in Middletown, Connecticut, while also directing the Christian education program of a small Methodist Church in Higganum, Connecticut. During this year of ministry with the Methodist Church Russell decided: "I too could cultivate the life of a church community." ¹⁵

In 1952 she began her work with the East Harlem Protestant Parish as Director of Religious Education at the Church of the Ascension, and as a home missionary of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. In 1954 she was in the first class of Harvard Divinity School that allowed women. Russell was one of two women to earn top honours in her Masters of Divinity graduating class, although the faculty were reluctant to grant the only two women in the class the homage "because it might reflect poorly on the qualifications of the men."² Upon graduation in 1958, Russell was one of the first women ordained to the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament in the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. She returned to the Church of the Ascension, where she served as Pastor for ten years.

¹³ See Ibid. Russell writes: "I did what every 'normal' white middle-class woman did in 1951: I got married." She married a fellow leader in the Student Christian Movement, a graduate of Harvard and enrolled to study at Yale Divinity School. During 1951-52 while Russell's husband was student pastor in Higganum, Connecticut he left her and he left the Church.

Russell earned her S.T.M. from Union Theological Seminary, New York, in 1967 in the area of Christian Education and Theology. In 1968 she left the East Harlem Parish to continue her theological studies. She completed her Th.D. in Mission Theology and Ecumenics from Union Theological Seminary, New York, in 1969. Russell's dissertation was entitled "Tradition As Mission: Study of a New Current in Theology and Its Implications for Theological Education". Russell wrote in her dissertation that mission, not ministry, is the key to understanding new possibilities for theological education. She emphasized theological education as, "...participation in Christ's invitation to join in God's Mission of restoring us to true humanity."

It was through her national and international efforts with the World Council of Churches that Russell met a Dutch ecumenist and missiologist named Hans Hoekendijk. After studying with him when he taught at Union Theological Seminary, Russell married him.

From 1969 to 1974 she taught reformation theology and Christian education at Manhattan College as Assistant Professor of Religious Studies. Russell integrated her pastoral experience with her new teaching ministry emphasizing the congregation as


the locus of educational growth; she described education as building up, learning through action.\textsuperscript{14}

Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut has been the base of Russell's academic calling for the past twenty-five years. Her distinguished theological career began at Yale in 1974-77 as Assistant Professor of Theology, it continued from 1978-84 as Associate Professor of Theology, in 1984-86 as Professor of the Practice of Theology, and her current appointment in 1986 as Professor of Theology. In 1990, she was appointed Adjunct Professor at McCormick Theological Seminary and in 1993 as Adjunct Professor at San Francisco Theological Seminary.

In a candid manner, Russell reflects on her encounters at Yale as "a most dangerous place for me."\textsuperscript{15} The danger Russell experiences is that she feels "very much that I am more out of the garden than in it."\textsuperscript{16} As she tries to support the use of inclusive language about God, or affirmative action hiring, or teaches liberation, Russell experiences that she moves outside of traditional academia.

During this time Russell began her involvement with the


\textsuperscript{15} Russell, Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens, 148.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 148.
World Council of Churches, which continues today. Russell has been passionately immersed in theological reflection that is rooted in communities of faith and struggle. She is determined to connect local and global communities of faith and struggle practically and theologically. Through her work with the World Council of Churches, Russell is known throughout the world. She has been on the forefront of theology and Christian education from the liberation and feminist perspectives. Russell's understanding of feminism is integral to her vision of theology and her commitment with communities of faith and struggle:

the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women - as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.  

Russell understands her embodiment of feminist theology as advocating human dignity and equality for all women and men. She is nationally and internationally known as one who encourages theological dialogue that respects diversity and works for

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19 For a theological overview of Russell's work see Dissertation Chapter Three, Russell's Understanding of the Mission of the Church, pp.87-93.
inclusivity.

As an elite professional feminist woman, Russell found to her dismay that she still resembled her early role models, male and female. Her keen awareness evoked a subversive nature within her being. She identifies such subversive activity first, as being a misfit:

If you are a tomboy and 5 feet 8 inches tall in the seventh grade, you never do fit female cultural norms. Most certainly a white middle-class woman never fits in a New York ghetto neighborhood, nor does she fit in a Christian Brothers men's College or (for that matter) in the ministry.

Being a misfit or on the margin can give freedom to breathe, even the freedom to maintain a self-critical stance. Indeed that is the place where Russell finds it worthwhile to continue the struggle. Second, it is vital to share our inheritance refusing to accept reality as it is. Russell saw the need to learn from black mothers, who decided that the dream was the truth and then acted accordingly. Third, Russell discovered the need to cultivate the inner resources and wisdom necessary to live out visions of full human community. In seeking to describe the vision of new humanity and the meaning of liberation, Russell began to search out ways of learning and living which reinforce new found possibilities of equality and co-humany.

Russell has given time and energy to lecturing and teaching world-wide, in Asia, Africa, and Central America. The international scope of her scholarship incorporates the current

—— Russell, Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens, 149.
issues and thinking of Christian communities in all parts of the world. Her feminist concerns move toward a global partnership in feminist theology, affirming cross-cultural diversity, and working face-to-face in numerous groups and locations.²¹

Russell's work with the World Council of Churches, notably the Faith and Order Committee beginning in 1977, has enabled and supported her feminist liberation convictions. Her commitment to Third World women in her writings, conference and seminar leadership has stimulated feminist theological agenda globally.²² Her dedication to fostering feminist envisioning is further evident in her work as Doctoral Advisor to numerous students.²³ This is particularly apparent in her work as Advisor to the Doctor of Ministry Program with an international feminist emphasis, at the San Francisco Seminary. Russell's scholarly work is celebrated in a collection of essays honouring and

²¹ See Dissertation, Selected Bibliography, especially: The Future of Partnership; Growth in Partnership; Becoming Human; Inheriting our Mothers' Gardens; and articles by Russell in Doing Theology in a Divided World; International Review of Mission 81; Christian Century 1991-92.

²² Russell's curriculum vitae, fall 1996 Yale University, lists her membership on: the Board of Directors, Women's Theological Center; Board of Advisors, Asian Women Theologians; Board of Directors, Foundation of Theological Education in South East Asia; Advisor to the Doctor of Ministry Program, International Feminist Emphasis, San Francisco Theological Seminary.

²³ See Dissertation, Selected Bibliography - Dissertations Directed By Letty M. Russell.
Russell's theology has emerged from a Reformed tradition. Her theological understanding of partnership is greatly influenced by Karl Barth. In trying to explain the tension of God as separate, yet God as human partner, Barth wrote:

But did it not appear to escape us by quite a distance that the deity of the living God- and we certainly wanted to deal with Him- found its meaning and its power only in the context of His history and of His dialogue with man, and this in His togetherness with Man?...Who God is and what He is in His deity He proves and reveals not in a vacuum as a divine being-for-Himself, but precisely and authentically in the fact that He exists, speaks, and acts as the partner of man, though of course as the absolutely superior partner. He who does that is the living God. And the freedom in which He does that is His deity.

Russell draws on this understanding of God who, though superior, chooses to be in partnership with humanity. It is not as though God stands in need of another as God's partner, and in particular of humanity, in order to be truly God. It is just that God has

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26 Russell writes, "Whether we speak of the Trinity of economic salvation or of the immanent Trinity, or of other metaphors for understanding God, all such knowledge is an attempt to describe God's threefold way of being partner in God's self and being partner with us." See Russell, The Future of Partnership, 30.
freely chosen "to be man's partner." In *Household of Freedom*, Russell writes, "As Karl Barth has reminded us, God wants to be our partner and savior and has shown this in choosing to share our humanity." The way God has chosen to be partner with humanity is through Christ. God as separate from us, and God as choosing to be partner with us is a tension evident in Russell's work. She maintains a perspective of God free from us, yet choosing to be free for us in Jesus.

As a Presbyterian Christian educator, in the local Church in the 1950's, Russell was influenced by the Christian Education Movement which was underway at this time and was formative for her theology and education.

Influenced by my own seminary training in the 1950's, I wanted to make it clear that God in Christ is our teacher, and that we share with God in the process of learning through action.

Russell's view on the nature of the Church and the relationship of Church and the world have been shaped by James Barth, *Humanity of God*, 50. See also Letty M. Russell, "Authority in Mutual Ministry," *Quarterly Review*, 6 (Spring 1986): 12.


The Christian Education Movement was a response to the liberalism found in the Religious Education Movement prior to World War II.

Smart, a Presbyterian educator. In *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, Smart expressed his view of the Church and its relation to the world:

The Church is the human instrument called into being by God's revelation of himself in his word, a people of God living in response to him as his witnesses in the world, that through them God may be known ever more widely as he has been known to them. The revelation of God creates the Church.

For Smart, as well as for Russell, the Word of God is not synonymous with scripture. The Bible is scripture because it records God's love affair with the world, and invites humanity to participate in the restoration of the world.

Smart considers theology to be asking "how the Church can most truly be the Church," a question Russell continues to probe. Smart and Russell also share a methodology that seeks to integrate biblical, theological, historical, and practical ministry.

...when we speak of Christian faith, Christian worship, Christian education, Christian ethics, Christian witness, we are speaking of the same whole. In each case we are expressing a different perspective on the way men respond to God's grace with thanksgiving.

However, Smart's theological methodology differs from Russell's

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13 Ibid, 33.

14 Russell's theological methodology will be discussed later in this chapter.

in its starting point. Smart's theological methodology begins with biblical and theological questions, emerging from the scholarly tradition. Russell's theological methodology starts with the experiences of women along with men in communities of faith and struggle raising questions concerning biblical and Church tradition.

Evident in Russell's theological method is the use of liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Paulo Freire to ground her understanding of theological praxis." For Russell, feminist theology is a theology of liberation because it is "an attempt to reflect upon the experience of oppression and our actions for the new creation of a more humane society." She characterizes herself as being one "of those committed to doing feminist theology in partnership with other liberation theologies."

Juan Luis Segundo is another Latin American theologian who

" Russell borrows Paulo Freire's concept "pedagogy of the oppressed" to express solidarity with all persons. Freire points out the pedagogy of the oppressed is a task for radicals who are committed to human liberation and transformation of reality. See Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans., Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1988), 12-25. See also Russell, Human Liberation, 52-56; Christian Education In Mission, 35; Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, trans., and eds., Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 145.


has influenced Russell’s work.39 Segundo begins with the conviction that Christianity is a biblical religion.

It is the religion of a book, of various books if you will, for that is precisely what the word 'bible' means. This means that theology for its part cannot swerve from its path in this respect. It must keep going back to its book and reinterpreting it.40

Segundo's theological methodology is based on a hermeneutical circle.41 Russell shares Segundo's commitment that scripture has an important place and role in theology.42

The Dutch missiologist and Russell's late husband, Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk has influenced Russell's work. Russell rarely refers to Hoekendijk's influence on her theology yet it is significant. In Church in the Round, Russell reflects on the connection of her feminist liberation theology to the theological understanding of God's mission offering an uncommon reference to Hoekendijk's pioneering understanding of mission.43

40 Ibid, 166-173.
41 Ibid, 7.
42 Ibid, 8. According to Russell, Segundo describes a hermeneutical circle as: "...the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal. 'Hermeneutical' means 'having to do with interpretation.' And the circular nature of this interpretation stems from the fact that each new reality obliges us to interpret the word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then go back and reinterpret the word of God again, and so on."

44 Russell, Church in the Round, 90.
scholarly writing spans from the early 1940's to the mid 1960's." He was Professor of Missions at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. He had significant influence on the WCC in the 1960's, as discussion focussed on the Church and its calling with the world. Hoekendijk was fiercely critical of the Western missionary enterprise. Hoekendijk claimed to have rediscovered that ekklesia was a "theo-political category". The Hoekendijk approach to understanding mission that had been received in WCC circles is described by Bosch as:

> an umbrella term for health and welfare services, youth projects, activities of political interest groups, projects for economic and social development, the constructive application of violence, etc. Mission was 'the comprehensive term for all conceivable ways in which people may cooperate with God in respect of this world.'

The contention was that Hoekendijk supported a radicalized view that the missio Dei was larger than the mission of the Church, even to the point of suggesting that it excluded the Church's involvement. The central questions for Hoekendijk were: What is God doing in the world today? How is God active in the world? Hoekendijk suggested that: "Where liberation to true humanity

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Ibid, 392.
has taken place, we may conclude that the *missio Dei* has reached it goal." Russell maintains this understanding for the relation of God's mission and liberation. She writes: "I think of God's Mission or action in the world as equivalent to God's liberating action or liberation."  

Another influence on Russell's work is theologian Jürgen Moltmann. Russell draws on Moltmann as she struggles to understand the relationship with Godself, as well as God's relationship with humanity.

In discussing how God is to be understood in the event of the cross in Christ, [Moltmann] emphasizes that we cannot say who God is in Godself but only who God is for us 'in the history of Christ which reaches us in our history'.  

Russell suggests that the only way to understand God is in describing God-in-action. Russell also incorporates Moltmann's political theology of hope, as she participates in women's struggle for freedom and develops her own feminist liberation theology.

Russell continues to be informed by and actively informs feminist theology. Her theological searching has been in

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Ibid, 507.

" Russell, *Church in the Round*, 90.


the midst of the women's liberation movement and offers a vibrant contribution to the texture of feminist theology. Russell is influenced by social advocate and teacher Nelle Morton. Morton's passion with language, for image, and metaphor enlivens Russell's work. In The Journey is Home, Morton shares her holistic and self-affirming spirituality that both inspires and informs Russell's theological speech with her use of metaphorical descriptions for the Church.

Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and bell hooks are instructive for Russell's understanding and critique of oppression. These writers claim to work from the margin, most

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"The influence of feminist scholars Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza on the work of Russell will be discussed in the Dissertation Chapter Four, An Evaluation of Russell's Understanding of the Mission of the Church, Feminist Perspectives on the Mission of the Church In Dialogue, pp.166-180.


bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From the Margin to Center, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Talking Back: Thinking Feminist/Thinking Black (Boston: South End Press, 1989). The use of lower case letters for the proper name bell hooks is in keeping with the scholars form of written address for her name."
notably the marginality of black women." In Feminist Theory:

From Margin to Center, bell hooks argues that women of
colour are creating feminist theory that places their concerns
about the web of oppression at the centre of discussions of
feminist theory." hooks writes:

"It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black
women recognize the special vantage point our marginality
gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the
dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to
envision and create a counter-hegemony."

Black theologies speak of solidarity, justice, empowerment,
transformation, and advocacy. Russell acknowledges the imperative
need for feminist and black theologies to share insights with
each other as they share agendas of liberation theology."

From the days of the abolitionist movements the struggles
of blacks and women have been intertwined in both a mutual

" Russell recognizes a kinship with Black Theology. This is
addressed by Russell in several books and articles including: "A
First World Perspective," in Doing Theology in a Divided World,
eds., Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, New York:
Orbis Books, 1985), 206-211; Human Liberation; "A Feminist Looks
at Black Theology," in Black Theology II: Essays on the Formation
and Outreach of Contemporary Black Theology, eds., Calvin E.
Bruce and William R. Jones (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press,
1978), 247-266; Church in the Round. See also Glenn R. Bucker,
"Theological Method in Liberation Theologies: James Cone,
Russell, and Gustavo Gutierrez," in Philosophy of Religion and
(Chambersburg: American Academy of Religion, 1976), 118-121.

" hooks, Feminist Theory.

Ibid, 15.

" See Letty M. Russell, "Feminist and Black Theologies,"
Reflection, 74 (November 1976).
and a conflicting struggle against the over-arching system of domination by white males.\textsuperscript{61}

The writings of James Cone have encouraged and challenged Russell's journey toward freedom. Cone writes of his concern for the Church:

\textit{the heresy of the church today is not its doctrines, but its denial of the Lordship of Jesus Christ by refusing to join in the struggle for justice and freedom.}\textsuperscript{62}

Russell has encouraged and been encouraged by dialogue with voices of Third World women. For example, Chung Hyun Kyung\textsuperscript{63} and Mercy Amba Oduyoye\textsuperscript{64} search for ways to connect faith and life story in the context of women's lives who are the oppressed of the oppressed. Russell's feminist methodology of connecting with those on the margins searches for ways to work with and learn together with women who are suffering as the oppressed of the oppressed.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye highlights the necessity of hearing

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 14.


the voices of Third World women. She focuses on her African
culture and the generations of strong independent African women.
In her book on the Ecumencial Decade of Churches in Solidarity
with Women entitled *Who Will Roll the Stone Away?*, Oduyoye seeks
justice for women both locally and globally toward the
recognition of the full humanity of women.  

Chung Hyun Kyung is committed to understanding God at work
in and through the whole world and through all religions and
ideologies, particularly through the Korean traditions of
Christianity, Buddhism, and Shamanism. Chung is dedicated to
developing a theology that is life-giving for the poor and
suffering women of Korea.  

Russell together with other feminist theologians, believes
in continuing dialogue with a global network in which women of
all colours, cultures, and continents share their stories.

By listening to the voices of those who have been excluded,
and beginning with their oppression and marginalization,
we may find a way to cultivate a global garden together.

Russell shares significant contributions with the nurturing,
thought provoking, and innovative global network of women working
together in creating liberating theologies.

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65 See Oduyoye, *Who Will Roll The Stone Away?*

66 See Chung, *Struggle To Be The Sun Again.*


77 See Mary John Mananzan, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elsa Tamez,
J. Shannon Clarkson, Mary C. Grey, Letty M. Russell, eds., *Women
Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life* (Maryknoll, New York:
Movements of Thought

Letty M. Russell's work in the area of theology is considerable. I will briefly explore the significant movements in her theology, particularly her ecclesiology. A study of her major works will form the basis for this exploration.

Russell's first book, *Christian Education In Mission*, bears witness to her vision, her theological and ecclesiological growth. *Christian Education In Mission* describes her experiences at the Church of the Ascension in East Harlem during the 1960's. As pastor, Russell struggles with a city of poor people, of immigrants, of single mothers, and of unemployed persons. Russell begins to see and experience her context anew, through the eyes of those around her, people who did not share the privilege Russell enjoyed. It was through her experiences with the community in East Harlem that Russell began to question the Church and to seek new ways of being the Church which were more pertinent to the world.

Russell's ecclesiology is presented in her 1967 book *Christian Education In Mission*:

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The abundance of God's grace (Rom. 8:28; 5:15-17) and the people's celebratory response (I Thess. 5:16-17; Eph. 5:15-20) leads people from bondage to freedom. "Eyes of faith" through God's grace allows the people of faith opportunities to participate with Christ in God's mission (Luke 24:28-35; Isa. 6:9).

Missionary structures provide prototypes for churches serious about participation in the mission of God."

For the Church to participate in the mission of God, Russell maintains that the witnessing community is "to participate in God's mission of reconciling the world to himself through Jesus Christ...joining in God's work of restoring men to their true humanity." Russell argues that the arena of God's mission is the world and the Church is instructed to take the world seriously. She claims that the "present denominational structures are not adequate to the task of joining in God's mission or of taking the world seriously, therefore new structures are needed." Russell challenges the Church to view God through eyes of faith, the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. Russell asserts that with this new vision the life, message, and structure of the Church will be reformed, thereby transforming the mission of the Church.

Russell's work in the 1970's continues to propose reform

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63 Ibid, 10-11.
65 Ibid, 14.
for the Church. Her focus for reform is significantly influenced by human liberation and liberation theology. Russell persists with her concern for the poor and oppressed, as she continues to offer a preferential option for the oppressed. Yet she embraces an outlook that advocates for marginalized persons from the standpoint of gender, "advocating equality and partnership of women and men in church and society." Russell actively works to use nonsexist language in reference to God and humanity.

Russell begins to articulate her theological method as praxis. In Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology Russell explains her understanding of theology as praxis: "action that is concurrent with reflection or analysis and leads to new questions, actions, and reflections." This theological method concerned with praxis is central to Russell's theology in the remainder of her works including her 1993 book Church in the Round.

Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology is an innovative work in its use of language, and its feminist vision of authority. Russell continues to be sensitive to

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See Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, as cited in Russell, Human Liberation, 20.

Russell, Human Liberation, 19.

Russell, The Liberating Word.

Russell, Human Liberation, 55.

Russell, Church in the Round, 30-31.
language, not only by her insistence on the need to use nonsexist language but through her powerful and skilful use of image and metaphor.

Russell offers fresh metaphors for a new image of the Church which are drawn from the Greek word oikos, which include: "Household of Freedom", "God as Housekeeper", "New House of Authority", "Household of God", and "Good Housekeeping". Russell contends that we must continue to live in the house now ordered by the master, the ones who dominate.

The role of new interpreters with new modes of authority is to be "house revolutionaries", challenging and proposing new modes of "housekeeping" that may perchance transform the house.

Russell is committed to the recovery of language from a feminist perspective and believes this is crucial for a liberating faith.

A second focus evident in Household of Freedom is Russell's examination of the problem of authority. Russell discusses authority exploring the shift from "paradigms of domination" to "paradigms of shared power in partnership." This partnership will gain its authority through authorizing the inclusion of all persons as partners and through empowerment for

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1 Russell, Household of Freedom.


self-actualization. Russell's image of the Church presents an alternative eschatological vision for the Church - a household of freedom as a sign of the household of God."

Russell's writings through the 1980's continue to reflect her attempts to reform the Church. In The Church with AIDS: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis Russell demonstrates a change in perspective. She highlights issues of inclusivity, particularly as it concerns those labelled other and unclean by the Christian Church. Her work is directed at Church structures and practice that prohibits freedom. Russell's work has invited the Church to change regarding matters of partnership, feminist interpretation, authority. With her book The Church with AIDS, she writes from a position of persons with AIDS and persons with same sex orientation.

In Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church Russell provides a new paradigm for a fully welcoming Christian community. Russell articulates a doctrine of the Church from a feminist perspective by combining insights from her own years in Christian community and those experiences from global feminists searching for a liberating praxis for women and men. The Church is depicted as a gathering in Christ's name and

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"Ibid, 75. Russell uses the phrase household of God in lieu of kingdom of God."
service through the power of the Spirit."

Russell expands her metaphor of the household of God. She uses the marvellous imagery of the table: the kitchen table, the round table, and the welcome table. Her imagery of the table is the vehicle for conceptualizing a Church in the round, a place where the feast, God's eschatological banquet, is spread. Russell's is an already-and-not-yet vision, centred in the Christ, a vision already experienced through the presence of Christ's Spirit in the midst of a community of faith and their struggle for justice and new life. Russell utilizes the metaphor of God's hospitality as central to feminist ecclesiology.

Russell continues to call the Church to imaginatively and constructively repent as they move from a Church theology to a prophetic theology standing with those on the margins. Russell uses a feminist perspective to re-image the Church, based on her experience and the experiences of women and men in communities of faith and struggle.

**Theological Method**

Russell writes, in *Christian Education in Mission*, that her work grew out of two directions:

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" Ibid, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.
" Ibid, Chapter 2.
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that of my experience and that of my theology. My experience is that of life in a Christian community set in the midst of poverty, failure, and despair that has nevertheless learned to give thanks (Eph. 5:15-20). My theology is based on the conviction that the resurrection and victory of Christ is the starting and ending point of Christian life and nurture (I Cor. 15:51-58).

Russell's experiences in ministry particularly with the community in East Harlem influenced her understanding of theology. Her experiences of being in ministry with the poor and oppressed required that she reexamine and rework her understanding of ministry, as well as a theology valid to the experiences of those on the margin.

Russell is dedicated to joining with others in unmasking self-deception in terms of what is going on among Christians so that Christian practice can become consistent with purposed theological and ethical commitments. This task calls for integration and consistency of theology and practice. Russell's theological method is committed to concrete situations and contextual theology. Beverly Wildung Harrison calls this approach a "liberation social ethics methodology".' Katie Cannon describes Russell's theologizing as "emancipatory praxis".'

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uses a theological spiral as a contextual method helping to make the critical connections between experience, social analysis, tradition, and action so that all these different components are joined together in theological reflection within communities of faith and struggle." She recognizes all the components as essential to theology. Such a theological spiral helps to connect context with the search for the unity of the Church and humanity; action and reflection make connections between faith and life. Russell's commitment to action for social change and a critical consciousness is always seeking to make connections between theology and what is happening in human life.

Russell names her theological method a "Spiral of Theological Engagement": It is composed of five movements:

A continuing spiral of engagement and reflection begins with commitment to the task of raising up signs of God's new household with those who are struggling for justice and full humanity.

It continues by sharing experiences of commitment and struggle in a concrete context of engagement.

The theological spiral leads to a critical analysis of the context of the experiences, seeking to understand the social and historical factors that affect the community of struggle.

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Russell, Church in the Round, 30.
Out of this commitment to action in solidarity with the marginalized, and out of sharing of experiences and social analysis, arise questions about biblical and church tradition that help us gain new insight into the meaning of the gospel as good news for the oppressed and marginalized.

This new understanding of tradition flows from and leads to action, celebration, and further reflection in the continuing theological spiral."

For Russell, theological engagement begins with a commitment to God's work in the world, and to a community of people who are marginal. With these commitments as a way of doing theology, one can then enter the spiral at any place. Russell maintains that the five movements of the spiral are a process of "action/reflection and never reaches a conclusion. Instead it leads to some tentative clues and insights which in turn raise new questions.""

It would appear that the movement through the spiral begins with sharing and understanding experience, and moves through the other stages in sequence. However, entry could occur in the spiral through bible study, raising questions about biblical and Church tradition. This might raise issues about communities of interpretation, what one brings to the hermeneutical task, a sharing and growing awareness of one's own experiences and the impact of experience on theological beliefs.

It is not essential where one enters Russell's theological spiral of engagement, for the spiral does not have a specific

" Ibid, 30-32.

" Russell, Changing Contexts of Our Faith, 103.
sequence of stages in its movement. Rather what is crucial is the realization that the movements in this spiral are part of theological action and reflection. Russell believes that feminist theology is engaged in all of these movements at some point in time. According to Russell, one will participate in each movement numerous times. The ongoing movement of the spiral is generated by new questions that are raised which can give rise to new awareness and analysis as well as development toward social and ecclesial transformation.

This spiral begins with one's own experience and with engagement in a community of faith and struggle. In the process of sharing and understanding the communities' experiences, analysis is developed from the lives of women and men. As those experiences are considered, questions concerning biblical interpretations and Church traditions begin to arise. Questions of different interpretations are voiced as well as the influence these interpretations and traditions have on the construction of reality. With this awareness there is the opportunity to further develop and shape social and ecclesial reality by creating alternatives; paradigms for transformation.

The spiral illustrates a theological engagement which is a dynamic process. There is commitment as an individual joins with

a community struggling for freedom in moving through the spiral. Russell's spiral of theological engagement is dedicated to social transformation. In The Church With AIDS Russell offers application of her spiral:

The method followed in the Study Group of Unity and Renewal, and in this book, is a spiral of theological engagement. This method begins in the actual context of the community of faith and struggle, where persons engaged in the struggle with AIDS help the community to understand what it means to live with AIDS. Next it analyzes the experience of those struggling with AIDS and what this means for those reflecting on this experience. This in turn leads the group to explore new questions that are raised about traditional understandings of the nature of the church. The final phase of the spiral includes examples and suggestions for further action and reflection, so that both the writers and readers of this book can experience struggle, social and theological analysis, questions about tradition, and actions. In this way the theological reflection is embedded in the actual story of the church with AIDS as it seeks renewal in the midst of crisis.

Russell's approach aims to move oppressors out of their perspective into an understanding of concrete oppression and from this new standpoint do theological action and reflection. Her spiral of theological engagement represents an intertwining of life experiences and theories as faith seeking understanding.

Scripture is integral to Russell's theological

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" Anselm coined the phrase fides quaerens intellectum to represent faith venturing to inquire or ask questions. The phrase has become a way of understanding theology.
methodology. Russell believes scripture presents God's self-revelation through its narrative and functions as script for persons' lives. She believes the Word of God is centred in Christ as supported in scripture. Russell does not however, stress the sovereignty of the Word of God in relation to theology. According to Russell, theology embodies more than a response to the Word of God because it includes philosophical, sociological, and ecumenical contexts. For her, it is crucial to understand that the Word of God is uniquely God's Word as it is accepted in the human context.

To say that the biblical texts taken as scripture are "authority" for church and theology is to say that they provide patterns determinate enough to function as a basis for assessment of the Christian aptness of current churchly forms of life and speech and of theologians' proposals for reform of that life and speech."

The Bible is authoritative for Russell because it speaks to her relationship with God and God's creation, and because of the history of God with the world.

I am one of those for whom the Bible continues to be a liberating word as I hear it together with others and struggle to live out its story. It is an authoritative witness to what God has done and is doing in and through the lives of people and their history. It is authoritative because those who have responded to God's invitation to participate in God's actions on behalf of humanity

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" See Dissertation Chapter Three, Russell's Understanding of the Mission of the Church, Clues to the Mission of the Church, pp.142-145.

find that it becomes their own lived out story or script through the power of God's Spirit."

Russell recognizes certain biases in the Bible, yet continues to maintain that scripture grants blessing and liberation.

Why bother?...[The Bible] reflects the androcentric culture and religion of its time that the message continues to be one of the subordination of women to men, whatever you do with it. To this we can only say that "the liberating Word" has managed to speak to many new languages and cultures...."The liberating Word" can only speak to women and men of today if our words and actions put the gospel into practice as good news of liberty for "those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18).

The story of liberation through God's work is in Jesus, and seen in new ways through life experience, particularly the experiences of the oppressed. For Russell, scripture is the story of God's love affair with creation, and summons her to a deeper relationship with God.

For me the Bible is "scripture" or sacred writing because it stems from its story of God's invitation....Responding to this invitation has made it my own story, or script, through the power of the Spirit at work in communities of faith and struggle.

The interrelationship and importance of scripture and script is basic for Russell's hermeneutical process and therefore to her theological method.


Russell has developed an eschatological methodology.

I made a beginning in this area by discussing partnership from the perspective of God's intention for New Creation rather than from this perspective of Old Creation. I understand this eschatological hermeneutic as a constant "hermeneutic of suspicion" in which one questions the text and context of the writers and listeners in the light of emerging questions and shared stories from the perspective of the oppressed. Such a hermeneutic is a process of questioning our actions and our society in the light of the biblical promise of New Creation. The end of history is seen as the newness of creation breaking into life so that we discover signs of God's "new thing" now in our lives (Isa. 43:18-19).

Russell's theme of New Creation is prominent in her work. She recognizes her focus on the mending of creation as profoundly shaping her interpretation of scripture.

    My own interpretative key is the witness of scripture to God's promise (for the mending of creation) on its way to fulfilment. That which denies this intention of God for the liberation of groaning creation in all its parts, also does not compel my consent.

To understand Russell is to recognize the centrality of God's promise of New Creation in her interpretation and witness of scripture.

    Tradition understood as doctrine and ecclesial practices is also found in Russell's theological method. Russell attempts to locate a useable past to find a useable present in

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^ Russell, "Bread Instead of Stone," 668.


^ See Dissertation Chapter Three, Russell's Understanding of the Mission of the Church, Theological Overview, pp.110-117.
order to have a useable future. Her eschatological perspective focuses more on the present and future than the past. However, Russell does acknowledge the necessity to dialogue with tradition to facilitate transformation.

A criticism of Russell's theological methodology lies in the appeal to act and reflect without seemingly engaging in research and evaluation necessary to dialogue with scripture, doctrine, and history. However, distinct in Russell's theological method is the prior assumption of both a commitment to the theological task, and working in community. The context of community as a working group, empowered from their experiences, involved in theological dialogue is a revision to an environment of research and evaluation. By using this context of community as a modification of theological research and evaluation, Russell creates a corrective to the appeal of action and reflection.

Summary

This chapter has introduced Letty M. Russell and provided an outline of her life to date. Russell's theological journey has been explored displaying significant development as she searches for


universal freedom and transformation of God's household.
Theological mentors influencing Russell's thought have also been surveyed. In this chapter Russell's theological method has been introduced and examined. Having established the background for my study, I will proceed to examine the mission of the Church as articulated by Russell. In the following chapter I will offer an understanding of Russell's mission of the Church using the clues she provides in her theological work.
CHAPTER 3

RUSSELL'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'tis the gift to come down where you ought to be,
...to turn, turn will be our delight
'til by turning, turning, we come round right.'

The words of the Shaker hymn Simple Gifts embody Russell's hope and experience of theology. Russell asserts that theology "is a spiral that connects action and reflection in a continuing process of discovery."¹

Each time, we look at our experience and context in solidarity with those on the margin; do critical analysis of the social, political, economic, historical, and ecclesial reality; raise questions for interpretation of scripture and tradition; and search for clues to action and continuing reflection.²

Her development theologically has consisted in going around the spiral, and with each new move around the spiral Russell sees from a slightly different point of view.


² Russell, Church in the Round, 32.

³ Ibid, 34.
In this chapter I will draw from the writings of Letty M. Russell in order to demonstrate her understanding of the mission of the Church. This study will follow the movement of the continuing spiral Russell maintains in her thought and action as she discovers new clues and new questions toward a theology of the mission of the Church. The continuing spiral is evident in the layout of this chapter as it discovers clues to action and thought about Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church.

The chapter is comprised of two major movements: a theological overview, and clues to understanding the mission of the Church. The first movement begins with Russell's own experiences as a woman in the Church, as one in solidarity, listening and acting, with those at the margin. It moves to a series of questions in response to this experience that Russell advances further as theological convictions. This movement includes research and analysis of Russell's theology born of her experiences. Within this larger movement flow five significant theological themes: a feminist liberation ecclesiology, images and metaphors of the Church, Tradition, eschatological perspective, and paradigm of authority.

From Russell's theological context, the second movement seeks to discover her understanding of the mission of the Church. Within this larger movement six clues to Russell's understanding of

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' Russell refers to Tradition as God's handing over of Jesus Christ to the world. See Russell, Church in the Round, 36-39.
the mission of the Church will be explored: missio Dei, journey toward freedom, advocating justice, partnership in the household of God, transformative hermeneutic, and practising hospitality.

Theological Overview

Russell's theology embraces both liberation and feminist perspectives. It begins with the assumption that God's work through Jesus Christ is one of liberation, that humanity has been liberated to be part of the New Creation, and "to make that love [Christ's love] known as God's will to bring liberation, justice, peace and reconciliation to all creation." As noted in chapter two, Russell's theology has been influenced by the work of liberation theologians. Liberation theology is from the underside, not from a place of power.'

Like other theologians, liberation theologians proceed with careful and logical discussion, documentation, and points of clarification. Yet they are quite different in their commitment to reflect on the experience of oppression as a basis for understanding the biblical message of liberation. This beginning point is sometimes considered "biased", but liberation theologians point out that every theology is rooted in the cultural, linguistic and social situation of those interpreting the Gospel. Their commitment to articulate the meaning of God's concern for justice and shalom is simply a

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different starting point. Proceeding inductively they begin with a commitment to speak out of solidarity with a particular group of oppressed people, especially people of color, the poor and women living in the so called, Third World, or in this country."

Russell's theological method includes her experience as a woman, for it is part of the experience upon which she draws as she reads, reflects, interprets, and constructs. Her theology is developed out of "the perspective of women struggling for full recognition of the human dignity of all women and of all men." Russell interprets scripture as an authority for the equality of women and men before the Creator. No longer willing to be defined by theology done from a male perspective, Russell joins the voices of women developing their own theological chorus.

In all parts of the church, many women and not a few men seek ways of liberating the word to speak the gospel in the midst of the oppressive situations of our time.

Russell is a self-described feminist who advocates:

changes that will establish political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. In a Christian context [feminists] reflect on a way in which theology can become more complete, as all people are encouraged to contribute to the meaning of faith from their own perspective. Such action and theory form the basis of feminist theology. It is "feminist" because the women involved are actively engaged in advocating the equality and partnership of women and men in church and society.

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Ibid, 14.


Russell, Human Liberation, 19.
Russell understands feminism as "an advocacy word...for the needs of women, needs that cannot be met without changes in the lives of both men and women." She is committed to feminist theory and practice that considers freedom for all women: "Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement." Russell reflects on her own journey:

As a pastor and teacher I wanted to express my solidarity with women in my theology. I began to write theology from the perspective of women struggling to be free, so that both men and women can be more free. Feminist theologies are different in different situations, cultures and traditions, but they share the ingredient of commitment or advocacy of equality of the sexes. Feminist theologies represent a search for liberation from all forms of dehumanization, by those who advocate full human personhood for all. Feminist theologies are theology because the subject of reflection is God. All theology is thinking about God, what is new about them is that they take women's experience of God seriously in reflecting on how God is known to us."

Although there is no one feminist theology, rather feminist theologies, certain characteristics are evident in theologies from a feminist perspective. Theology from a feminist perspective

11 Russell, Church in the Round, 22.


primarily includes working for freedom of women, so that all persons might be equal, as well as valuing women's experience.

Russell suggests four basic components of feminist theologies: a commitment to act on behalf of the oppressed, an awareness that theology is contextual, a collective, and that it is critical. The first component identifies feminist theologies as a theology of praxis:

commitment to act on behalf of the oppressed and reflect on what this means in the light of God's liberating action in the exodus and resurrection. You can not just study these theologies. You have to act for the equality of women and men and then see what this means for your faith.

From a feminist perspective this means involvement with and commitment to equality for women and men.

These theologies [feminist theologies] are contextual. They begin in a concrete situation and ask about the problems and questions that arise in that context.

Russell is careful to acknowledge that she does theology from the perspective of a white, middle-class, American woman. For Russell careful attention must be given to the context in order to make connections. Context is not isolating but rather provides a critical gaze for looking at the connections between the text and our experience.

\[\text{Ibid, 102-104.}\]

\[\text{Ibid, 102.}\]

\[\text{Ibid, 103.}\]

\[\text{Russell, Church in the Round, 32.}\]
Paying attention to context does not detract from either faith or action. Rather, it emphasizes the connection between the context in which a community stands (and its understanding and interpretation of shared tradition) and shared struggles for justice in all parts of the globe. Russell argues that paying attention to context "provides a strong pattern that can address a multifaceted web of oppression." Feminist theologies are not the only theologies to make this assertion; their appeal is to women's experience. "Like other marginalized and voiceless groups, women disrupt the accepted western, male perspectives on interpretation."

The third component is that feminist theologies work to be collective. Russell has understood ministry in collective terms for decades. Her role in shared leadership in the East Harlem Protestant Parish in the 1960's models her deep commitment to being in partnership with others. In recent years, Russell has been intentionally part of cooperative projects that include others in the conversation.

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1. Ibid, 33.
2. Ibid, 34.

Chapter Two of this dissertation makes reference to the various cooperative efforts Letty M. Russell is engaged in, for
The style of liberation theologies provides opportunity for church renewal because these theologies encourage all people, not just professional theologians, to participate in the process of sharing the actions and thoughts of their lives. This style of doing theology is a collective attempt to live out faith, and all are invited, especially those who find themselves in communities of struggle for a more humane society. In the commitment to justice there is a sharing of God's bias toward the poor and the marginalized who listen for the good news (Matt. 11:15). Such a style is rooted in concrete contexts or situations and moves inductively out of those situations to understand the meaning of God's summons to journey with others toward the New Creation. Critical reflection and action are used as a continuing process of discerning the Way.  

Russell's fourth component is that feminist theologies must be critical. "They are experimental, trying to find the best questions for research, and questioning the contradictions they see in church and society." Russell encourages questions that will empower people to continue on a journey towards New Creation.  

We are more able to deal with our own fears and inadequacies as teachers and learners if we recognize that questions themselves are important, whether or not we can answer them. ... Freedom to ask questions is crucial for learning critical and committed awareness in a world of change.  

example: development of Women's Theological Centers, coauthoring, coediting, contributing to collective materials.

Russell challenges the belief in the myth of dualism:

the world is not made up of either/or's....Whenever we can arrive at a simple answer by picking one side of a dualism, we can be fairly sure that we have missed the other wonderful and messy ways that things can be both/and."

She maintains that "the scriptural and church traditions are constantly in need of critique and new interpretation if they are to be liberated as a witness to new situations, cultural perspectives, and challenges." Russell's feminist perspective, advocating for women, offers this critical stance.

A Feminist Liberation Ecclesiology

Russell's understanding of the Church is from a christological perspective:

I describe the church as a community of Christ, bought with a price, where everyone is welcome. It is a community of Christ because Christ's presence, through the power of the Spirit, constitutes people as a community gathered in Christ's name (Matt. 18:20; I Cor. 12:4-6). This community is bought with a price because the struggle of Jesus to overcome the structures of sin and death constitutes both the source of new life in the community and its own mandate to continue the same struggle for life on behalf of others (I Cor. 6:20; Phil. 2:1-11). It is a community where everyone is welcome because it gathers around the table of God's hospitality. Its welcome table is a sign of the coming feast of God's mended creation, with the guest list derived from the announcements of the Jubilee year in ancient Israel (Luke 14:12-14).29

27 Russell, Church in the Round, 22.
28 Russell, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 17.
The Church as a sign of the coming fulfilment of God's promise for New Creation is provisional. Over the centuries there has been a shift in the understanding of Christ's presence in the Church. For the Church to be an authentic witness of God's love and justice in a changing world calls for renewal in our theological interpretation of the meaning of Church. Russell advocates a feminist interpretation of the Church as a means of constructively formulating changes in terms of the nature and mission of the Church. Russell seeks to address, from a Christian feminist perspective, what it means to be a witnessing community where women and men are in solidarity with each other and with God. Russell believes the Church is in a time of revolution. The Church is facing serious liberation challenges from the women's movement, "to the patriarchal interpretation of ecclesiology." Russell's conviction is that feminist theology can create some of the changes needed in ecclesiology. As the Church is now being interpreted from a feminist perspective, new questions, fresh insights, and different explications of old doctrines are being formulated.

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30 See Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 210-211. Christ is initially perceived as the Church's founder (from within), then the Church came to see Christ as present and active in the world (from without), and finally from a liberation perspective there is a shift in understanding Christ as identified with the poor and oppressed (from underneath).


Ecclesiology, from Russell's perspective, is a synthesis of feminist theology and liberation theology, "committed to the struggle to stand with those on the margin."³³

Feminist ecclesiology is committed to justice for all marginalized persons and not just women, and liberation ecclesiology is not truly about liberation if it is not committed to liberation of all women together with men.³⁴

Russell's experience with communities of faith and struggle provide opportunities for her to discern a feminist liberation ecclesiology:

the missionary nature of the church as it participates in God's sending and liberating work in the world requires a justice connection.

the witness of the church as rooted in a life of hospitality...to the stranger in their midst.

the church involves the nurture of spirituality of connection...to God and to the people on the margins of society.³⁵

Russell locates feminist liberation ecclesiology within the context of a faith community searching for a "resurrection in the church."³⁶ The nature and purpose of the faith community is rooted in God's mission of mending creation. Its activity is in the context of the world.

From her work with the World Council of Churches' study on Friendship Press, 1991), xi-xii.

³³ Russell, Church in the Round, 43.
³⁴ Ibid, 43.
³⁵ Ibid, 110.
³⁶ Ibid, 110.
Missionary Structures of the Congregation Russell identifies structures suited for the Church's participation in God's mission. Russell identifies and describes four forms of missionary structures: family type, permanent availability, permanent community, and task force.

God's Trinitarian activity on behalf of the whole world calls the church to structure its life for participation in God's Mission and especially for those who are marginalized, oppressed, and denied their human dignity in that world. The life of the church is derivative from God's Mission and is shaped by the needs of those who are marginalized and oppressed in the world and by the gifts it can bring to the particular challenge of its own context.

Russell is dedicated to developing new structures for the contemporary Church that are relevant to society and more faithful to the Church's purpose of being a witness of God's love.

Russell identifies several types of liberation communities. Both the liberation structures of communities and missionary structures of communities are committed to participation in God's activity for justice. The significant difference between the two types of communities are the context out of which they are born and to which they are associated.

What makes them distinctive is not their traditional church life but their willingness to be connected to the struggle of particular groups of freedom and full

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" Russell, *Church in the Round*, 90.
humanity. Thus these communities become liberation and/or feminist churches of faith and struggle.  

The missionary structure groups originate from the Protestant ecumenical movement. In North America these renewal groups were initiated by middle-class educated white men. The liberation structure groups emerge out of the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches, although they are not always accepted by larger Church institutions. Their members come from groups struggling from oppression to freedom, and place emphasis on a commitment to act in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. The presence of a large number of women in these communities often leads to a focus on the full humanity of women together with men.

Russell identifies three types of liberation communities: renewed Christian communities, Basic Christian communities,  

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19 Russell, Church in the Round, 94.


41 Russell, Church in the Round, 97-101. Renewed Christian communities represent the ongoing movement in established Churches that emerges in Church life and calls the people to advocate for the marginalized in society and in the Church. Inclusivity and diversity, dignity and equality are stressed in Church life.

42 Ibid, 101-104. Basic Christian communities are small communities of faith and struggle, focussing on prayer, Bible study, with a basic commitment to stand in solidarity with the poor. They combine biblical and theological reflection with social examination which leads to action for justice. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "'Basic Communities': Renewal at the Roots," Christianity and Crisis, 41 (September 21, 1981): 234.
and feminist Christian communities.  

Russell's feminist liberation ecclesiology evolves from her work with the witness of communities of faith and struggle. A presupposition to Russell's feminist liberation ecclesiology is a "table principle". It asks: How are action and reflection connected to those at the margin?

It [table principle] looks for ways that God reaches out to include all those whom society and religion have declared outsiders and invites them to gather round God's table of hospitality.

Russell's table principle asks questions of connection from the perspective of communities of faith and struggle and it is through the lens of the experiences of these communities that Russell tests whether her feminist liberation ecclesiology makes sense.

Three elements emerge as integral to her ecclesiology. First, the conviction "that the missionary nature of the church as it participates in God's sending and liberating work in the world requires a justice connection." According to Russell, advocating

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Russell, Church in the Round, 104-111. Feminist Christian communities are ecumenical Christian groups created to bring feminist perspectives to mainline Christian Churches. The communities are formed by women and men alienated by the patriarchal structures, liturgies, and theologies of the Church. They most often form based on the need of advocacy for women, transformation of the Church, and new practices of spirituality. These groups are most commonly called Women-Church.

Ibid, 24-27.

Ibid, 25.

These elements of Russell's feminist liberation ecclesiology will be discussed later in this chapter.

Russell, Church in the Round, 110.
for partnership, the full humanity of women together with men, is basic to working for justice. Second, the conviction "that the witness of the church is rooted in a life of hospitality". It requires a new openness and welcome on the part of the Church toward those who are outsiders. Russell claims that it calls for a "shift in our ecclesiology toward an understanding that particularity is not to be equated with partiality (Acts 10:34)." Third, the life of the Church "involves the nurture of spirituality of connection." This last element of Russell's feminist liberation ecclesiology lifts up the communities need for connection to God and to those on the margin. Russell envisions the community practising a spirituality of connection through study and interpretation of the Bible and acts of celebration.

Images and Metaphors of the Church

Our words reflect the nature of reality as we see it, and they can be a powerful tool, either for oppression or liberation. Russell's guide to non sexist interpretation of the Bible, The Liberating Word, demonstrates a deep appreciation for the

"Ibid, 110.


Russell, Church in the Round, 110.

power of language to shape concepts of reality and ways of acting and to be shaped or re-shaped by changes in concepts and social behaviour. For Russell, the reciprocal relationship with language and social structures is consequential. "Without a conscious change in expression, the desired process of change in oppressive social structures is slowed down." Russell maintains that "changes in language interact with our faith and actions in Christian communities." New interpretations arise from Christian communities that alter the language in worship, theology, and daily life. The Church is also changing and in need of change and reform. Genuinely inclusive language, images, and metaphors must be recognized and encouraged. Russell is concerned that language adequately reflect an authentic expression of human experience. She insists on the use of inclusive language.

If the gospel message is good news that all are welcome into the realm of God, then a deal of careful scholarly work is needed to render that communication as inclusively as possible in biblical readings, liturgies, hymns, and in all ecclesial structures.

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Russell, The Liberating Word, 16.

Ibid, 82.

Russell, "Inclusive Language and Power," 583.
Russell insists that the metaphorical aspect of God-talk is an important task of theologians. She defines a metaphor as "an imaginative way of describing what is still unknown by using an example from present concrete reality." Her use of images and metaphors is in the hope of focussing the meaning of the Church in a way that makes it accessible to a feminist interpretation. The issue, for Russell, is whether a feminist interpretation can envision an understanding of the Church "that would make sense to those who share the perspective of women struggling for the full humanity of all women together with men." The intentional use of language is therefore, purposeful and vital in Russell's theology. Russell's primary images and metaphors used in her theology and ecclesiology are koinonia, diakonia, oikonomia, a Church for troubled waters, and Church in the round or round table.

The early Christians were described by the term koinonia or community, referring to the gathering of Christians, "people of the Way". Russell understands the term koinonia or community

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1 Russell, Church in the Round, 14.

a new focus of relationship in a common history of Jesus Christ that sets persons free for others. This partnership with Christ is described in the New Testament by the word koinonia....It is a form of partnership rooted in the life story of Jesus Christ, yet containing small anticipations of God's intended partnership of New Creation.\(^5\)

For Russell, koinonia describes "a relationship of trust with God and others that comes to us as a gift of Christ's love."\(^6\)

Central to Russell's understanding of koinonia is God's initiative in being partner with humanity, specifically through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.\(^6\) Partnership involves relationship with God, humanity and creation.

Russell identifies three basic qualities considered important for partnership. The first quality is commitment, involving responsibility, vulnerability, equality, and trust. The second quality Russell names is common struggle which she considers involves risk, continuing growth, and a spirit of hopefulness. The third quality Russell includes as basic for partnership is "contextuality in interacting with a wider community of persons, social structures, values and beliefs that may provide support, correctives, or negative feedback."\(^6\)

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Partnership is committed to the goal of New Creation. It focuses on mutuality, reciprocity, and a shared life which may be discovered in the Trinity. In God's self-communication to the world as Creator, Liberator, and Comforter reveals the dynamic and divine communication of love to humanity. In Jesus Christ, God is in partnership with humanity setting us free to work together toward New Creation. It is through the promise of God that Russell perceives something of the deep and profound mystery of the Trinity.

Russell claims that from a Christian perspective koinonia, community or partnership is "a new focus of relationship in Jesus Christ that sets us free for others." Its central commitment to Christ forms the basis of Christian community, and it is the Spirit that connects us with Christ. The Christian community, as partner with God, is called to bear the image of koinonia as it proclaims, celebrates, and serves.

Russell views koinonia and diakonia, or partnership and service, as inseparable. Partnership as a new focus of relationship in Christ sets us free for service. This conviction

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64 Ibid, 34-36. For Russell, the partnership of God in the Trinity reveals a focus of relationship in mutual love between God and creation.

Russell, Human Liberation, 102.


is visible in the history of God's self-presentation. Humanity is set free in Christ yet nevertheless called to service. Russell describes this as a paradox of freedom from and for."

_Diakonia_ begins with freely accepting Jesus' own story as one's own story and extends to solidarity with others. This form of service is an expression of liberation and a gift of empowerment, "being set free to be ourselves for others." "_Diakonia_ is becoming part of God's love affair with the world.

Russell describes the three basic forms _diakonia_ takes:

_Curative diakonia_ is the healing of the wounds of those who have become victims of life; providing help to the sick, the hungry, and the homeless.

_Preventive diakonia_ is attempting to curtail developments that might easily lead to restriction of full freedom for life.

_Prospective diakonia_ is attempting to open the situation for a future realization of life; helping those who are outcasts from the dominant culture or society to participate fully in society or to reshape that society.

Russell observes the Church using all three forms of _diakonia_. Women have commonly supported the curative _diakonia_ form and this raises a problem as it tends to limit full participation in ministry. A second problem for women and other oppressed groups is the difficulty in being identified with the role of

"_Ibid_, 73-77.

"_Ibid_, 77.

Russell, _Human Liberation_, 31-32. See also Russell, _The Future of Partnership_, 118-120.
servant. Service that perpetuates dependency is not diakonia.
Service involves the mutual action of people as co-servants with Christ, and genuine solidarity in groaning and liberation with others.

As she uses the metaphor of God's oikonomia or God's household, Russell begins with a biblical understanding of God's partnering activity:

The word for house, dwelling, or temple (bayith) is one of the fifty most frequently used words in Hebrew scriptures. Together with the Greek translations (oikos, oikia) it appears some two thousand times in the Bible. In the New Testament, house or household becomes a key metaphor for Christ's resurrected body and for the church as the household of faith.

Russell notes that in the Gospel accounts the word household is often used interchangeably with kingdom to signify where God's will is done. Russell uses household of God comparable to kingdom of God as a way of expressing the New Creation without using language of domination. Russell contends that as a metaphor of God's reign, household claims an inclusive wholeness as the arena of God's love. In this sense of God's householding

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"Ibid, 37.
"Russell, Church in the Round, 129. Russell sites Mark 3:24-25 as an example of the interchangeable use of household with kingdom. "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand."
activity, the Church as a household of faith is called to be a sign of God's power at work. Russell clearly states that "there are other signs that point toward's God's mended world house." She suggests:

household of God does not refer to the church, as it does in later New Testament books such as 1 Peter, but rather to God's New Creation. Insofar as church in all its manifestations becomes a place where household of freedom is experienced, it also becomes a sign of God's household."

Oikonomia is a sign of God's household both as a future and present reality.

Russell's choice of metaphor is surprising because of its frequent oppressive associations and ignored domestic implications for women. She combines household with the term freedom, both in personal relationships and in the social and political structures of God's world house. Russell imagines household where there is mutual love, care and trust.

Russell's image of a Church for troubled waters emerges from an ecumenical roundtable of action and reflection on the nature of the Church and its renewal in the midst of crisis. This involved the actual context of a community of faith struggling with Aids, analysis of experiences, exploring questions that are raised about traditional understandings, and suggesting further

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*Ibid*, 129. Russell's understanding of the work of Christ as proleptic and paradigmatic is discussed later in this chapter.

*Russell, Household of Freedom, 26.*

action and reflection.

In Russell's analysis of what it takes for the Church to be a Church for troubled waters, she states that "the troubling of waters is a metaphor not only for times of difficulty but also for the presence of God's Spirit." Russell cites Bible references illustrating situations in which God's Spirit is at work in the midst of troubled waters. The story from John 5:1-18 is noteworthy for Russell as it exemplifies the metaphor "troubling" in two ways. First, it refers to divine action, God's healing power. Second, it refers to "the trouble and suffering that comes to those who identify with outsiders". Jesus becomes the troubler of the waters when he befriends the outcasts of religion and society, brings healing and offers justice by welcoming those who are outsiders into God's realm.

The image of a Church for troubled waters challenges the Church to identify with the outcast and to attend to a ministry of healing and justice. It prophetically calls the Church to reexamine its self-understanding in light of the movement of the Spirit that is soaring over the uncreated watery chaos as God begins to create the heavens and the earth. In Matthew 3:11-17, the symbol of new life is the water of deliverance used in baptism. In John 5:1-18, the man by the pool of Bethesda is waiting for the Spirit to trouble the waters so that he can be the first to enter the pool and be healed.

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79 Ibid, 133-135. Russell states: "In Genesis 1:1, it is the Spirit that is soaring over the uncreated watery chaos as God begins to create the heavens and the earth. In Matthew 3:11-17, the symbol of new life is the water of deliverance used in baptism. In John 5:1-18, the man by the pool of Bethesda is waiting for the Spirit to trouble the waters so that he can be the first to enter the pool and be healed."

80 Ibid, 133.
Spirit.

Only true repentance and willingness to be in, but not of the world will lead members of the churches to search for their identity in the midst of troubled waters. Russell is aware of the difficulty the Church has in learning to be a community of struggle, love, and justice. Russell views the contemporary white North American middle-class Church as reflecting the culture of which they are a part rather than the New Creation. She envisions the Church as "a community baptized in the troubled waters of the Spirit and called out by God to participate in the New Creation."...

...the church needs to be willing to stir up the water, rather than look for the closest "bridge over troubled waters." If it is water that has been stirred up by God's Spirit, it may still hold a great deal of risk for those who swim in it, but it will be a place where we are likely to find strength for the journey. And if it is water that is stirred up by injustice and the marginalization of those considered "other," then the church also needs to be present there to work for change.

A Church for troubled waters advocates for justice socially, economically, and politically.

Russell continues to explore the metaphor of God's household in search of other images that speak about a global vision of communities of faith and struggle. She reflects on the question: What kind of Church could in some way become a household of

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*Ibid*, 144.


This leads her to ask about the contents in a household of freedom. Based on her varied experiences of community and her Christian heritage, Russell draws on the image of table. She differs from the analysis of Paul Minear, who classifies the table as a minor image in the New Testament. Russell maintains that the table is a significant metaphor for Church in the Gospels.

The table is always one that is spread as a gift of God and hosted by Christ. When this is added to the abundant reference to feasting and to God's banquet in the Hebrew Testament, it would seem that table community is a major image of church that links the community of Christ to the breaking of bread as well as to sharing with the poor.

Russell extends the metaphor of table to speak of a feminist interpretation of the Church.

Concerning the why and how and what and who of ministry, one image keeps surfacing: A table that is round.

Church in the round provides a metaphorical description of an unknown reality in terms commonly experienced: "gathering in the round, with or without tables, and experiencing the welcome of others." Russell extends the metaphor of table to include:

people gathered around the table and in the world in order to connect faith and life in action/reflection (the round table),

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* Russell, Church in the Round, 12.
* Russell, Church in the Round, 18.
* Ibid, 12.
work for justice in solidarity with those at the margins of society (the kitchen table),

and to welcome everyone as partners in God's world house (the welcome table)."

Russell indicates that the table must have many connections: the vital connection is to Christ. Christ's presence connects us to one another and to the margins of society and the Church, welcoming the stranger. Russell is concerned to make connections between faith and feminism, accepting the differences among women of a variety of cultures, languages, races, and religious backgrounds. A presupposition of Russell's is a desire to be engaged in round table talk as theological action and reflection connected to those at the margin. The image of Church in the round or round table emphasizes our relationship to one another. Russell claims that the use of the image of a table which is round is familiar to many cultures and homes, a symbol of hospitality, sharing and dialogue.

Tradition

Russell views tradition as something to be examined and evaluated rather than be assumed as the basis of life. She understands tradition as a problem for women and all groups with invisible histories as well as for modern society unless it is understood as changing and changeable. As Russell is

"Ibid, 12.

engaged in liberation struggles a key discovery for her has been dealing creatively and faithfully with tradition. She supports the much needed corrective of tradition with the reinterpretation of tradition as a basis for the search for new identity.

Russell is committed to talking back to tradition. The design of round table is to talk back to tradition. She refers to talking back in the sense used by bell hooks. "It should be understood that the liberatory voice will necessarily confront, disturb, demand that listeners even alter ways of hearing and being." Russell explains:

Table talk is also talking back in the sense that feminist interpreters are no longer willing to allow talk about God, about themselves, or about the church to continue in its patriarchal framework or understanding and interpretation.

Together with other feminist interpreters Russell challenges the patriarchal paradigm which defines women as marginal to the male centre. Talking back is the movement around Russell's spiral of theological engagement, "bringing scripture and tradition into connection with context, critical analysis, and

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action by those at the margins of church and society." 95

Russell asks of the Christian tradition: "Is it authentic? Does it have any meaning for me today?" 96 Russell's doctoral dissertation distinguishes models of theological education that are designed to advance the Tradition of Jesus Christ. 97

Russell offers a range of meanings of tradition, differentiating between Tradition, tradition, traditions, and traditioning. 98

Tradition is seen "as the action of God's Mission in sending or handing over Jesus Christ to the world." 99 It refers to the biblical understanding of the ongoing process of God presenting Jesus Christ to all generations. For Russell this involves a dynamic relationship of God with us.

In the biblical view, Tradition is not a static deposit, but a dynamic action of relationship or handing over as described in Mt. 17:22 and Rom. 8:31.100

A second meaning is that of tradition as "a deposit of faith

95 Russell, Church in the Round, 36.
96 Ibid, 2.
99 Russell, Church in the Round, 37. See also Russell, Human Liberation, 77. This interpretation of the Tradition is always capitalized by Russell and will be in this dissertation.
100 Russell, "Beginning From the Other End," 100.
in the witness of scripture and church doctrine. Russell identifies this as a basic anthropological category:

the structural element of the historical existence in which the still living and evolving past calls for commitment in shaping human community in the present and future.

A third meaning, for Russell, is traditions which would be the confessional patterns of Church life. These traditions represent the diversity among confessional groups and are an important part of developing identity. Yet they pose a problem in dividing communities of faith when Tradition is understood and declared only through traditions.

Russell includes a category called traditioning, "the process of handing over that is part of the human way of shaping history." The meaning of traditioning emphasizes the continuing process, the still living and evolving past to shape the future. The dimension of Christian hope is significant for the human traditioning process.

Central to Tradition is the biblical understanding of Christ that provides the liberating core for Christian faith. Russell recognizes that many feminists question the biblical account of the story of Christ as having special privilege. However, Russell maintains:

The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense


of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ. In spite of its ancient and patriarchal worldviews, in spite of its inconsistencies and mixed messages, the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of New Creation that impels my life.¹⁰⁴

Russell argues that "those who would do Christian theology cannot abandon the story of Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁰⁵ Her central theological norm is commitment to Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁶

God is known to us in Jesus Christ. God through Christ has entered and altered history.

Jesus Christ becomes God's re-presentation of the humanity of God. Just because of this he is also God's chosen representative of true humanity as togetherness with God.¹⁰⁷

God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ stands for all of humanity. "God's choice of the One also opens up a new possibility of a future in which all can become representative of a new personhood."¹⁰⁸ Russell views God as looking to humanity "to become re-presentatives of true humanity."¹⁰⁹ Russell's christology operates in mediating and reconciling ways.

Russell sees the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ bearing witness to God's love. "In Jesus Christ, God

¹⁰⁴ Russell, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 138.
¹⁰⁵ Russell, Human Liberation, 58.
¹⁰⁶ Russell, "Inclusive Language and Power," 590.
¹⁰⁷ Russell, Human Liberation, 136.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 136.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 136.
addresses us and provides a living relationship to help us shape
the present and future of our lives." Jesus is the example
for humanity, "it shows Christians clearly what God's love and
justice are all about". Jesus' humanity is paramount, his
being in the form of male needs to be disconnected from his being
the new humanity.

The struggle is basically for a new human being: one that
is whole; that moves beyond social stereotypes of
masculine and feminine, dominant and subordinate to an
understanding of human sexuality which recognizes the
variety of sexual characteristics in each person.

Christ's life and work, healing and teaching need to be connected
with the new human being.

The New Creation represents the new humanity to which we are
called. Jesus as God's representation actively introduces the
New Creation.

His death and resurrection witness both to the power of
injustice to cause suffering in the world and to the power
of God's just love in overcoming that injustice. This
action of God in Christ is the first-fruits of the coming
New Creation which is offered on behalf of all creation
(Rom. 8:28-39)....Jesus is elected both to witness to
and embody the New Creation, and it is the risen Christ's
presence among us that continues to convey the justice
and peace of that new reality.

Death and suffering are overcome by love, as Jesus the liberator
is the first sign of God's New Creation. Russell clarifies her

" Russell, The Future of Partnership, 44.

Russell, Church in the Round, 130.

Russell, "Beginning From the Other End," 102.

Russell, Church in the Round, 129.
conviction by drawing upon the biblical understanding for historic phrases such as Jesus is Lord and Servant. She recognizes the difficult connotations of each of the words and the possible problems this raises. Christ as the way to the New Creation came to serve. Russell concludes:

that neither Lord nor Servant can be removed from our description of God's self-presentation, and that the key to understanding them is to allow them to remain together in the liberating paradox that witness to the story of God's oikonomia. The words cannot be separated if they are to be understood without leading to false dualisms and false uses of power. The meaning of God's Lordship in Jesus Christ is clear only in relation to the purpose of that Lordship, which is service. The purpose of God's service and subordination in Jesus Christ is to establish the Lordship of God's love.

Russell affirms a primary characteristic of Jesus as service, a task to which all humanity is called. She views this as a liberation struggle for women along with men in the Christian community and the world.

Another way of discussing Russell's christology, of Christ as representative, is that of Christ as the connector, the representative of divine reality, as well as the One who connects God and humanity. Russell maintains that "Christ's presence also connects us to one another as we share in a partnership of

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Russell finds no problem with either of these terms. She recognizes the possible objection to the use of such metaphors, the dualistic meaning of domination/subordination or master/slave relationship, and the religious reinforcement of superiority. See Russell, The Future of Partnership, 62-67.

Ibid, 67.
Christ's presence is the primary connection for the Church, for each other and in the world. As stated earlier in this subsection, the traditioning process envisions Christ as central:

The Tradition is thus seen as God's handing over of Jesus Christ into the hands of all generations and nations until Christ hands all things back to God.

**Eschatological Perspective**

Russell's eschatological perspective is evident in the fact that she begins her theology with the New Creation rather than beginning with the old story of creation. Russell's perspective is a concept she calls adventus, "beginning from the other end." Adventus, Russell explains, is "God's future that comes toward us, breaking into our lives as the anticipation of God's intended creation." It is the Christ event that shapes our lives as part of the New Creation. Russell refers to what Jürgen Moltmann

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"Russell, Church in the Round, 18.


Russell, "Beginning From The Other End," *The Future of Partnership*.

calls the prolepsis or anticipation inherent in the Christ event, "that God is not our utopia, but that we are God's utopia. We are hoping for God, because [God] hopes for us."¹²¹

The Church is already called into partnership with God through Christ although it is not yet living the entirety of the New Creation. Already the world is being set free, but the suffering of the not-yet is consistently present. There is a constant tension of the already-not yet for those gathered in Christ's name. A tension of glory and groaning as the world struggles toward its liberation. In Jesus Christ, God's saving and liberating action has already happened, yet this is the process of continuing fulfilment and on the way toward completion in the New Creation.

"The church is on the way to the world of tomorrow because it already anticipates that world, living out of the memory of God's promised future."¹²²

In the tension of the already-not yet, Russell is committed to live "as if God's New Creation were already in our midst."¹²³ She looks to Paul's use of hos me, "living as if we are in God's New Age leads us to live as if not in regard to the customs and relationships considered of ultimate importance


¹²³ Russell, Household of Freedom, 40.
in this age." What really matters is God's love in Jesus Christ, God's promised liberation to be shared with all.

For myself, our relationship to Jesus Christ is of ultimate importance and all other things are hos me (I Cor. 7:39; Rom. 14:8).

Russell's eschatological perspective is rooted in a biblical hope of things to come which are oriented toward the future but also take place now. Her eschatological emphasis focuses on the future of God that is breaking into lives now.

This *eschatological emphasis* would look to God's goal and purpose for life and creation as the basis for contradicting present reality when it is seen to be dehumanizing.

The *already* quality of New Creation suggests for Russell the hope that is needed in the *not yet* character of New Creation. A perspective that is dynamic, always in process and never finished, involving risk, continuing growth, and hopefulness. Russell's confidence is that because God has hope and love for creation, humanity can have hope in God. She relies on Hoekendijk's expression for Christian hope:

Christian hope...means that we move forward in a world with unlimited possibilities, a world in which we shall not be surprised when something unforeseen happens, but shall, rather be really surprised at our little faith, which forbids us to expect that unprecedented.

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125 Ibid, 175.
126 Ibid, 167.
Paradigms of Authority

Russell's claim is that feminist theology provides an opportunity for analyzing authority. Russell understands feminist theology as "part of a revolution of consciousness that touches the issue of authority at every turn."

For whatever feminist theologians take up transforms itself into an authority problem. I usually call this the "feminist touch" - referring not to holding hands but to the daily experience of women who find that their words, actions, and being tend to raise questions of authority within a society and church that assumes authority only comes in the male gender.

All humans develop ways of being with one another. All human relationships include patterns of authority and power. Russell describes power as "the ability to accomplish desired ends through various means such as authority, coercion, persuasion, and the like." Feminists speak of power in terms of empowerment, the capacity for self-actualization. Power as a form of domination or the use of force to control others is rejected. Russell describes authority as "a relational bond that leads persons to give assent without coercion or persuasion because they find security in the real or imagined strength of others."


Ibid, 12


Ibid, 11.
emphasis on the relational bond, authority can inspire a response of obedience. Russell maintains that the source of authority for Christians is the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.

Authority can be understood as legitimated power. It is a form of power, or the ability to accomplish desired ends. The problem is that authority, like other forms of power, can be corrupted and used in illegitimate ways to manipulate or even destroy the respondents.132

Russell refers to Sallie McFague's work, Metaphorical Theology, which argues that paradigms in the field of theology are very slow to change.133 Liberation theologies and feminist theologies have signalled a paradigm shift in theology that affects authority structures. The predominant paradigm of authority in Jewish and Christian religions is that of authority as domination. For Russell, as well as for other feminist theologians, this paradigm of authority as domination no longer makes sense.

This paradigm of reality is an inadequate theological perspective because it provides a religious rationale for the domination and oppression of the weak by the political, economic, and religious power elites. Such a view is clearly contrary to the prophetic-messianic promise of God's welcome to all the outsiders (Luke 4:16-30).134

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132 Russell and Clarkson, Dictionary of Feminist Theologies, 19.
133 Russell, Household of Freedom, 33. See also McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 79-83.
134 Russell, Household of Freedom, 34.
A feminist paradigm that Russell advances is that of authority as partnership.

The emerging feminist paradigm that tries to make sense of biblical and theological truth claims is that of authority as partnership or community.... Authority is exercised in community and not over community and tends to reinforce ideas of cooperation, with contributions from a wide diversity of persons enriching the whole. When difference is valued and respected, those who have found themselves marginal to church and society begin to discover their own worth as human beings. 

This paradigm searches for a new way of ordering reality, not merely reversing the old paradigm of authority as domination. It seeks to be inclusive of women and men of every race and class, welcoming new questions raised and insights gained as the journey is shared toward God's New Creation. The paradigm of authority as partnership "grows in a community where people take time to be partners with one another." 

Russell depicts authority as partnership using the image of the rainbow:

rainbow order consists of a wider variety of colors, and it gains in beauty as more of the color and more of the entire circle may be seen. The rainbow appears most often in the midst of a storm, and this is appropriate for portraying a new reality in the midst of struggling with the old. The rainbow is also a familiar sign to us of God's covenant with creation after the flood (Gen. 9:12-13). 

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137 Ibid, 34-35.


139 Russell, Household of Freedom, 35.
With a rainbow perspective, human creation is no longer at the pinnacle of the pyramid of authority as domination. A rainbow perspective is in contrast to the hierarchical order imaged in the old paradigm of authority.

In this view, reality is interpreted in the form of circles of interdependence. Ordering is explored through inclusion of diversity in a rainbow spectrum that requires not that persons submit to the "top" but that they participate in the common task of creating an interdependent community of humanity and nature. Russell's new feminist paradigm of authority maintains an openness to the possibility that God is doing a new thing, "and this new thing may have to do with the way we exercise authority in God's world household (Jer.31:22)."

CLUES TO THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

For Russell, the emphasis of theology is toward the future and away from the past. God's promise of New Creation not the Old Creation is Russell's interpretive key for her theological explorations. Russell does her theological work out of the perspective of the anticipation of God's New Creation begun in Jesus Christ. She identifies her theological findings as clues, guiding those who seek to live now as if part of God's New Creation. Russell's clues provide information about God's action in the world. She understands theology as an ongoing process of


discovery and knows that "our answers are always provisional."¹⁴⁰ This is God's intention "because we are describing an ongoing process."¹⁴¹ Instead of looking for final conclusions, Russell looks for clues to follow and test.

We are called to live out the story of Jesus Christ in ever-new circumstances. When a person and not a principle is at the center of our life the relationship itself is never static. This means that the meaning of God's intention for creation and the image of God cannot be described in static terms.¹⁴²

Russell's clues are intended to serve as an invitation for others to share in the theological quest. Clues are not rules from a feminist theological perspective; rather clues acknowledge that no one theologian or theological viewpoint will have all the answers. Russell encourages testing the clues that she provides, based on one's own experience.

Well, we don't have all the answers, but we sure do have the questions; we know that to create is to survive.¹⁴³

**Missio Dei**

Russell's understanding of *missio Dei* is that all who participate in missionary activity are participating in the

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¹⁴⁰ Russell, "Beginning From the Other End," 105.
mission of God. It is participation in God's self-sending action through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in the world. Russell calls for the remembering of a theocentric interpretation of mission. She maintains:

the concept of missio Dei has been understood in theology as God's sending, traditioning, and liberating work. In this sense the church does not have a mission, but rather, it participates in God's mission in the redemption of humanity and the restoration of all creation. God's economic activity continues in the work of housekeeping and invites us all to take part through acts of justice and shalom."

The mission of God is dependent on the action of God in Jesus Christ. This constitutes a living, active, and sending quality.

The nature of mission as missio Dei (the Mission of God) is understood in Biblical perspective as the sending action and oikonomia (plan of salvation) of God in the history of the world. The Church participates in this Mission by its missionary or sending activity in the world.

Mission, not ministry, is the key to understanding new possibilities for the Church. The Church needs to begin with God's mission, which Russell views from the biblical witness as "one that points to God's intention for bringing about Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (to use the WCC theme)." To begin, the mission of God creates a commitment

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Russell, Human Liberation, 77.

in creating an alternative mission paradigm. An alternative mission paradigm is risky because it is open-ended and also open to the whole human race.14

For Christians, the mission of God is most fully revealed by God's action in sending Jesus Christ to dwell among us as one who welcomes particularly those who have been declared marginal, different, outcast. By welcoming all persons into God's new household, or reign, Jesus points us to the intention of God to include diverse peoples in the new creation.15

It is in the light of God's mission that the Church participates in the interpretation of scripture and Tradition; it becomes the way along which worship and witnessing efforts occur. Russell clarifies:

The life of the church is derivative from God's Mission and is shaped by the needs of those who are marginalized and oppressed in the world and by the gifts it can bring to the particular challenges of its own context.16

With this mission paradigm, Russell's focus is oikocentric (God/world/Church). The Church becomes partners in God's action as a sign of that action.

These three elements—Kingdom, world, and Church—must be spelled out in their proper order. First is the Kingdom as the primary reality that gives rise to the others. Second is the world as the place where the Kingdom is concretized and the Church is realized. Finally, the Church is the anticipatory and sacramental realization of the Kingdom in the world, as well as the means whereby

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16 Russell, Church in the Round, 90.
the Kingdom is anticipated most concretely in the world. Russell identifies the shift in theology and missiology from an ecclesiocentric to a theocentric and, for her work, to an oikocentric perspective. She discovers that the essence for the mission paradigm is on reaching out to those who are marginal, poor, and outcast from society and making them welcome in God's household. God's mission, most fully revealed in Jesus Christ, seeks to welcome and include particularly those who have been declared marginal, different, outcast as members of God's creation.

Journey Toward Freedom

Russell states that "Freedom can never be defined once and for all." The search for freedom is found in our own journey, sharing clues and stories of liberation "towards the future which God holds open for us" or by sharing our common longing:

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free  
I wish I could break all these chains holding me  
I wish I could say all the things I should say  
Say'em loud, say'em clear, for the whole world to hear!

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Ibid, 89.

Russell, Human Liberation, 25.

I'm glad I know how it does feel to be free
I'm glad I can break all these chains holding me
I'm glad I can say all the things I should say,
Say'em loud, say'em clear, for the whole world to hear!"

She clarifies freedom as "a journey with others and for others and toward God's future." The journey metaphor is used by Russell as a way of developing understanding into the dynamic and open-ended process of theology. Theology is a journey of continuing action and reflection. The biblical metaphor for this journey is that of exodus and Russell looks to the biblical story of God's liberation in the exodus story. Russell does not use the image of exodus as moving out of, but rather moving together toward freedom.

Whether we point to the freedom experienced at the Red Sea or in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we still understand our freedom as a gift from God who redeems us from personal and societal bondage, reclaiming us as partners in New Creation. This is seen as a journey toward freedom and wholeness.

The journey metaphor in the image of exodus means going out together as part of God's freedom movement. Thus giving way to what Russell considers the logical thought about God, described by Krister Stendahl, as "worrying about what God is

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Russell, Human Liberation, 25.

worrying about: mending creation."^{156}

Russell looks to the experience of women in today's world for clues in understanding the mission of the Church as a journey towards freedom. She merges her appeal to women's experience with a biblical description of the journey towards freedom found in Roman's 8:14-27, looking at groaning for freedom, discovery of freedom, and horizons of freedom.^{157}

First, with the vivid picture of the whole universe groaning for freedom there is the discovery of a solidarity of groaning. Women's liberation movements in the nations of the world help to underline this experience of solidarity with personal and social groaning. Women's growing realization that they can participate in shaping their own destiny and that of the world is what Jürgen Moltmann describes as the "Revolution of Freedom."^{158}

Second, with the working for freedom comes the longing to catch a vision of what it means to be free. Women's liberation movements and other liberation movements ask this question with new urgency: What does it mean to be human? What do real children

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of God look like? Women in these movements recognize the false ideologies of sexism and racism. Women in the Church are called to share in the process of discerning what it means to be human and to live out the discoveries of freedom, which means the restructuring of our world society.

The struggle begins with woman in her own heart, mind, and actions as she learns to be pro-woman. But it must stretch around the world to all people (men, women, and children) who are looking for the freedom to shape their own futures and participate in the search for what it means to be children of God.

Third, is the awareness that we live constantly in the horizon of freedom which is hope. A hope that God's promised future will become a reality. Russell stresses that as one moves toward a horizon, it seems to change and a new horizon appears.

The horizon of freedom constantly changes and looks different as we journey with others and for others towards God's future....There is always the horizon of the future which comes towards us as God's future. When we act now as if that anticipated future of God is breaking into our lives, we discover new horizons of freedom. God is hoping for us, and it is up to us to live as if God's freedom were already present in our lives.

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161 Russell, Human Liberation, 38.

162 Ibid, 41.

Russell contends that the women's liberation movement represents some of the already but not yet character of liberation.

By their new thoughts and actions women are saying that they are already on their way toward freedom. They know, however, that they have not yet arrived because no one is freed until all are free. The horizon changes but does not disappear because a few people gain new privileges and responsibilities. The stress on sisterhood stands as a constant reminder to women of the continuing responsibility for their other sisters and brothers in the world. Whatever gains women have made, they are only partial unless society and culture is restructured so that others have the same equal access to these changes, be they economic, political, social, or private.

Liberation is a long journey toward freedom, a never-ending struggle to find out who we are and what we must become. Russell's prophetic view is a calling "to live now as if the world is already on its way." The horizon of freedom is to hope in the future of God which is already in our midst. It is a clue for the Church to live this proleptic emphasis as a sign of the reign of God, bringing the future of God into the present.

**Advocating Justice**

Feminism is the advocacy of women for the needs of women, needs that will result in changes to the lives of women and men. Although feminism takes many forms and finds expression in

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different manners, from a Christian feminist perspective it
advocates for full human personhood and for all of creation.
Russell explains:

it [feminism] represents a search for liberation from
all forms of dehumanization on the part of those who
advocate full human personhood for all of every race,
class, sex, sexual orientation, ability, and age.15

Feminists continue in mission by advocating the rights of
people whom society marginalizes and exploits, women working for
the dignity of human beings and all creation. A clue to the
mission of the Church is the passion for justice that is integral
to women's mission. Women continue in mission seeking repentance
and transformation of persons and structures.

Women seek to turn the whole world into a house of
prayer in which each person is transformed into a being
that accepts the earth as belonging to God and the place
where God is experienced.16

Russell suggests that for the Church to be Christ's Church
it must witness to the presence of God, with emphasis on the
justice connection. Together with other theologians, Russell
asserts that the Church needs to include the perspective of people
who need justice, people on the margins.

The church witnesses to the cross by standing shoulder
to shoulder with those who are marginalized, by sharing
their burdens and suffering, and by learning to live
in community with one another.169

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15 Russell, Church in the Round, 22.

16 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Pact of Love Across All Borders,"

169 Letty M. Russell, "Searching for a Round Table in Church
and World," in Women and Church, ed., Melanie May (Grand Rapids,
For Russell, it is the justice connection which provides a vital clue to the mission of the Church. The work of advocating justice is intended to be descriptive of the Church. Equipped with advocating justice, the Church is to be a transforming agent in the world.

"If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!":70

Russell uses the metaphor of the kitchen table where the Church in the round draws people into solidarity and partnership as communities struggling for justice.:71 Russell maintains that the work of solidarity begins in kitchens "because it is there [the kitchen]...that the daily activities and lives of persons are shaped and moulded.":72 Russell sees no limit to the tables that are part of the Church in the round. Christ's table is central to the gathered community and connected to the round table, kitchen table, and the welcome table. But all tables, Russell stresses, are metaphors for the one table of God, "where there is justice and peace.":73 Russell views the Church as required to struggle for justice.

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:70 Russell, Church in the Round, 75.


:72 Ibid, 75.

In Russell's opinion, God's mission is to set humankind free from bondage. She considers this a biblical message that feminist liberation theology brings into focus. Russell's feminist understanding of the mission of the Church as advocating justice is rooted in her perception of God's mission of shalom. She defines shalom as including "this totality of blessing as a description of the goal of God's liberating action as past event and a promised hope."  Using language of shalom from the Hebrew scripture, Russell observes:

Shalom is a social event, a venture in co-humanity which cannot be reduced to a formula. The word itself represents a summary of all the gifts that God promises to humanity; the fulfilment of God's intention for all creation.  

Shalom is the total fulfilment of God's purposes for creation. It is experienced as liberation and blessing. The first motif of liberation refers to deliverance from all that restricts and endangers life. The second motif of blessing refers to "the power of life which creates wholeness and goodness in both creature and creation." Russell does not deny that salvation includes the message of individual well being, but she

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Russell, Human Liberation, 108.
does nevertheless stress "the total goal of salvation (Rom. ch.8) which is the gift of shalom (complete social and physical wholeness and harmony)."

Russell's feminist liberation theology joins other liberation theologies which seek to reflect on God's justice in light of particular oppressive situations by turning to the biblical motifs of liberation and blessing.

In liberation and feminist theologies the two overlapping motifs of shalom appear again as a description of a still living and evolving past that can shape the future.

In order for the Church to advocate justice, it must begin with its own social transformation. This involves change which is very difficult and requires risk.

Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety.

Russell points out that justice is about the restoration of right relationships. She calls for a return to the biblical notion of justice as God's saving action and our response to that action. The Church advocating justice "follows the one who is working still to call us all to take part in the work of mending the

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Ibid, 110.


creation and putting it right (John 5:17). Russell reflects on this further in her discussion of the Lord's Supper. The Church advocating justice must actively remove the fences at the table of the Lord's Supper so that all may bring their gifts, seek Christ's presence, and experience shalom. Russell claims the table is to be fenced with justice, becoming what is called the welcome table. Russell insists that the table belongs to God who fences it with justice and peace, not the limits and requirements often set by the Church. This clue of advocating justice is an important reminder that the Lord's Supper is the welcome table belonging to God.

The fencing of the table at the Lord's Supper refers to the need to be properly prepared to receive God's gifts of love and grace, but from a feminist perspective this preparation consists of a discipline of living justly in solidarity with those who are marginal to church or society.

Partnership in the Household of God

Partnership in God's household is a vital clue for Russell toward understanding the mission of the Church. Russell suggests

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182 Russell, Church in the Round, 147.
185 Russell, Church in the Round, 145.
that God offers a new grammar and a new math.\textsuperscript{166} What God offers is surprising because it does not follow the traditional Western rules of grammar and mathematics.

One thing about God's point of view on reality is that it is different. God's action in Christ is toward a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). Over and over in the parables of the Kingdom of God, Jesus points to the surprising reality of God's New Creation.\textsuperscript{167}

Russell's indication of a new grammar is evident in her creative and innovative use of images and metaphors. Russell perceives that the new grammar God has is inclusive, welcoming, and speaking to all people. It specifically welcomes outcasts, misfits, and sinners. God's new grammar speaks to all people in their own language about their own lives with God and with one another.

Russell's development and use of the household metaphors exemplifies the new grammar.\textsuperscript{168} Household is significant to the biblical tradition as well as the global family of faith in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{169} The metaphor of household, according to Russell, "can be a prism for understanding the jubilee promise of human liberation and reconciliation."\textsuperscript{170}


\textsuperscript{167} Ibid, 28.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid, 28.

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid, 28.

\textsuperscript{170} Russell, \textit{Household of Freedom}, 36-41.
It seems to me that one way of making it clear that the gospel confronts the old image of kingdom as domination and exclusion and replaces it with a new image of kingdom as love and community is to use an alternative metaphor, that of the household.\textsuperscript{191}

The word household is used interchangeably with the word kingdom in some gospel accounts to signify the place where God's will is done, that God's work is in the midst of humanity.\textsuperscript{192}

Russell recognizes the problem and possibility of using the term household of God for kingdom of God. It is a term that has most often been identified with the Church.\textsuperscript{193} Russell maintains that in the New Testament household of God can denote the gathered community as well as the eschatological reality of a new community.

In the New Testament there is always the understanding that the household can be the gathered community, but it also can be the eschatological reality of a new heaven and a new earth.\textsuperscript{194}

With the use of the term household of God, Russell extends the vision of what household might mean beyond Israel and the Church. Russell states that "Jesus' message is that all persons are created by God and are welcome in God's household."\textsuperscript{195} Russell

\begin{itemize}
  \item Ibid, 83.
  \item See Russell, \textit{Church in the Round}, 129; \textit{Household of Freedom}, 84.
  \item The language in I Peter associates the term household of God with with Church community. See Russell, \textit{Household of Freedom}, 84.
  \item Ibid, 84.
  \item Russell, \textit{Church in the Round}, 25.
\end{itemize}
claims that the wholeness of God's welcome extends particularly to the poor and marginalized. She asserts God's preferential option for the destitute and outcast as participants in building new households.

Russell's insight into God's new math is a clue to the mission of the Church. According to Russell, God seems bad at math because things do not add up correctly or at least not the way math textbooks and formulas would have us believe.

Talents that are used, multiply. People who work only the last hour receive a whole day's wage. Those who are saved are lost. The many sheep are neglected in search for one fool. The poor are fed and the rich are sent empty away.

God's new math is a sign of New Creation entering into the midst of humanity. The new math defies the human logic of equivalence. Rather, it is the logic of grace, of generosity and of overabundance.

Central to God's new math is the invitation to become partners in receiving the gift of koinonia or partnership.

In my books on partnership, I have developed the understanding of partnership as koinonia by describing it as what happens when there is a new focus of relationship in the common history of Jesus Christ which sets us free for others. I understand it as a gift of God in which we are drawn in to the already-not-yet of the new creation by the power of the Holy Spirit.197


Partnership works the same way God's new math works, in surprising and unexpected ways, transforming humanity, pointing to provisional and open-ended experiences from those who are considered weak, unclean, or the least of these. Partnership raises up small signs of the way things could be; it focuses on what God will do next when humanity keeps expecting. The gifts of synergy, serendipity, and sharing are found in partnership relationships and provide the energy for this innovative world-view.

Russell identifies four perspectives that are significant in God's new math and for the growth and health of partnership. One perspective is that of looking for third things, or a third thing in a partnership. The third thing looks for the common goal or the shared task that holds the partnership together. Russell perceives this third thing to be a partnership in Jesus' own ministry in which he shares in God's agenda of liberation.

A second perspective is that "in God's sight love is a matter of multiplication tables and not of subtraction." Gifts that are offered and used in partnership with others in need, Russell contends, have a multiplying effect. Russell points to the Eucharist as a symbol of the increase of gifts in partnership, "where the sharing of bread is part of God's intention that bread

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Russell, Growth in Partnership, 33.

Ibid, 34.

Ibid, 35.
be shared with all." A third perspective of God's new math working in partnership is what Russell calls "calculated inefficiency" or the minus factor. Calculated inefficiency allows for the weak to become strong, searches for those who are lost and of little account to society, works with patience and grace in the midst of human failings and denials. Russell maintains that God's new math provides space for people to grow, to experience transformation. A final perspective Russell offers regarding God's new math working in partnership is temporary inequality. Russell applies this image to God's action in Jesus Christ as becoming temporarily unequal, becoming a servant.

The basis for unity is... the willingness of Christ to become a servant and our willingness in our relationships to become temporarily unequal... but by willingness to accept the relationship for the sake of the whole.

God's new math and new grammar point to a perspective that is vital for partnership in the household of God. Partnership through the new math of third things, multiplication tables, calculated inefficiency, temporary inequality, and the inclusive wholeness and welcome of the household of God are

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291 Ibid, 35.
292 Ibid, 36.
293 Ibid, 36-37; see also Jean Baker Miller, Toward a New Psychology of Women (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 4-5.
integral clues toward Russel's understanding of the mission of the Church.

**Transformative Hermeneutic**

Russell's hermeneutics is a theory and praxis of interpretation in the interest of women and men. Her theory of interpretation aims to empower women to become engaged in questions of faith and life. By claiming the authority of human experience as commitment and struggle, questions are raised concerning biblical and Church tradition, and analysis is offered in the attempt to work at creating social transformation toward God's reign of justice and peace.

Russell's feminist hermeneutic accepts two seemingly contradictory insights. On the one hand, the Bible has its origin in the patriarchal cultures of antiquity and has functioned with oppressive values. On the other hand, the Bible has functioned and continues to function as an inspiration, resource, and empowerment for those who struggle against oppression.

In spite of its ancient and patriarchal worldviews, in spite of its inconsistencies and mixed messages, the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of New Creation that impels my life. 205

Russell asserts that women must seek to liberate the interpretation of the Bible from male bias. 206 Russell affirms that the Bible has been spoken through the words of men and

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"Russell, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, 138.

"Russell, The Liberating Word, 14-15."
interpreted in an androcentric way. According to Russell however, the biblical story is liberating "when by the power of the Holy Spirit it comes alive again in our hearts and actions." 207

The Bible is authoritative for Russell because of its ongoing relationship of God with creation, both in the past and in the present.

It [the Bible] is authoritative because those who have responded to God's invitation to participate in God's actions on behalf of humanity find that it becomes their own lived out story or script through the power of God's Spirit. 208

Its [The Bible's] authority in my life stems from its story of God's invitation to participation in the restoration of wholeness, peace, and justice in the world. 209

Russell understands the Bible as a sacred writing or scripture which functions as a prompting for life or script. 210 For Russell both of these understandings of the Bible as scripture and script are significant and related. The Bible is scripture because it bears witness to the story of God's invitation to participate in the New Creation. The Bible is script because it provides a vital relationship in Jesus Christ

207 Russell, "Beginning From The Other End," 98.


to help shape human lives.\footnote{Russell, Household of Freedom, Chapter 11.}

I am one of those for whom the Bible continues to be a liberating word as I hear it together with others and struggle to live out its story. For me the Bible is Scripture because it is also Script. It is an authoritative witness to what God has done and is doing in and through the lives of people and their history. It is authoritative because those who have chosen to participate in God's actions on behalf of humanity find that it becomes their own lived out story or script.\footnote{Russell, "Beginning From The Other End," 98.}

Both scripture and script are critical for Russell's hermeneutical process.

Russell perceives that feminist interpreters of the Bible are in touch with tradition and the biblical witness, but she claims:

\begin{quote}
they [feminist interpreters] raise radical questions about the unfaithfulness of the church as guardian of that tradition and about the ways scripture and tradition have been used and misused.\footnote{Russell, Household of Freedom, 49.}
\end{quote}

Russell asserts that she considers the Bible from the perspective of those struggling for human wholeness.

For my part, I cannot imagine a God who does not seek to be partner with all humankind in the mending of creation.\footnote{Ibid, 49.}

Russell views the Bible as a story inviting transformation. The basis for Russell's transformative hermeneutic is the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ through the power and presence
of the Holy Spirit. God incarnate in Jesus Christ is the source of life and love, and addresses humanity providing help to shape the present and the future.

Russell's prophetic vision of transformation begins with the Church.

The world as we know it is unjust, and to share with God in the building of a community of justice is to call for a breakup of the world as we know it and for a New Creation!

Russell's transformative hermeneutic is imaginative and constructive. As Russell observes, it calls for conversion, transformation, and liberation, beginning with the Church.

Practising Hospitality

Hospitality is a basic clue to the mission of the Church. Yet, Russell observes it is "often ignored when that hospitality requires including those who are outsiders." Russell writes, using her table metaphor:

This table of hospitality is just the opposite of the

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Ibid, Chapter 3.

Russell, Church in the Round, 126.

Ibid, 126-127. Russell identifies conversion, transformation, and liberation as imaginatively and constructively leading humanity toward a desire for social transformation. She argues that this longing and action begins with the Church. She also indicates the similarity between conversion, transformation, and liberation and the Church's teachings about salvation as justification, regeneration, and sanctification.

Ibid, 150.
As a Christian theologian who is committed to practising God's hospitality, Russell understands her task as generating a critical way of doing theology that makes sense to those who are marginalized and excluded, and responds with concern to the challenges of Christian scripture and Tradition.

Russell argues that the doctrine of divine election puts a fence around the table with a sign that reads NOT WELCOME. She suggests that the doctrine of election "is often used as a divine sanction for uniformity rather than unity, and for privilege of one group rather than justice for many." Russell maintains the difficulty with unity, uniformity, and exclusion is that they prompt alternative descriptions of mission for the Church. She suggests speaking of mission as hospitality and diversity rather than unity and diversity.

The church is a community called to share in the passion for humankind shown by God in Jesus Christ. It is called as Christ's partner to live as a community of faith, compassion, and justice.

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22. Ibid, 149.
Russell looks to Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan for an understanding of hospitality. Hospitality is an expression of unity in Christ as sharing God's hospitality with the stranger, not just someone like ourselves. John Koenig's description of hospitality as partnership with strangers supports Russell's claim. Koenig suggests:

the term for hospitality used in the New Testament, refers literally not to a love of strangers per se but to a delight in the whole guest-host relationship, in the mysterious reversals and gains for all parties which may take place. For believers, this delight is fuelled by the expectation that God or Christ or the Holy Spirit will play a role in every hospitable transaction.  

Parker Palmer understands hospitality as protecting pluralism, because the Church as a community of compassion shares God's love without the aim of conversion. Palmer states that communities are often formed, "by an act of exclusion - we are in and they are out."

Russell believes that hospitality is a manner of interaction with the many pieces that make up the whole of God's creation.

The doctrine of election, as an indicator of divine preference, is often used to deny the diversity of our society and of the whole earth by closing out persons

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Ibid, 130.
of different race, class, sexual preference, gender, or nationality."226

Diversity is often viewed as a threat, possibly offering discord in a particular community's way of life, yet many differences are created by God. Russell questions whether the doctrine of election is the reason that communities find it easier to practice unity without diversity.

Russell observes: "Often the chosenness of the community manages to swallow up the mandate for outreach to others."227 Christian communities spend considerable time with those on the margins, often working out of fear in order to protect the community from the strangers rather than to connect with those on the outside. Russell argues that this fear of difference is reinforced by dualistic theology that separates Church and world as good and evil. Russell stresses the importance of the Church moving to the centre of society, the middle of the struggle for life, the centre of the web of oppression.228

A community that is able to practise hospitality and therefore, welcome the stranger is called to compassionate living, "the Church becomes a community of compassion where...God's covenant to do justice, to love kindness, and to

227 Ibid, 479.
Practising hospitality links those who have been excluded with those who have been included. This connection is vital, Russell claims, because it is those who have suffered injustice and exclusion that offer clarity, meaning, and authenticity to hospitality and diversity. A community practising hospitality allows for radical openness to the stranger.

Hospitality calls us to be a community of faith and struggle that connects with those at the margin and celebrates the way God has called a diverse people, so that we may all share together at God's welcome table.

Summary

This chapter has highlighted the theological writings of Letty M. Russell. Russell's theological perspective embracing liberation theology and feminist theology has been explored. The theological overview of her feminist liberation work has considered five significant themes: a feminist liberation ecclesiology, images and metaphors of the Church, Tradition, eschatological perspectives, and paradigm of authority. In this exploration of Russell's theology, critical theological questions and convictions advanced by Russell have been considered.

From the context of Russell's theological perspective, the


Russell, Church in the Round, 181.
chapter moved to discover her understanding of the mission of the Church. Six clues from Russell's theology are presented as key to her understanding of the mission of the Church: Missio Dei, journey to freedom, advocating justice, partnership in the household of God, transformative hermeneutic, and practising hospitality.

This chapter has explored Russell's theology as well as her clues to the mission of the Church. The study will proceed to evaluate Russell's work in conversation with contemporary missionary paradigms, and feminist perspectives of the mission of the Church. It will then present Russell's significant contribution toward an understanding of the mission of the Church.
CHAPTER 4

AN EVALUATION OF RUSSELL'S UNDERSTANDING
OF THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Having considered Letty M. Russell's theological understanding of the mission of the Church in her writings from 1967 to 1993, I will now present an evaluation of Russell's theology of the mission of the Church. I will consider Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church as it contributes to the contemporary conversation. The first part of this chapter will reflect on Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church in light of the six major elements of an emerging missionary paradigm outlined in chapter one of this dissertation: missionary by its very nature; God's pilgrim people; sacrament, sign, and instrument; Church and world; rediscovering the local Church; and creative tension. The second part will examine Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church in dialogue with the feminist perspectives of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza. The final section will explore what I consider to be Russell's contribution toward an understanding of the mission of the Church.

It is important that an evaluation of Russell's theology occur in dialogue. Russell envisions dialogue as the hope for healing. Dialogue helps to imagine a world on its way toward
shalom because it implies both openness to otherness and a sense of common solidarity in suffering and alienation, and willingness to work for change. Russell presupposes dialogue as the very nature of participation:

participation with Christ in his work as the representative of God's love to others, and sharing with his community in common actions of celebration, reflection, and service in the world (I Cor. 10:16-17)."  

Russell refers to Paulo Freire's description of dialogue as the "encounter between people mediated by the world in order to name the world." Dialogue works in the world through relationships, and for Russell this is embodied in partnership. It assumes the togetherness of humanity with God in Christ and close human relationships.

Dialogue is a key to community with women and men of living faiths and ideologies which is based on mutual trust and shared concern for the unified world in which we live."  

Russell envisions the Christian community as establishing new forms of dialogue that offer healing of oppressor-oppressed relationships.

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An Emerging Missionary Paradigm In Dialogue

Missionary By Its Very Nature

The church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning.

Russell's theology affirms the overarching concept of missio Dei. Her theology presupposes God's love for the world and God's yearning for restoration of wholeness, peace, and justice in creation. The story of God's love affair with the world, embodied in Jesus Christ, and humanity's responsibility as partner in the mending of creation are essential to Russell's theological understanding. God's abiding compassion for the world and God's invitation calling humanity to stand together in search of New Creation inform Russell's understanding of God's mission for the world.

Russell identifies the shifts in missiology from what Churches did to convert nonbelievers at home and in foreign lands to the work of mission active in every land within and outside the Church. Russell perceives the work of mission as "the sending, traditioning, and liberating work of God in Christ". Together with other theologians and missiologists, Russell speaks

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6 Russell, Church in the Round, 88.
of the Church as a participant in God's mission."

Russell's theology claims the missionary activity of the Church as God's self-sending through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Russell views God fundamentally as Creator of the cosmos, transcendent and immanent, in relation with creation and particularly with those who suffer. She views Christ primarily as the Liberator who sets humanity free. And she maintains the conviction of the Spirit as creation's Advocate affirming both the divine gift and task of the Spirit. Russell views the purpose of the Spirit as strengthening the Church to carry on God's liberating action."

Russell establishes her theological and christological perspectives in light of her understanding of God's mission for the world. Her work on a spirituality of connection recognizes the gift and role of the Spirit in the life of the Church as it participates in God's mission. She discusses spirituality in non-dualistic ways that affirm the full humanity of women and men. She is helpful in articulating a Christian feminist spirituality as a holistic connectedness involving wholeness, freedom, relationality, and dignity.

A Christian feminist spirituality is one that finds guidance and source of transcendence in the God of Jesus Christ and finds guidance in our life choices

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Russell, Church in the Round, 88-90.


through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus' story.++

She understands the Spirit as empowering the community of faith and struggle to experience liberation, to freely join in the work of God through Christ.++

Russell understands "God's Mission or action in the world as equivalent to God's liberating action or liberation."++ She does not identify with the missionary perspective that hopes to proselytize people into Church membership, convincing persons who join to become the same as others in the community.++ Rather Russell understands God's liberating activity as setting people free to become all that God intends them to be. Central to Russell's understanding of God's mission is the value of difference and diversity as a God-given gift and an enrichment in the lives of humanity and communities of faith.

In Church in the Round, Russell herself is astonished to notice that God's mission is not perceived as a major theme in her theology.++ Her conviction of mission as God's liberating action or liberation encompasses the value of difference and diversity which can be problematic in light of more static views

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++ Ibid, 187.
++ Ibid, 187.
++ Ibid, 90.

++ See Russell's understanding of evangelism discussed later in this chapter, pp.164-166.
++ Russell, Church in the Round, 90.
of mission. There is an active component to Russell's sense of mission; it is sending, traditioning, liberating. This encompasses an understanding of mission that is dynamic, creative, and transformative. The active ingredients in Russell's theology of mission are rooted with God in Jesus Christ, oriented in the present with future influences.

God's Pilgrim People

The Church on an exodus journey is the story Russell uses to find clues primarily concerning education for partnership. Her discernment of an exodus journey finds support in the writing of Hans Hoekendijk:

I believe that the Biblical story of the exodus will, in a very special way, become our story even if the outcome is different....Where now we only vaguely and uncertainly detect a tract, there will be a path clearly shown us. What happens along the way will not be so conspicuous....Here and there a sign of shalom: reconciliation, peace, joy, freedom. A pennyworth of hope for people who have given up hope. A parcel of desert made inhabitable, a bit of life made human by that incorrigible Humanist, who is well pleased with [humankind].

Russell identifies exodus as a journey that "leads into the desert,...long, dusty, and difficult." She uses it as a

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Russell, Growth in Partnership, 64.
metaphor for humanity's life in the present, living out the already-not yet as partners in God's New Creation. Exodus names creation's freedom journey. For Russell, this journey is the basis for the Church's prophetic ministry.

Russell's theology is concerned with breaking down any boundaries that may restrict the image of the people of God. Her hope is to transcend divisions in the Church and society, and "claim the whole for the arena of God's powerful love." Russell uses the household imagery, focussing on the eschatological understanding of a new heaven and new earth. Her eschatological perspective enlarges the vision of what household might mean, not only beyond households of domination, but also beyond the Church itself as only one small sign of God's power at work among all the nations. Russell's use of the household imagery raises both a problem and a possibility. It is potentially confusing given the variety of biblical images associated with the household language. As well the stereotyping, degrading, and negative images present in the contemporary context for household are problematic. However it holds promise as a creative envisioning of the welcome extended by Christ. It is reclaiming a common structure present around the globe, a place of relationship and power that is in need of healing.

Russell's theological understanding of the people of God embraces all those who society and the Church consider on the

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outside. Russell's theology includes a growing awareness of the choice to be connected with all those on the margins. It means treating those people who have been labelled outsiders as subjects - God's people - who are respected and celebrated. Russell relies on womanist theology, global women doing theology, and feminist spiritually to guide her as she reflects on connections from the margins of society and the Church.  


Church as sacrament and instrument. Christ as the Liberator empowers the great reversal of relationships and structures. The Church is called to be a sign of God's power in Christ at work among all the nations. Russell holds that there are other signs that point toward the New Creation.\textsuperscript{12} Russell takes offence at the Church's fencing of the table, fencing the sacraments.

The fencing of the table at the Lord's Supper refers to the need to be properly prepared to receive God's gifts of love and grace, but from a feminist perspective this preparation consists of a discipline of living justly in solidarity with those who are marginal to church or society.\textsuperscript{23}

Russell suggests actively removing fences because the table belongs to God. She calls this the welcome table, and all who partake are called to come with repentance and share in the new life of Christ. \textsuperscript{24} Fencing the table with justice, Russell maintains, allows all to gather as full partners with God. By this she means "all may bring their gifts to the table and seek to discern the presence of Christ in their midst."\textsuperscript{25}

Russell's theology is practical, her consideration and

\textsuperscript{12} Letty M. Russell, "Searching for a Church in the Round [challenge of women's spiritual support groups to the church]," in Defecting in Place, eds., M. Winter, A. Lummis, A. Stokes (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 257.

\textsuperscript{23} Russell, Church in the Round, 145.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 145-150. See also James Cone, Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation and Black Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986).

Russell, Church in the Round, 146.
development of the table images are rooted in her ministry experiences in the 1960's and early 1970's, and are relevant for the Church today. Her hands on, pragmatic approach of doing theology has been criticized. However, Russell's goal continues to be one of relating feminist theology to those in the Church and to those who long to share in a worshipping community.

Church and World

Russell's vision of a transformed Christian community is embodied in communities of faith and struggle, partnering with those at the margins of the Church and society.

What makes them distinctive is not their traditional church life but their willingness to be connected to the struggle of particular groups for freedom and full humanity. Thus these communities become liberation and/or feminist churches of faith and struggle.

Russell rejects the division of the Church as community and the Church as institution. She argues that both community and society are in need of "the charisms of God's participation in God's Mission." Russell calls Christian communities to be in partnership having structures of shared authority in community rather than "inflexible and dominating institutional forms."  

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26 See Russell's images of the Church discussed later in this chapter, pp.187-193.
27 Russell, Church in the Round, 94.
28 Ibid, 93.
29 Ibid, 93.
Russell is committed to shattering dualistic views, where God's preferential option is for the Church and Christ is not identified with the world. She views this dualistic either/or perspective as a deformation of the doctrine of sin and salvation, one which conceals the injustice of social and ecclesiological systems. "Willingness to split off issues of sin from issues of injustice has led to the double sin of the church." Russell's feminist theological understandings of the Church and the world model a wholistic perspective.

Russell's theological understanding of the mission of the Church is involved with social, economic, and political advocacy for justice. Justice is a key ingredient for the work of Church and world transformation. Feminist liberation theology embraces the political, economic, social, and religious aspects; the whole of life. Russell believes the Church must be in the world and yet not be of the world. This requires vigorous struggle for right relationships and recognizes that God's justice invites humanity to live as part of the New Creation rather than in a broken one.

Russell's liberating eschatology envisions the hope, healing, promise, and goodness of the love of God. In her work of proclaiming the vision of New Creation, Russell labours with the struggles experienced in the present, while confidently announcing what will be. Russell maintains an acute sense of

\[\text{Ibid, 123-127. See also Russell, "Searching for a Church in the Round."}\]

\[\text{Russell, Church in the Round, 124.}\]
balance in her eschatological perspective. Her prophetic stance works toward what, in faith, she knows will be even greater liberation for all creation. There is the possibility of focussing on New Creation to the extent that there is blindness to current struggles. Russell's vision is toward New Creation while her senses are keenly alert to global realities here and now.

Rediscovering the Local Church

Russell's study of ecclesiology and its mission is contextual, through the prism of communities of faith and struggle. Her theology "begins with commitment to the task of God's mission with those who are struggling for justice and full humanity." The experience of pastoral ministry for seventeen years in the East Harlem Protestant Parish in New York City, with the Presbyterian Church of the Ascension, is the concrete reality out of which Russell's theology is born. Russell states that the "Church of the Ascension was the mother church for my ecclesiology." Russell's experience was that of a community of faith in Christ, struggling for justice. It is here she worked in a shared team ministry, partnering with people on the margins of society and the Church. Integral to Russell's theological understanding of the mission of the Church is her social

Ibid, 168.

Ibid, 12.
location of community.

For Russell, rediscovering the local Church is not concerned with the distinction between younger and older, dependent and autonomous faith communities. Rather it involves those who are inside the Church and those who are on the underside of the Church. Russell's theology entails living, listening, and learning with the poor and marginal. She saw her task, while working with the East Harlem Protestant Parish, as involving those who are considered inside and on the underside of the Church. She envisioned and shared in the development of a team ministry model for the local Church.

In order to share the gifts of each person on the team it was necessary to share tasks so that each person not only exercised his or her own skills and responsibilities, but also learned those of the others. Russell's theological perspective challenges individualism in community. She engages in a theological method that emphasizes the corporate nature of humanity. She promotes partnership in response to the growing individualism in society and in the Church. Russell's understanding of partnership recognizes all people as subjects, valuing a variety of opinions and points of view, and engaging in communal searching and sharing. Russell's theology explores authority, and relationships of power and how they impact the mission of the Church. There is risk in

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² Ibid, 19.
welcoming the poor and marginal and hearing anew the good news. Exercising solidarity will call for change in relationships of power and will transform communities.

Creative Tension

Russell believes there are connections between evangelism and the social mission of the Church. Participation in God's mission by the Church is what Russell calls evangelism. Russell understands the mission of God in handing over Christ is to bring liberation and blessing to humanity. The task of evangelism, Russell maintains, is sharing the good news of God's liberation in Jesus Christ. The influence of liberation theologues' praxis methodology is evident in Russell's action-reflection approach to theology.

It is an evangelical attitude toward life itself; an attitude that looks at what is going on in situations of oppression, trying constantly to see the problems and to work out the way in which God's will of liberation can be done; only to begin again with the next set of problems and consequent actions."

It is vital to Russell's theology that evangelism be understood as flowing out of God's love affair with the world; it involves theocentric participation. The role of the Church in evangelism is to point to Christ in the world, and not to itself. In the life of the Church, the work of evangelism is "from God's traditioning action whose goal is shalom for all

Russell, Human Liberation, 125.

Ibid, 125.
Russell interprets salvation as situation-variable, a story that describes God's mending and reconciling in all of creation, with the goal of salvation as shalom. For Russell, shalom includes "this totality of blessing as a description of the goal of God's liberating action as past event and promised hope." Russell relies on Claus Westermann's identification of liberation and blessing as two key motifs of salvation.  

Russell regards liberation as a gift of God's activity in history with emphasis on liberation as partnership with God in the work of New Creation. Blessing is viewed as God's intention for the full humanity of women and men. In this way the mending of creation is understood in an eschatological perspective. Russell recognizes the larger meaning of salvation as shalom, including both liberation and blessing. Russell offers meaningful and encouraging illustrations of communities working towards liberation. Her understanding of the mission of the Church as blessing is less evident in concrete ways. Although Russell's work is primarily constructive and hopeful, in this area it lacks

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"Ibid, 127.


Ibid, 108. See also Russell, Church in the Round, 116.


Russell, Church in the Round, Chapter 6.
a sense of celebration. Russell's project would be enhanced by including models of feminist liberation rituals of blessing.

Feminist Perspectives in Dialogue on the Mission of the Church

This part of the chapter will consider Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church in dialogue with the feminist perspectives of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. It presents an evaluation of Russell's work in light of the similarities and divergence with the works of two prominent feminist theologians. This section establishes Russell's theology of the mission of the Church in a context of feminist theological understandings of the Church.

Russell in Dialogue with Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether and Letty Russell share a commitment for change in society and in the Church, a dedication to liberation from oppression. Ruether's work embodies and asserts this challenge:

Christianity, for the first time in its history, is faced with a large-scale challenge to the patriarchal interpretation of religion and an increasing coherent vision of an alternative way of constructing the tradition from its roots.43

As feminist theologians, Ruether and Russell share the conviction

that experience, in particular women's experience, is crucial for feminist theology. Ruether understands the critical principle of feminist theology as:

the promotion of the full humanity of women...
Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption.

Ruether not only draws on women's experience as a source for theology and feminist interpretation but she uses women's experience as the starting point and the ending point in the circle of interpretation.

For Russell, advocating the full human dignity of all women is crucial to feminist theology. In Russell's search for liberation from all forms of dehumanization, she advocates the human dignity and equality of women and men. Such advocacy includes all women along with men. Russell's theological spiral differs in shape, as its movement continues in a spiral form. It does not rely solely on a specific starting and ending point, rather it allows for numerous points of entry, yet with the

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"Russell, "Unity and Renewal in Feminist Perspectives," 58. See also G. Hull, P. Scott, B. Smith, eds., All the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men, but some of us are Brave: Black Women's Studies (Boston: Feminist Press, 1982), 49."
experiences of women being paramount.

Ruether uses the fundamental biblical symbol of the exodus for a prophetic liberating tradition, claiming the exodus tradition as the tradition of liberation from patriarchy. Like Ruether, Russell claims the liberating prophetic tradition generated from scripture as a norm for feminist theology. Key for Russell, is the promise of God found in scripture concerning the mending of creation. Russell agrees with Ruether's view of christology as proleptic and paradigmatic. Yet Russell's interest is focused to the future, as Jesus Christ begins God's New Creation with justice, freedom, and wholeness. Remembering the past, Russell seeks to move toward God's New Creation. It is in light of God's New Creation that Russell sees liberation. Both Ruether and Russell envision a biblical based alternative society of peace and justice. Russell however moves from a hope that is promised; God's New Creation. While Ruether moves from an alternative that is remembered; exodus tradition.

Ruether searches to recall images of the wholeness of creation as she provides womanguides from communities on the margin of Judaism and Christianity. Ruether sees the need for women to claim the exodus tradition as the tradition of liberation. Women need to claim the right to be the Church.

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Ruether sees the need for Women-Church. 

Women-Church represents the first time that women collectively have claimed to be church and have claimed the tradition of the exodus community as a community of liberation from patriarchy. This means that patriarchy is rejected as God's will... Patriarchy is named as a historically contrived social system by which the "fathers" - ruling-class males have used power to establish themselves in a position of domination over women and also over dependent classes in the family and society.

Because the Church as institution is exclusive in its language and leadership, contradictions arise between the teachings of scripture, and the teachings and actions of the communities of Women-Church. Women-Church is clearly in opposition to patriarchy and a paradigm of domination.

Russell, similar to Ruether, calls for new communities of faith to live the new humanity now. However, Russell does not envisage Women-Church. In Russell's view, communities of faith and struggle advocating for partnership beyond patriarchy must work for justice within the context of the Church and the world. Russell is concerned that Women-Church are constructing a fenced

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5 Ruether, Women-Church, 283, 57-58.

She is supportive of persons gathering and beginning to act in imaginative and constructive ways in solidarity with the oppressed, particularly regarding patriarchy. Yet Russell's concern is that such groups continue to be comprised predominantly of persons who are white, Western, and female. It is noteworthy that Ruether's feminist theology considers Christianity and Judaism. Although Russell's feminist liberation theology relates to many different contexts, it is primarily identified with Christianity.

Both Ruether and Russell are interested in dialogue, Ruether with creative dialectic and Russell with communion in dialogue. Ruether's and Russell's concern regarding dialogue is about consciousness raising, socio-political action, healing oppressor-oppressed relationship, and replacing old authority-submission patterns with radical partnership models. They differ in that Russell imagines a world mending toward New Creation, in which there is an openness to others and a sense of solidarity and willingness to work toward change. Ruether's understanding is located in the present, as a task of relating to the historical institutional Church now.

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Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is also concerned that feminist theology relate to Judaism, she notes the anti-Judaism in some Christian feminist research. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, vol.1 (New York: Crossroad, 1993).
Ruether's Women-Church as a feminist liturgical community is devoted to liturgy, myth making, and political action; celebration and resistance. One of her strengths is her creative liturgies. Ruether's theological writings not only invite new liturgy but she provides myths as a resource for doing theology. Russell's spirituality of connection is challenged to embody the many faith traditions that speak of the love of God welcoming all persons. Russell's spirituality of connection pieces together a vibrant quilt of Christian feminist spirituality. It incorporates fibers of various perspectives, particularly feminist and uniquely womanist understandings of sister choice. Drawing on numerous experiences and examples of Christian feminist spirituality, Russell envisions an embodied feminist spirituality. While Russell's work supports, advances, and inspires the development of Christian feminist liturgy and myth making, this imaginative activity is not part of her published works. Her creative endeavours are seen most clearly in her images of the Church and feminist paradigm of authority.

Ruether's feminist spirituality and theology embrace ecological healing. She sees the work of spirituality and eco-

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"See Ruether, Gaia & God, Chapter 10.

"See Ruether, Womanguides.

"Sister choice is an option to choose to be for oneself as a woman and for other women. Once having taken this option, women have the opportunity to explore all the ways they might want to be a woman, affirming the value of who they are and learning from other women the many and various ways women might live out their lives. See Russell, Church in the Round, 182-187."
justice as related. Ecofeminism is the critical perspective Ruether uses to evaluate Western Christian culture. Ruether "seeks to envision a healed society, in the sense of nondominating relation between human beings in interrelation with the rest of nature." Her purpose is grounded in resistance of violence toward other people and to the earth. Her aim is "to contribute something to generating hope." An ecofeminist perspective is not developed in Russell's theological writings. Russell understands God's mending is intended for all creation yet she does not address just and loving relations between humanity and the earth and the Divine. Her hope is in God's New Creation, and she actively works for that in community relations.

Russell in Dialogue with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Letty Russell all advocate social change, supporting women in their struggle for liberation. The beginning and central focus of Schüssler Fiorenza's theology is women's experience of oppression. Russell and Schüssler Fiorenza share a passion for opposing and exposing patterns of domination, particularly in Church structures.

The world and the Church draw their models of behaviour and

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leadership from a patriarchal paradigm of reality. Russell and Schüssler Fiorenza are concerned with providing an alternative model of authority or leadership, from a feminist perspective. Schüssler Fiorenza understands this model of male domination as allotting women their status according to the men in their lives, namely the class, race, religion, and country of the man. Russell's paramount interest is advocacy for the full humanity of women and men.

Russell and Schüssler Fiorenza are intent on challenging the Church's understanding of authority. Schüssler Fiorenza is committed to explore scriptural authority. She views this as a political task because "the Bible and its authority has been and is again today used as a weapon against women struggling for liberation." Schüssler Fiorenza offers a "feminist-critical and a historical-critical model." Her critical evaluation of the historical-political understanding of a biblical text is essential to her project. Her work is primarily rooted in the biblical text, whether it involves suspicion of that material, a


50 Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work," 130.
critical evaluation of the text, or a remembrance of the event. Schüßler Fiorenza seeks "to articulate a critical feminist interpretation on feminist political terms." Schüßler Fiorenza's emphasis is on feminism as "a political concept and movement...a political context to which women are integral." The critical theory and political character of Schüßler Fiorenza's work is significant. Whereas Russell's enterprise has a political component it does not draw on critical theory in a political context to the extent Schüßler Fiorenza's work does.

Schüßler Fiorenza's biblical theology confronts "the patriarchal stamp" of the Bible, its religious and political legitimation of the patriarchal oppression of women. She uses a feminist perspective "to rehabilitate women's biblical history and theological heritage." Schüßler Fiorenza considers kyriarchy, which indicates the rule and domination of the lord/master/father/husband, as a more appropriate term than

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62 Schüßler Fiorenza, But She Said, 7.
63 Ibid, 8.
64 Schüßler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 21.
65 Ibid, 21.
patriarchy. " She maintains that although kyriarchy theology has marginalized all women, such manipulation affects women differently depending on their social location. Schüssler Fiorenza and Russell agree that no woman is liberated and free unless all women are. Schüssler Fiorenza's use of kyriarchy differs from Russell's as well as Ruether's use of patriarchy. She argues that Russell's work is caught up in a paradigm that advances a kyriarchal model. Schüssler Fiorenza critiques Russell for aligning with neo-orthodox theology as she develops feminist theological hermeneutics. She analyzes Russell's feminist liberation theology as separating the form and content of the biblical message.

Thus the distinction between form and content, theological essence and historical variable, language and divine action, makes it possible to develop a feminist biblical hermeneutics that can acknowledge the patriarchal language of the Bible without conceding its patriarchal content."

Schüssler Fiorenza's criticism of Russell is that she declares a theological statement, God's liberating activity in Jesus Christ, as the essence of biblical revelation. Schüssler Fiorenza however, approaches her historical critical task:

not from the biblical writings but from the contemporary struggle of women against racism, sexism and poverty as oppressive systems of patriarchy and from its systematic

'' Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, Chapter 4.
'' Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 15-16.
'' Ibid, 15.
explorations in feminist theory."

Russell shares Schüssler Fiorenza's concern for women to find identity and strength from biblical images which can guide and shape the present and future. Russell's feminist liberation theology is in search for a useable past employing as Schüssler Fiorenza does a hermeneutic of suspicion. Her search seeks to reflect on the love of God in Jesus Christ not only from past events but also from God's liberating power in the present and future. It is "memory of the future" that motivates Russell's theology.

Our hope is focussed on the future, but draws strength and meaning from the events of the past and present. These events form the tradition which guides our actions and gives meaning to our existence."

As Russell searches for a useable past, she begins by considering a useable future, then a useable history, as well as useable language. While she searches the past, she approaches with new questions exploring history as a medium of human liberation. Russell looks to God's sending of Christ to speak and act in the present and the future. Her work differs here from Schüssler Fiorenza's. For Russell, Jesus Christ is central to God's New Creation. For Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus is an important figure but not a norm in her development of Christian theology. Russell finds hope in the Christian tradition of Jesus Christ, whereas

" Schüssler Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone, 14.

Russell, Human Liberation, 72.

Ibid, 72-73.
Schüssler Fiorenza maintains a potential for hope in the Christian tradition of Jesus Christ.

Another way that Russell's work differs from Schüssler Fiorenza's is that it is not a project focussed on historical reconstruction, although it relies on a useable past to challenge the present and future. Schüssler Fiorenza is interested in the distinction between a useable and unuseable past and the effect this has on a feminist history of liberation. She explores the ecclesio-political structures of the past and present that perpetuate victimization and violence against women.

Both Schüssler Fiorenza and Russell advocate a Christian feminist vision of the Church. They share a particular concern to oppose and expose the social and ecclesial systems and structures of domination and subordination. In Bread Not Stone, Schüssler Fiorenza supports feminist base communities called Women-Church which are described as "a movement of self-identified women and women-identified men in biblical religion." She uses this term "as a political-oppositional term to patriarchy."

Women-Church is intended to be an alternative and non-patriarchal

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Schüssler Fiorenza, Bread Not Stone, xiv.

Ibid, xiv.

Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 344.
form of Christian community. The hallmarks for the ekklesia of
difficulty are commitment, accountability, and solidarity in
community. Schüessler Fiorenza finds this model in the ekklesia
as the basileia of God, which she claims although not explicitly
articulated by Jesus, is at the heart of his proclamation. 76

Although Russell does not explicitly promote Women-Church,
her work envisions and supports feminist Christian communities.

Whatever self-designation is used by these feminist
Christian communities, they form a movement for church
transformation and renewal made up of women and men who
find themselves alienated by the patriarchal structures,
liturgies, and theologies of the churches. The groups
seem to form around one or more of the following tasks
or needs: advocacy, self-identity, transformation of the
church, new practice of spirituality. 77

Russell's work of envisioning and advocating a feminist
ecclesiology, of challenging and transforming social and
ecclesial structures of domination and subordination takes the
form of a paradigm of authority in community. 78 Russell's
paradigm of authority challenges the structure and content of
theology. By using her paradigm of authority as central to the
community of faith, Russell conceives of the Church as the
household of freedom.

75 Ibid, 346.

76 Ibid, 151. See also Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza,
Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of
Liberation (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 11-12.

Russell, Church in the Round, 106.

77 See Russell's paradigm of authority in community
discussed later in this chapter, pp.193-198.
They [households of freedom] are signs that the new household of God is not just a spiritual abstraction, separated from the suffering of the world, but rather a present reality in the discipleship of women and men who break bread together, and with the poor and wretched of the earth.

For Russell, the Church in the round provides a description of the Christian community striving to become the household of freedom. Schüssler Fiorenza is critical of Russell's "attempts to rescue this image of Household of Freedom... in feminist liberation theological terms." The image of the Church as a home, Schüssler Fiorenza contends, acts "in order to safeguard for religious survival and identity." It denies or tolerates experiences of violence, oppression, and the Bible and Church as androcentric. Schüssler Fiorenza reacts against gender dualism, and she considers Russell's household imagery a dualistic feminist alternative.

Schüssler Fiorenza's approach to scripture focuses on suspicion of androcentrism in the texts and interpretations of the texts, proclamation of a liberating canon, remembrance of biblical traditions from a feminist perspective, and a creative


"Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, 125-132. Schüssler Fiorenza is also critical of Rosemary Radford Ruether's "exodus into a new, liberated home-space."

Ibid, 126.
actualization using historical imagination and re-creation." Her method of exploring scripture evokes expression in celebration and liturgy. Schüssler Fiorenza includes ritual in her writings, in the form of poetry, litanies, and prayers. This is not common in the current writings of theologians and biblical scholars. The ekklesia of women, for Schüssler Fiorenza, celebrates women's religious power and visions for change, ritualizes struggle, reclaims women's spirituality and religious life.

Russell's work looks to a spirituality of connection for Christian communities and in that context envisions a celebration of God's love. Her eschatological perspective informs present reality. It is God's eschatological future that promises and prompts Russell's vision of a future mended creation. Russell's writings are forward looking, yet her future orientation is grounded in present experiences of communities of faith and struggle, and inform her work with a spirituality of connection and celebration.

Russell's Contribution to the Mission of the Church

In this third and concluding part of the chapter, I will explore what I consider to be Russell's significant contribution

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" See Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, Chapter 16 and Chapter 17.
toward an understanding of the mission of the Church. The rich contribution Russell adds to the conversation that will be considered are: a spiral of theological engagement, fresh images of the Church, the paradigm of authority in community, and mission as practising God's hospitality.

Some of the questions that I bring to this exploration are: What makes Russell's contribution significant? How does Russell's contribution advance an understanding of the mission of the Church? How would her contribution re-vision the Church?

What is meant by the term significant contribution is that which is meaningful, has an influence or effect on theology. This is drawn from a thorough study of Russell's theological writings and the context for her work. The notion of Russell's significant contribution advancing understandings is intended to explore her clues as they contribute to an understanding of the mission of the Church. By asking how Russell's significant contribution re-visions the Church, we consider Russell's aim of "how to subvert the Church into being the Church."  

A Spiral of Theological Engagement

Christian theologians...are called to develop a critical way of doing theology that makes sense to those who are marginalized and excluded...as well as responding with

" Russell, Household of Freedom, 88."
Russell is committed to making critical theological connections between experience and tradition. An integral component in this search is the connection with human experience and faith journey. She is concerned with the wholeness of life and theology. Russell's theological method of a spiral of theological engagement models a way of doing theology that makes connections with the various components to the whole of life.

Russell's theological method can be considered significant in two ways: shape and movement, and theological perspective. First, Russell's spiral of theological engagement is characterized by its shape and movement. She conceives of the shape being a spiral, not a circle or a pyramid, or other configuration. A spiral is usually circling a central point that can increase or decrease. It coils or is coiled, and can appear as a spiral curve, spiral form, or spiral path.

Russell maintains that the spiral rather than the circle or another shape allows for the movement of action and reflection. She is concerned that "it moves to discover new clues and new questions in a continuing spiral that never comes out in exactly


the same place." A coil or corkscrew circling around supports the ongoing motion and directions that are determined by the activity of action and reflection which is critical to Russell's theological method.

A spiral also has the capacity to increase or decrease without its shape being significantly affected. This potential allows for the changes that Russell asserts are present constantly in experience and context when in solidarity with those on the margin: doing critical analysis of social, political, economic, historical and ecclesial reality; raising questions of interpretation; and searching for clues to ongoing action and reflection.""

Russell's spiral of theological engagement is continuing, active, dynamic, and moving. It is composed of five movements: commitment to the task of justice; sharing experiences with communities of faith and struggle; critical analysis; questions about biblical and Church tradition; and action, celebration, and further reflection."" These movements are ongoing, with new understanding leading to the continuing of the theological spiral.

Russell's theological method embraces a feminist liberation

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Russell, *Church in the Round*, 34.

"" *Ibid*, 34.

"" Russell looks to her own writing in *Church in the Round* as evidence of the movements of the spiral. "For instance, the Introduction touched base with the four major movements of the spiral at least twice in an attempt to explain what the book was about and to raise questions about feminist interpretation of the church." *Ibid*, 34-35.
perspective, where the activity of action and reflection is essential. She observes that "it [the continuing spiral] is concerned to discover clues to thought and action about the church from a feminist perspective." She is dedicated to a journey of discovery which requires movement and space for searching and testing. Integral to this journey is the context within communities of faith and struggle which necessitates a process that is ongoing and dynamic.

A second way that Russell's contribution is of importance is the theological perspective that she offers. Her feminist liberation perspective is concerned with wholeness rather than dualism. With a spiral of theological engagement, Russell stresses the connections between the context in which women together with men dwell, interpretations and questions arising out of Church tradition, and the possibilities for creating justice on the earth.

Russell's spiral of theological engagement embodies the numerous aspects she contends are in need of making connections. It embraces Church, biblical tradition, human experience, raises questions, as well as creates possible paradigms for social and ecclesial transformation.

It is noteworthy that Russell's spiral begins with "commitment to the task of raising up signs of God's new

\[\text{Ibid, 34.}\]
household". Her theological presupposition of liberating eschatology is foundational for Russell's method of doing theology, and is present throughout the spiral. God's promise of a New Creation inspires Russell's search and affirms her hope on the journey toward God's future.

Russell's spiral of theological engagement advances an understanding of the mission of the Church primarily by the aim of her theological method as social and ecclesial transformation. Her spiral offers clues toward an understanding of the mission of the Church as an agent of transformation. It suggests two important resources to enable a better understanding of the mission of the Church. First, a spiral of theological engagement places significant value on human experience, both as a source for theological reflection and as empowering God's reign of justice and peace.

Russell begins with communal contemporary experience and rediscovers biblical and Church tradition from the prism of the experience of communities of faith and struggle. The focus is on the present community which shares, analyzes, reflects, and celebrates in light of present concerns. Russell calls for the experience of those previously ignored to inform theological

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1 Ibid, 30-31.


reflection. Welcoming and including voices from the outside, offers correction of a bias present in all human experience which is always limited and distorted. This adds voices that will provide fuller resources for understanding human experiences, critiquing paradigms, structures, as well as ways of doing and knowing.

Second, Russell's theological method encourages mutual partnership of experience and Christian tradition. Her method calls for the sharing and understanding of the experiences of those marginalized and muted voices in society and the Church. To consider such reflections in light of Church tradition is a partnership that shatters ecclesial boundaries. It holds incredible potential for the mending of creation and for renewed understanding of the mission of the Church. It is a mutual partnership that explores the experiences of those on the outside with a tradition which is considered inside. Russell envisions a reversal, a healing, changes to the Church and its mission.

Russell's contribution re-visions the Church actively working toward the mending of creation, using the jubilee image of liberation for the oppressed. A spiral of theological engagement values the voices of the oppressed; their pain becomes a source of understanding for liberation and feminist theologies. The wisdom of the experiences of the oppressed contributes to a process of transformation, an image beyond oppression, a healing where all creation are free with one another.”

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Russell, Household of Freedom, 71.
The local Church will provide a profound and purposeful role in the re-visioning. The responsibility of sharing and listening to experiences will need to take place in a context of faith and struggle. The local Church will be challenged, tested, and inspired with this new partnership. Including outsiders' experiences will lead to questioning: What is our mission? How do we participate in mission? Who is engaged in mission? Questions will lead to new understandings, and new and re-newed ways of doing things.

Images of the Church

God's self-revelation is known to us through our "earthen vessels" of experience.

Russell is strongly influenced by the feminist movement and its re-discovery that naming has to do with claiming identity, thought, and action.⁵⁵ Sallie McFague's theological project supports a model that understands the power language has to revitalize.

If such a vision of an alternative way of being in the world is to be effective, it must take place not only

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⁵⁵ Ibid, 36.


within the academy but also and primarily among ordinary people who will begin to talk to and about God with new metaphors and models."

For Russell, language is not just a tool; it is an extremely important form of social control. Russell effectively discusses the interrelation of power and language."

Power determines the way language is used, because those who are able to carry out their intent do so in regard to human communication as well as other matters. At the same time, language itself is a powerful force in establishing positions of domination and subordination and in legitimating authority."

Characteristic of Russell's images of the Church is their rootedness in human experience and biblical faith, as well as their imaginative and constructive nature. Language is vital to Russell's project of participation in God's mission of handing over Christ to all creation. She is aware of the frequent problems language presents, "creating situations more like the story of Babel than of Pentecost." Russell asserts that language can often be a barrier to communication, particularly in the Church with many of the symbols and words encrusted in sexist and racist Western culture. Russell is committed to work proactively in becoming more inclusive of those who find themselves on the outside of Church and society, by changing linguistic models.


Ibid, 47.

Russell perceives that the way language is used reflects the images in people's lives and the patterns of social behaviour. Her use of images is designed to liberate all women and men, particularly by greater inclusion of those on the margins. Russell is intent on maintaining this vision of inclusion and thus observes: "It is wise to revise our language." The metaphors we use are powerful God-talk, for they determine the way we think about God and about ourselves as men and women, created in God's image.

From a feminist liberation perspective, Russell explores the interpretation of Church tradition in the biblical experience and present human experience. Examples of this from Russell's work are: her interpretation of the story of Creation which focuses on the relationship of the Divine and Creation as a partnership; her insight into the Divine as Creator, Liberator, and Advocate; and her emphasis on education as exodus and liberation as a journey toward freedom.

Russell's numerous images and metaphors are rooted in biblical tradition, with an eschatological orientation, and embodied in the experiences of women and others marginalized by society and the Church. Her images for the Church abound. In The Church with AIDS, Russell uses two profound metaphors for the Church. First, the metaphor of the Church with AIDS. She writes, "We are the

\[1\] Ibid, 93-103.

\[2\] Ibid, 102.

\[3\] Russell, Household of Freedom, 53.
body of Christ. If part of us has AIDS, we all have AIDS.\(^1\)

Second, the metaphor of a Church with troubled waters. She uses this metaphor "not only for times of difficulty but also for the presence of God's Spirit.\(^2\)"

As a paradigm for embracing diversity and inclusivity within the Church, Russell suggests the image of the rainbow, a symbol of the promise of God to creation.\(^3\) Household of freedom is a metaphor Russell recommends to describe concrete human interaction in interdependent society that breaks open oppressive experiences of household "by speaking of it as a household where freedom dwells.\(^4\)" Household of freedom is a metaphor for a future and present reality that speaks of the New Testament reign of God in terms of already, not yet.\(^5\) The Household of freedom is a metaphor for God's New Creation, with the Church as a sign of God's household.

Russell's metaphor of the Church in the round describes the Church attempting to become a household of freedom. She is


\(^2\) Ibid, 133.

\(^3\) Ibid, 133.


\(^6\) Ibid, Chapter 2.
concerned that Christian community is not understanding what God intends and thus she uses a creative metaphor in an imaginative way, to help make known what is unknown. She refers to the abundant use of table metaphors in the Bible and her intention to offer a feminist interpretation of their meaning. In speaking of the need for connecting faith and life in action and reflection, Russell uses the image of the round table. A kitchen table is conceived for the work of justice in solidarity with those who are on the margins. A welcome table is the image for all creation in partnership in God's universe.

Russell's images of the Church are creative, vibrant, playful, and imaginative. Her myriad of images shatter stereotypes in an attempt to remain faithful to the biblical tradition from a feminist perspective and to the experiences of human reality, particularly the oppressed.

Russell's characteristic use of images of the Church advances an understanding of the mission of the Church first as active participants in the places where Christ promises to be present, and second by using a prism of feminist advocacy as inclusive of all women together with men contributing to the work of the Church. Russell perceives the Church as a sign of the work of Christ in bringing about the mission of God. She is concerned that the images of the Church are descriptive in order to be helpful for the community of faith participating in God's mission.

Russell urges that the Church "must always be looking to find where Christ is present in a particular time and place"
and share in God's mission. This is primarily derived from Christ's presence, "God's sending and liberating action in the world." From this perspective, her images focus on the Church as a community of faith and witness - the rainbow, Church in the round; a community of struggle for the poor and oppressed - a Church for troubled waters, the Church with AIDS; and a community of hope in God's New Creation - Household of Freedom. Russell uses these renewed images of the Church to help locate the Church in mission. She is committed to using new images as she recognizes changes according to different cultural, historical, political, and economic contexts of the Church.

By using a prism of feminist advocacy Russell's feminist interpretation of the Church and its mission includes both a spiritual search for meaning and advancement for justice. Russell's images of the Church provide meaningful direction for a community in which all are equally God's partners. Her images of the Church contribute to the feminist work of re-defining, re-claiming, and re-discovering the Church. In the process of embracing women's experience as a source and a norm for envisioning the mission of the Church, changes in structure, paradigm, and practice will follow. The Church will be engaged in practising God's presence, doing acts of justice, living a faith witness, and embodying hope for all God's creation.

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Russell, Church in the Round, 131.

Ibid, 135.
Russell's contribution of images of the Church empowers and invites others to create images of the Church in mission for the contemporary context.

The church is changing....Society is changing rapidly and the church as part of that society is bound to change. The key question is not: Is the church changing? Nor is it: Is the church changing fast enough to keep up with the present or changing too fast to maintain its roots (ie. tradition)? The key question is whether the church is changing in response to its desire to serve Christ's mission in a relevant way in a postmodern society or simply in reaction to the changes in society."

Russell's work offers a model of participation, in society and the Church, that is intentionally designed to serve Christ's mission in response to change. Her images speak to and grow out of the reality of life and faith in the present context.

Biblical theology itself is 'hope filled' and provides images of jubilee and liberation, images of promise on the way to fulfilment.""

Her project is an encouragement to use language as a liberating power, envisioning a different nonpatriarchal future.

**Authority in Community**

One of Russell's significant contributions is her questioning of authority and her proposal of an alternative paradigm of authority, from a feminist liberation perspective. She joins a chorus of feminist liberation theologians concerned with the

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... Russell, Household of Freedom, 20.
problems and possibilities of authority. In *Household of Freedom*, Russell proposes a working description for authority as:

> legitimate power....Authority is more than a form of power; it is power that is legitimated by the structure of society. It is exercised in most situations through hierarchy and is control.\(^\text{14}\)

She presents a feminist perspective of authority and power.

> But they [power and authority] can also be exercised through empowerment and authorizing as they sometimes are where people are seeking to live out the gospel vision of shared community of service.\(^\text{15}\)

Then she suggests a paradigm of authority in community that challenges hierarchical authority and individualism.

> First, Russell appeals to women's experience as an authority in theology, advocating the human dignity and equality of women and men. Her feminist appeal is to a biblical theology that is hope-filled, with images of jubilee, liberation, and promise. In the midst of structures of domination and oppression, Russell seeks to articulate a vision of a mended creation. "Such an appeal to the future is not a flight from present reality but a commitment to contribute to the actualization of hope."\(^\text{16}\)

> Russell's idea of authority is rooted in biblical tradition from a feminist perspective and is oriented toward anticipating God's intended future. Russell claims that the appeal to God's

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 21-22. Russell identifies four ways that authority is established: structural authority, authority of knowledge, charismatic authority, and authority of wisdom.

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 23.

\(^{16}\) Ibid, 20.
future action in a community of responsibility and freedom is already present in the activity of God through Jesus Christ. The source of authority is the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and through the Spirit exists in the lives of Christians to inspire and direct them.

Russell understands authority as "a description of relationship". She is particularly concerned how authority is exercised, drawing on a partnership paradigm. She views authority being exercised "standing with others by seeking to share power and authority." Russell's paradigm of authority in community or as partnership is distinct. This paradigm challenges individualism as it celebrates interdependence rather than either independence or domination/subordination. It calls for persons to participate in a common task of creating a cooperative community, with diversity enriching the whole. This paradigm invites inclusive consensus on theological issues that have been corporately searched, shared, and discussed.

Russell's paradigm of authority in community advances an understanding of the mission of the Church as partnering with God and God's creation. Second, Russell's paradigm pertains to and affects relationships particularly the relationship between the Church and the world. Russell agrees with Beverly Wildung Harrison's insistence on relationality.

Russell, Church in the Round, 38.

Ibid, 57.
As a feminist moral theology celebrates the power of our human praxis as an intrinsic aspect of our work of God's love, ... so above all else a feminist moral theology insists that relationality is at the heart of all things.  

This style of power, authority in community, is not coercion but empowerment of others. It seeks to bear witness to a shared communal story of God's love in Jesus Christ, and to welcome all persons who are willing to share in building a community of wholeness.

Russell's paradigm of authority embodies partnership, friendship, community, relationship, and mutuality, qualities which are vital for the Church engaged in God's mission. It impacts our understanding of the Divine human relationship, as well as the motivations for mission and the practice of missionary activity. With a paradigm of authority in community, the mission of the Church is to assist one another "in making use of their gifts in the service of Christ's love in the world."  

Russell's paradigm of authority in community uses imagination to embrace diversity and celebrate difference, yet speaks concretely to human relationships reminding us that all of humanity, all of creation lives together in God's house. For the Church in mission to use Russell's paradigm of authority in community, reconsideration of Church and world relationship would

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need to occur. Russell's call for partnership extends to the political, economic, and social structures of God's world. Russell's feminist liberation theology is concerned with an imaginative and constructive ecclesial and social transformation.

Russell's contribution of a paradigm of authority in community fosters a spirituality of connection, and envisions an alternative ecclesial structure. When authority in community is envisaged as relational, flexible, intimate, and passionate re-naming and re-visioning God's intention for the Church is made possible. Those who have been excluded are given a new opportunity for partnership. The poor, oppressed, outcast are welcomed and become partners for understanding the meaning of justice, the love of Christ, and the shape of the mission of the Church. With the love of Christ inspiring, directing, and empowering the Church, a spirituality of connection will recognize the contradictions present in our structures and inspire life-giving conversion. In a multicultural context, connecting to those who live at the margins of society, the Church will pray, sing, dance, and embody God's justice and love.

Russell's paradigm re-visions the Church as a model of shared authority, a circle of interdependence, a community of responsibility and freedom. She suggests that women "rediscover, recover, reread, and retell the stories of...women leaders so

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that all...may share these gifts." An alternative ecclesial structure modelling mentorship, partnership, and enablement will affect ecclesial structures of domination. A re-visioning of the Church will occur as the community shares in partnership, discovering its own marginalization as a result of commitment with oppressed people. Authority in community challenges the Church to make a stand and take action against oppressive and unjust powers.

Practising God's Hospitality

The theme of hospitality is basic to Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church. She laments that hospitality, at the heart of the mission of the Church, is often ignored when it requires including those who are considered outsiders.

Perhaps this is why there is so much emphasis in the Gospels on the way that Jesus welcomed the outsiders into God's household."

Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church as practising God's hospitality is meaningful because it advocates justice and service. Hospitality is reclaimed as a biblical term, renamed from a feminist perspective, and the social, political, economic, and religious implications are discovered.

Russell recognized the need for a metaphor to speak of the Christian community that practises God's hospitality, and thus her

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Ibid, 150.
choice of the Church in the round. "The round table has become a symbol of hospitality and a metaphor for gathering for sharing and dialogue." The table, according to Russell, is spread by God and hosted by Christ. The Church is gathered in Christ's name and experiences mission as life in Christ's service.

Russell looks to the New Testament gospel accounts where partnerships are formed with strangers, where Jesus shares God's hospitality with the stranger. The model for hospitality is of Christ's welcome for humanity. Russell comprehends practising hospitality as being involved in the service of God's intention to mend creation.

This worrying with God about the poor, the outcasts, the outsiders of society is...rooted in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' own actions and parables about the hospitality of God.

The mending of creation, according to Russell, has social, political, economic, and religious implications. Social, political, economic, and religious structures will be reshaped, power dynamics transformed, with a reversal toward divine economics. Russell views feminist reconstruction working toward the

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Ibid, 17.


God's worrying about the mending of creation is central to Russell's work of theology. Russell refers to Krister Stendahl's quote of a rabbinic saying that theology is worrying about what God is worrying about when God gets up in the morning. To Stendahl, God is worrying about the mending of creation. See Krister Stendahl, "God Worries About Every Ounce of Creation," Harvard Divinity Bulletin, 9 (June/July 1979): 5.

Russell, Church in the Round, 196.
mending of creation as carrying out the task of service by responding to those who define the need. Those who define the need are precisely those whom society and the Church identify as needy, outcast, marginal. "A great reversal of 'things as they are' so that they may become part of God's reality of love and justice."

Practising God's hospitality becomes the prism for Russell's interpretation of beliefs and actions, particularly concerning the Church. Her feminist perspective regarding the teachings and insights of Jesus envision an egalitarian community of hospitality. Russell's contribution affirms diversity and calls for a loss of privilege as an indication of divine preference.

Practising God's hospitality is Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church. Russell's conviction advances an awareness of the mission of the Church as upholding justice, and unfolding the meaning of God's promise. Russell describes a feminist interpretation of the Church as "a community of Christ, bought with a price, where everyone is welcome." This means that Christ is the basis of the life of the Church; the struggle of Jesus to overcome the structures of sin and death is a source of new life in the community and its mandate to continue the struggle; it is a sign of God's mended creation, welcoming with God's hospitality.

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Ibid, 149.

Russell and Clarkson, Dictionary of Feminist Theologies, 76.
Upholding justice involves the task of witness and service with and for others. Russell urges that the hospitality of the Christian community is offered as part of its participation in God's justice and love in the world. God's love with justice is the gift the Christian community shares. God's just love is the basis of the community and its hospitality. She agrees with Jürgen Moltmann who affirms God's love in Christ:

...freed from the cramped life of self-confirmation. We lose anxiety about ourselves and become open for others. Prejudices fall from us as scales from our eyes. We become alert and interested, we share in life and give a share of life. Then we no longer feel that we are made insecure by others because we no longer need self-confirmation. The person who is different becomes for us, precisely because of that difference, a surprise which we gladly accept. We can mutually accept each other because Christ has accepted us to the glory of God (Rom. 15:7). Russell maintains that it is only in the practising of God's hospitality that love takes shape, "and God's will is done on earth as in heaven (Matt. 6:10)."

Practising hospitality promotes justice for women along with men. Advocating justice encourages women to make crucial connections between gender issues, racism, heterosexism, and classism. God's hospitality is committed to mutuality and empowerment. The mission of the Church needs to be offering

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1. Russell, Church in the Round, 179.


hospitality with those who have been excluded and dominated.

The mission of the Church in practising God's hospitality unfolds the meaning of God's promise of forgiveness and salvation, made possible in Christ's death and resurrection, as open ended. Russell maintains that "we continue to live out our salvation and liberation in fear and trembling and in the expectation that, one day, we will be fully set free to be with God (Phil. 2:12)." The promise of God is understood in terms of God's concern for justice and the mending of creation and thus constantly reinterpreted in light of the vision of New Creation.

By practising God's hospitality the Church speaks and acts in ways that proclaim God's welcome. The Church must be prepared to revisit and reinterpret its theological understandings in such a way that God's hospitality is clearly expressed in its life. By practising God's hospitality, the Church may be able to echo Russell's hope that "we will find that even we are more welcome than we dared to believe!"

Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church as practising God's hospitality offers a re-vision of the Church that maintains a Christ-centred life as a Christian community, promotes justice for women, and joins in solidarity with the marginalized. These notions are characteristic of Russell's


Ibid, 484.
re-visioning of the Church.

Russell thinks of the Church as a community of Jesus Christ, provisional and in constant need of renewal, in order to make an authentic witness to God's hospitality in every changing circumstances. She promotes the need for the Church to maintain a strong sense of identity, finding its definition in Christ as the centre of its life.

Just as persons cannot give themselves away to others if they have no sense of self-worth to share, churches with no sense of identity and worth have little to share.\(^{135}\)

It is the Church's identity in Christ that extends welcome to the stranger and provides guidance for the task of hospitality. With Christ at the heart of the Church, compassionate living can be shared with others.

It is Russell's contention that the Church is in need of revolution. She asserts that the Church is:

- in need...of building a new house of freedom where people's hopes for human dignity are incorporated in both social structures and expressions of faith and service.\(^{136}\)

The Church practising God's hospitality needs to place emphasis on the justice connection. "Surely the church is not Christ's church if it is not a witness to the presence of the one in whom God made things right."\(^{137}\) Russell views this as essential for empowering the Church's witness. Russell lifts up justice with holiness. Her shift

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\(^{135}\) Ibid, 483.

\(^{136}\) Russell and Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 74.

\(^{137}\) Russell, *Church in the Round*, 135.
in perspective calls the Church to constant repentance, a need for continuing self-criticism in light of the mark of justice. She is critical of the Women-Church movement for often neglecting issues of justice for persons of all colours and classes.

Russell's concern is for the mending of all God's creation; in order to partner in this task the Church is to be in solidarity with "the other pieces." Hospitality becomes a style of interaction with the other pieces that make up the whole of God's creation. Partnership with the marginalized means yielding to those the Church and society considers outcasts. It entails listening as the marginalized define the need for hospitality. Practising God's hospitality in the form of solidarity with the marginalized challenges the Church to revisit doctrine, and the practice of ministry. The challenge of the global women's movement is a powerful liberation invitation to the Churches and their patriarchal interpretations.

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13 Ibid, 484.
Summary

Russell's practice of ministry and numerous academic endeavors embrace a model of dialogue. Her work as it relates to an emerging missionary paradigm was evaluated in light of the six major elements: missionary by its very nature; God's pilgrim people; sacrament, sign, and instrument; Church and world; rediscovering the local Church; and creative tension. Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church shares many similarities to the shifts noted in the emerging missionary paradigm.

Additionally, conversation partners in consideration of Russell's project have been prominent theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Recognizing that there is a chorus of voices sharing in the enterprise of feminist theologies, it is instructive to explore the similarities and divergence among several contemporary feminist theologians. Their similar commitment for change in society and the Church is evident, although their method, emphasis, and theological assumptions vary.

Finally, the chapter presented what the writer of this dissertation considers Russell's significant contribution toward an understanding of the mission of the Church: a spiral of theological engagement, fresh images of the Church, a shift in understanding and exercising authority in community, and practicing God's hospitality. The evaluation considered the meaningful features of her contribution, how the components of Russell's work advance an understanding of the mission of the Church, and their
potential for re-visioning the Church.

The conclusion will propose a response to this work from Letty M. Russell. It will suggest questions for further investigation resulting from this dissertation. Finally, it will consider the Mennonite faith, my home denomination, as the context for exploration of Russell's contribution toward an understanding of the mission of the Church.
CONCLUSION

The thesis of this dissertation is that Letty M. Russell provides a significant contribution toward our understanding of the mission of the Church. Russell's work is an important resource for the development of a theology of the mission of the Church. To support this thesis I have presented an outline of contemporary theologies of mission and offered an evaluation of Russell's work in dialogue with these emerging paradigms and perspectives. Arising out of the context of Russell's work, I have described, explored, and evaluated her theological convictions. A synthesis of Russell's theology has consolidated her understanding of the mission of the Church. This study of the theology of Letty M. Russell has drawn out of her theological writings a significant contribution to an understanding of the mission of the Church. I have suggested Russell's contribution to be: a spiral of theological engagement, fresh images of the Church, the paradigm of authority in community, and mission as practising God's hospitality. I have demonstrated the meaningful nature of Russell's contribution and their potential for re-visioning the Church.

I am thankful for the opportunity this study has provided. I have learned a great deal from my research of the articles, reviews, and books which Russell wrote between 1967 and 1993.
I have experienced her presence in unique ways as I have worked at this dissertation, particularly through written correspondence with Russell. To explore Russell's theology is to enter into dialogue with many important, creative, and diverse theological thinkers of the twentieth-century. With this exploration I have gained a deeper appreciation and knowledge of the ideas and context that have shaped contemporary theological discussion. My doctoral study programme grew out of my experience with the Church: this study continues in that direction. In conclusion, I will do three things. First, I will suggest a response from Russell to this study; second, I will highlight questions arising out of this work for further study; and finally, I will consider Russell's contribution particularly to the mission of the Church in a Mennonite perspective.

Russell's Response

In this first part of the conclusion, I will suggest three possible responses from Russell to this study. This response is drawn from my study of her theological work and the insights gained from the undertaking. It is not Russell's actual communication in responding to this study. Rather, it is an attempt to represent what I have experienced embodied in Russell's theology; creativity and interaction. This response is intended to encourage an opportunity to talk back to the study.¹

¹ Letty M. Russell, Church in the Round: A Feminist Interpretation of the Church (Louisville, KY: Westminster John/
Russell's goal in offering her interpretation of the Church has been to speak of the Church in ways that are recognizable to feminists. Through her voice other voices have been heard; hearing into speech marginal, outcast, and oppressed women's voices. Russell's work places profound value on the contribution of women in theology. In so doing, she recognizes and incorporates not only the voices of other women but also the everyday experiences of their lives as integral for theology. Life experience, the context from where one lives and experiences community is a significant source for Russell's theology.

That this study begins by placing Russell's theology in context with other contemporary theologians is noteworthy. Russell would consider it essential to also begin such a study by describing and examining the context for her work. Her understanding of the mission of the Church developed from her life experiences in the context of a particular community, the Presbyterian Church of the Ascension. Her life continues to inform her theology: as she works collectively with other women on writing projects, encouraging Third World women scholars, embracing the challenges and changes associated with a teaching ministry, and extending hospitality to doctoral students, to name merely a few.

Russell would find a degree of pleasure in the exploration of mission in this study. Her prophetic call for the Church to be

the Church has formed the foundation of her theology. In her quest to subvert the Church to this calling, she envisions God's mission as liberation. Russell's concern has been not to add to the misconception of the term mission. She deliberately writes and speaks instead of God's liberating action.

Russell's early work with the World Council of Churches' study on the Missionary Structures of the congregation along with her more recent work with a feminist interpretation of the Church continue her search for alternative forms of Christian community that carry out Jesus' ministry of setting free the oppressed, and God's mission of mending creation. Identified in this study are meaningful feminist and liberation connections with Russell's theology, particularly with the mission focus. Russell is delighted to share in dialogue with other feminist and liberation theologians.

Making connections with those who are on the margins, and making connections in theology with what has been regarded as dualistic ideas have been some of the challenges Russell has faced. The choice to enter into relationship and incorporate the voices from new relationships is modeled in Russell's life and

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3 Russell, Church in the Round, 88-90.
theology. Describing, evaluating, and determining her significant contribution toward an understanding of the mission of the Church are necessary steps if further connections are to be made.

Russell savours invitations to make connections, to enter into relationship, to be in dialogue. She would undoubtedly appreciate more dialogue of her theology with other scholars and faith community perspectives. That this study offers dialogue with Russell's work and the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is important for the findings and the method of doing theological exploration. I suspect Russell would be equally pleased to enter into relationship with a particular Church community and share in dialogue concerning understandings of the mission of the Church. She would engage in lively discussion concerning the contribution this study concludes are characteristic of her understanding of the mission of the Church. Russell would be fascinated to consider these clues in light of a Mennonite faith perspective.

Questions for Further Study

The freedom to search is the freedom to grow. Russell shares her love for questions. Loving the questions is the "willingness

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to admit ignorance and failure that makes it possible to go on learning and discovering new things." Growth comes through learning from our questions. There is risk and potential danger in talking about questions, considering alternatives, and the like.

But in a world in which we do not have answers and blueprints, loving the questions may at least provide a means of sharing in a partnership of learning how to journey together toward God's future.

Theology is a way of questioning God and being questioned. As Christians, our journey is mapless. Like Sarah and Abraham, we have the promises of God to guide our journey and not all the answers. Rainer Maria Rilke has had similar insights and writes of waiting actively with patience:

be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like unlocked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Live in the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

This dissertation began with a quote from Russell concerning hospitality as a method of interaction with the other pieces that comprise the whole creation of God. A pressing question for this writer is: How are we in a Canadian context, with multi-ethnic and diverse religious beliefs, practising hospitality as a style of interaction? There are emerging Canadian contextual

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"Ibid, 140.

'Ibid, 141.

theologies; Russell's imperative to communities of faith and struggle to practise God's hospitality may offer some insights to this task.\(^9\) Canada offers refuge to many who are alienated from their homes of origin. Persons seeking immigrant status and citizenship have increased. The Canadian government follows set procedures and policy in these matters. The faith communities are invited to sponsor individuals and families seeking sanctuary in Canada. Yet attitudes and belief systems prevail that are not welcoming but rather sustain intolerance, racism, and discrimination. What does it mean to identify with the other pieces of God's creation and become partners in the mending of creation? What does Canadian unity mean in terms of religious beliefs and practice? How can mission as practising God's hospitality inform Canadian unity? How can mission as practising God's hospitality celebrate diversity in Canada?

An addendum to this concern is that in practising hospitality we listen to the voices of the weakest in our society. Russell's spiral of theological engagement advocates a commitment to a particular group struggling for liberation. Her methodology fosters sharing and understanding in the context of struggle and commitment. In the Canadian context, aboriginal

women, women who experience abuse, women and children experiencing poverty are marginalized. The Christian Church struggles to hear and to learn from these shared experiences. For example, by practising hospitality with aboriginal women, hearing, learning and responding to their stories the community is renewed and transformed. What would a theology in mission comprise if the commitment was to share in the struggle with aboriginal women?

Growing out of this dissertation is the awareness of creating new and renewed images of the Church that are meaningful for the changes in society and in the Church. Russell's work embraces a number of creative, resourceful, fresh, and purposeful images. Through them Russell extends an invitation to continue building up the household of freedom with powerful God-talk. What does it mean to confess Jesus as the Christ as we confront our daily situation? How does our language heal and free women along with men? What images and metaphors can we envision for God to be God, and for the Church to be the Church? How is a round table connection to be made with the homeless, poor, and outcast on the street corners, sidewalks, and soup kitchens? Such questions imply openness in faith communities to God's Spirit moving in ways that are dynamic and ongoing.

This study encourages continued work from a feminist theological perspective in the areas of authority and power, as well as ritual and celebration. What Russell claimed as the feminist touch in 1987, can still be considered true for
today. What feminist theologians take up does become transformed into an authority problem. Authority and power continue to be sources of interest and debate. Increasing numbers of women are actively engaged in ministry, government, business, academics, providing leadership in private and public sectors. Yet there remain faith traditions, in Canada and globally, where the issue of women in leadership is a closed matter. There remain positions of Church leadership which are not open to women because of their gender. A mission of witness from faith communities that embody non-patriarchal leadership, offering a biblical view of mutuality in community is imperative.

Russell's spirituality of connection offers embodied theological thinking. Her vivid imagery of waters, rainbows, tables, and many more metaphors generate new stories from women's experience. These stories through community use become more than personal or individual.

Telling our stories may possibly begin a greater revolution, unleashing the power to turn the world's greater order around.

Ritual and celebration are collective means of capturing the joys

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10 Russell, Household of Freedom, 12.

11 See for example: Celia Allison Hahn, Growing in Authority, Relinquishing Control: A New Approach to Faithful Leadership (New York: The Alban Institute, 1994); Consultation on Issues of power and Authority in the Mennonite Church, May 1997.

and the sorrows of women along with men in solidarity. Music, poetry, prose, artwork, liturgies, prayers, litanies, and sermons reflecting the realities of different cultures and ages continue the journey of liberation and blessing.

Application and Conclusion

In these final few pages I will initiate a dialogue between Russell's understanding of the mission of the Church and the Mennonite Church perspective of the Church in mission. While this application of Russell's theology can only take place in actual Mennonite faith communities sharing their views and practice of mission, and not by a single theologian, I will point to some convergence, differences, and areas for reflection. Russell's understandings of the mission of the Church will be in dialogue with a Mennonite Church perspective of the Church in mission, particularly a statement of faith that guides the practice of mission for the Mennonite Church.

The Mennonite Church perspective of the mission of the Church that will be considered for application is taken from a statement of what Mennonites believe: *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective.*\(^1\) Confessions of faith serve the Mennonite

\(^1\) Helmut Harder, ed., *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995). See also Helmut Harder, *Understanding the Faith from a Mennonite Perspective* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Pub., Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1997). There is a rich tradition of confessional history from Mennonites. Confessions of faith used by Mennonites are: Schleitheim Articles 1527; Dordrecht Confession 1632; the
Church by providing guidelines for interpretation; guidance for
belief and practice; a foundation for unity; an outline for
instruction of new members; an updated interpretation of belief
and practice in the midst of changing times; and assist in
discussion with other faith traditions. The Confession of Faith
in a Mennonite Perspective was adopted at a delegate session of
the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite
Church. This confession of faith is widely used in the
Mennonite Church. It represents the faith and life of the
Mennonite faith community in North America. Article 10 "The
Church in Mission", from Confession of Faith in a Mennonite
Perspective, will be the dialogue partner with Russell's
theological understanding of the mission of the Church.

I will highlight five areas of convergence with the
Mennonite Church and Russell's understanding of the mission of
the Church. First is the centrality of Jesus. Jesus is the one

Christian Fundamentals 1921; a Statement of Faith 1941; and the
Mennonite Confession of Faith 1963. See Howard Loewen, ed., One
Lord, One Church, One Hope, And One God: Mennonite Confessions of
Faith (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985).

14 Harder, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 8.

15 General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church

16 See John Howard Yoder, The Politics of Jesus (Grand
Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1972); The Priestly Kingdom
(Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1984); J. Denny
Weaver, "A Believers' Church Christology," Mennonite Quarterly
Review, 57 (1983): 112-131; Erland Waltner, ed., Jesus Christ and
the Mission of the Church (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press,
who God gave to humanity, and Jesus Christ is the one who enables humanity to know God's mission. Jesus reveals God's mission and offers humanity the example of a life to follow. In Church in the Round, Russell describes her interpretation of feminist ecclesiology as "a community of Christ, bought with a price, where everyone is welcome." She views the Church as a community of faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, the Church embodying Jesus' way of life and patterned after the reign of God requires a vision of how things could be: a prophetic vision. Russell is confident in God's promise and emphasizes a vision of God's intention for a mended creation. This is a hope that empowers Christian feminists to keep on keeping on.

We are addressed by God to become partners. In this sense we are God's utopia....Through hope we are drawn into the future, becoming God's utopian agents of change.

Third, it is by doing and being that the Church carries out God's mission. Doing includes activities, such as repentance, such as repentance,

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Waltner, Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church, 126. Waltner documents the findings from a study conference of contemporary Anabaptist Mennonite perspectives on christology. Noted at this conference was a strong affirmation of "the centrality and significance of Jesus Christ for our [Mennonite] understanding and practice of mission, church and discipleship."

Russell, Church in the Round, 43.

Ibid, 18.

forgiveness, healing, and acts of justice. Being is envisaged as the faith community providing a sign of God's presence in the world, where there is love for one another. Faith is expressed in a Mennonite perspective through actions and words.21

The two [actions and words] go hand in hand. Words support actions and actions back up words. We speak through our actions, and we act through our words. There is an intimate connection between word and deed.22

The Mennonite Church expresses its mission through its programs. Conference mission boards emphasize proclamation in word, while Mennonite Central Committee emphasizes deeds. Russell's understanding of mission as practising God's hospitality stresses the activity of a community engaged in doing and being God's reality of love and justice.

A fourth area of convergence between Russell and the Mennonite faith community is the notion of the Church as an alternative community within the surrounding culture. The Church lives in the dominant culture, yet it is to challenge cultural reality when its myths and assumptions deny wholeness to creation. Being in and not of the world requires a recognition of


22 Harder, Understanding the Faith from a Mennonite Perspective, 58.
justice as key to the Church's relationship with the world. God's justice is a basic ingredient for participants of the Church in the world. The Mennonite Church and Russell present a prophetic stance.

Finally, a Mennonite Church understanding of mission embraces a response to Jesus' call to make disciples (John 20:21). A call to conversion is part of a Mennonite missionary witness.

It is significant that persons are attracted to the Mennonite church because of its proclamation of the message of peace and justice. The church which proclaims and works for peace and justice is the church in mission. Mission includes peace and evangelism. Peace is an integral part of the Mennonite Church's message. It also describes the context of evangelism. The Mennonite Church preaches and lives peace, yet without coercion.

I suggest four differences evident from this initial reflection of Russell and Mennonite Church perspectives on the mission of the Church. Although Russell and the Mennonite Church share converging views regarding the Church as an alternative community proclaiming and working for peace and justice, the

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24 Mennonite Churches in Europe and North America have sent many missionaries to Africa, Asia, and South America. There are over seventy-five countries with Mennonite Church affiliations. In North America, Mennonite congregations worship in Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Spanish, French, Laotian, and Hmong.

difference lies in the relationship of God, Church, and world. Russell and the Mennonite Church consider God's reign the primary reality. However, from a Mennonite perspective the Church is God's chosen people providing "a special channel for salvation." The Church is a new social and political reality with spiritual dimensions and a spiritual character. With Christ as its head, the Church is expected to witness to all creation about God's saving love. From a Mennonite perspective the relationship of Church and world, is that of the Church witnessing/in mission to the world, rather than with or from the world. Russell views the claims of the Church as more modest, taking its place as a sign of God's action in and through all parts of the universe.

A second difference between Russell and a Mennonite Church position articulated in the 1995 Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective is the exclusive claim of Jesus as the Saviour of the world. In its mission, the Mennonite Church affirms Jesus Christ as the only Saviour of the world. Jesus is the only promised One who brings clarity to God's mission and gathers dedicated people to proclaim the message that Christ is Lord of all. As a Christian theologian, Russell sees the

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26 Harder, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 49.


importance of Jesus. Jesus announces the promise of God's New
Creation, justice, freedom, and wholeness. According to Russell,
the person of Jesus, and the living relationship God provides in
Jesus Christ with humanity is central. She looks to Jesus as the
re-presentation of God entering into history to be with humanity,
and looks to Jesus' ministry as clues along the way. Russell
maintains that Christ is not the only way to discern God's will
for creation, nor has Christ's coming completed the New Creation.

When we universalize the Christian story of God in Jesus
Christ as the only message of salvation for all people,
we deny the power of God to work through all the poor
and through all creation."

A third point of difference between Russell and the
Mennonite Church perspective of mission reflected in the
Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective is one which is at
the heart of mission. The Mennonite understanding of mission is
more christocentric than theocentric. The first commentary note
from the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, Article
10, "The Church in Mission" states: "Christ has commissioned the
church to continue his mission." God's call to the Church and
its mission is not emphasized until the final paragraph in the
Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. From this
perspective it is clearly the Church's mission. For Russell, the
missio Dei concept is crucial to an understanding of mission. The

29 Russell, Church in the Round, 130.

30 Harder, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 43.
Church does not have a mission: it participates in God's mission.

A final difference and area for further reflection between Russell and the Mennonite Church regarding mission is a theological perspective. Russell's feminist liberation theology is linked to her theological understanding of God's mission. The Mennonite faith community continues to engage in study and conversation respecting feminist conviction. The Mennonite faith community is both encouraged and ambivalent concerning involvement in feminist theology. Collections of papers, books, and conferences serve to encourage further evaluation from a Mennonite perspective regarding the contributions of feminist theology. From a Mennonite faith perspective there is ambivalence related to the importance of feminist commitment, and the fruitfulness of feminist hermeneutics.

I am particularly encouraged and challenged by Russell's understanding that the Church does not have a mission rather it participates in God's mission. I am encouraged to view the Church as a sign of God's promise in the mending of creation. A prophetic vision of God at work in the world, compassionately

loving the world. My Mennonite convictions are challenged to see the world as God's arena. The Church, by the grace of God's Spirit, witnesses with and from God's work in the world.

The tension of scripture, Mennonite faith tradition, and the text of our lives is real for me. Embodied theological thinking that values a spirituality of connection is integral to Christian feminist theology. Mission as practising God's hospitality is a manner of interaction with the many pieces that make up the whole of God's creation. What does it mean for Mennonites to identify with the many pieces of God's creation? Feminist theological convictions and practises must be explored and embraced rather than feared and excluded. How can mission as practising God's hospitality celebrate and sustain diversity in the Mennonite Church?

In bringing the study home to the confession of faith from my faith community, the Mennonite Church, there is need for further reflection. The Mennonite Church must continue to discover the benefits and necessity of ecumenical dialogue. Women along with men in Mennonite faith communities are experiencing the life-giving force of feminism and feminist theologies. Care needs to be taken to continue to initiate conversation among feminists and Mennonites. I am concerned that ongoing work in ecclesiology and missiology in the Mennonite Church invite and embrace the diversity of views present in the Church. As a Mennonite Church community we must encourage and welcome further exploration of ecclesiology and the mission of the Church.
I am convinced of the significance and worthiness of exploring feminist theology as a resource for the Church. In this case, the theology of Letty M. Russell is a resource toward the development of a theology of the mission of the Church. Feminist theology is a valued source for ecclesiology and missiology. Where will this exploration lead us? I am challenged by Russell's feminist liberation theology and her understandings of the mission of the Church. Russell's work invites further theological inquiry. Her theological method and clues suggest the possibility for testing in local faith communities. Where will this analysis lead us? Russell's meaningful theological contribution: a spiral of theological engagement, fresh images of the Church, her paradigm of authority in community, and mission as practising God's hospitality advocate an understanding of the mission of the Church that makes sense of the Christian faith in the world today.
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