ARE SEEKERS WELCOME?

THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF BABY BOOMER WOMEN

by


A DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS

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in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

Based on personal interviews with eleven baby boomer women who are affiliated with the Knox-Sutton and Virginia congregations of The United Church of Canada, this study reports and reflects on their spiritual longings, and attempts to describe the place of the church in their lives.

These women lead busy lives that are affected by the insistent messages of our consumer culture. Their husbands are not likely to be involved in the church, and do not look to the church as a place to find friends. The women believe in God, and sometimes pray, but question traditional church doctrine. At the same time, they appreciate church rituals, especially holiday rituals, and want their children to be exposed to the church's stories and values. The church can support these women in their spiritual pilgrimage with non-judgmental acceptance and with opportunities to share their faith stories with one another.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Except for my maternal grandmother who was the daughter of German Quaker immigrants, my forebears were Methodist and Presbyterian farmers from upstate New York. As a young widow, my Quaker grandmother married my grandfather, the hired man on the farm her "gentleman farmer" husband had left her. All of the many children, and most of the many grandchildren from that marriage, were raised to be devout Quakers. I come from a line of strong women.

Two distinct contexts defined my belief system as I was growing up: the post-war optimism and sense of superiority of white middle-class America, and the prophetic spirituality of the Society of Friends (Quakers). As I approached adulthood, the conflicting value systems of these two contexts began to battle within me. I chose the more prophetic way and became a 60's "drop-out." Over the next two decades I experienced many facets of counter-culture life, from itinerant vagabond to inner-city tenement dweller to rural commune idealist to single welfare mom. I learned to enjoy a variety of life-styles. I learned there is a price to pay for defying the norms of the prevailing culture. Eventually, my economic struggles led me back into universities and middle-class circles.

As my generation emerged from some of the justice struggles of the sixties, I began to realize that, in some ways, I myself was a disadvantaged person simply because I had been born female. Since that time, a growing feminist awareness has coloured all my decisions. I became a teacher, and then a teacher-administrator in the anti-poverty Headstart programme. I moved to Canada, and became a college instructor, training students to be social service and child-care workers. In my work, I have always had a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to women and children, especially women and children living in poverty.

Spiritually, I have been a strident atheist, have dabbled in Eastern spiritualities, and have accessed the quick fixes of drug-induced wisdom and other New Age gimmicks. Finding myself living in the interior of British Columbia, I began, by default, to attend the local United Church. To complement the busyness of the United Church's emphasis on community fellowship, I also began to go away to silent retreats at a Roman Catholic retreat centre. I have continued this practice and greatly value the disciplines of Jesuit spirituality.

In 1983, I decided that because I had been born a Christian, the most sensible spiritual path for me to pursue was a Christian path. I began a course of study that could lead to ministry in the United Church of Canada. When I began my studies, I assumed that if I were ordained, it would be to some special ministry with women. Since my ordination in 1988, my ministry has been with middle-class mainstream congregations.

Ironically, I have returned to the middle class context I once sought to escape. I believe that my intimate connection with mainstream culture gives me a good understanding of the fears, pressures, and limitations middle-class women experience. I believe my intimate connection with realities of the counter-culture, gives me a message of hopeful alternatives to share with the middle class women in our United churches.
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CHAPTER ONE

1. KNOX-SUTTON AND VIRGINIA UNITED CHURCHES: THE MINISTRY CONTEXT

1.1 The Setting

In late February 1992, my husband and I drove through "whiteout" conditions to attend an interview with the Pastoral Relations Committee of the Knox-Sutton and Virginia United Churches, the two churches of a pastoral charge that was seeking to call new ministers. Heavy snow swirling on the stretches of road where farm fields had not been filled with suburban housing developments made it tough going. Finally, about 80 kilometres north of Toronto, we turned off the highway and drove along High Street, the main roadway through of the Village of Sutton's downtown district. It did not seem to be a very exciting place. Along High Street's three blocks, we saw a post office, two banks, several tired-looking eating establishments, three convenience stores, a liquor store, a video games/pool hall, a couple of bars, about ten seemingly shabby retail stores, and several empty storefronts. My heart sank. This definitely did not seem to me to be the sort of town I had dreamed of making my home.

Wondering where the manse might be, we drove around the side streets of the village. Most of the houses were on very small lots. I thought that many of the older houses in the village had "character", while most of the newer houses did not. When we met our afternoon host, we learned that both the town and the area served by the church are not confined to the little section we had been exploring. The Village of
Sutton is one of many little communities within the Town of Georgina. Sutton itself extends out to a new strip of retail stores on Dalton Road which connects the Village of Sutton with the Village of Jackson’s Point. The newer houses on the side roads in this section of town have larger lots with more attractive landscaping.

Driving on to Jackson’s Point, one of the communities served by the Sutton and Virginia United Churches, we found ourselves in a rather quaint little tourist area located on the south shore of Lake Simcoe, just three kilometres from Sutton’s High Street. In the past, Jackson’s Point was a summer vacation area for wealthy Torontonians. There were still some beautiful mansion-like homes in this community. They stood side by side with small summer cottages that low income people were trying to winterize into year-round dwelling places. Several large buildings in Jackson’s Point had been converted into residential homes for mentally ill and mentally challenged individuals. There was, as well, a newly established shelter for battered women. Seeing this part of the pastoral charge caused me to feel some excitement. Unlike drab, bland High Street and its immediate surrounds, I saw in Jackson’s Point a potentially rich ground for outreach ministries. I pictured myself interacting with single welfare moms and others who were struggling to make do with the little semi-winterized cottages.
1.2 Our Team Ministry

A month later, we received and accepted a call to a 1½ time clergy couple team ministry position at the Sutton West-Virginia Pastoral Charge. We began this ministry in July, 1992. In the intervening years, I have been too busy working with the people who come to church to find time for any significant outreach ministry with those who are not already a part of the church community.

Each Sunday, my husband and I are "up front" as worship leaders in both churches. We assume primary responsibility for preaching and preparing worship on a rotating, every other Sunday basis. He attends most board meetings. We both attend meetings of the Knox Session, the board that deals with spiritual and educational concerns. He takes most of the weddings. We share equally the responsibility of hospital visiting and conducting funerals. He has primary responsibility for nursing home services, and visiting shut-ins. I do most of the crisis pastoral care. He answers routine correspondence. I work as a consultant to the Sunday School teachers, and help recruit leaders for Christian Education programmes. We both give leadership in special education events.

1.3 The Churches

The total population of our catchment area is approximately 9,000. In addition to Knox-Sutton and Virginia United Churches, the Sutton/Jackson's Point/Virginia area is served by seven other major churches: two Anglican, two Roman Catholic, a
Presbyterian, a Salvation Army and a Nazarene. The total number of people who regularly participate in the life of these nine churches is approximately 1200.1 Within the Town of Georgina, there are five other United Churches: Wilfred and Cooke's United are part of a small, three point, rural charge. Keswick and Ravenshoe United serve the rapidly growing commuter community of Keswick and the rural hamlet of Ravenshoe. Georgina Island United serves the Native community of the Georgina Island Indian Reserve. Georgina Island is "next door" to Virginia, and can be reached by a ferry that departs from Virginia Beach.

The Knox United Church in Sutton draws members from the Village of Sutton, beach communities like Jackson's Point and Willow Beach to the west, and rural communities like Belhaven and Baldwin to the south. Virginia United draws members from beach and rural communities that are east of Sutton. Fifty years ago, the rural communities were populated by Protestant farmers. The beach communities catered to affluent Jewish tourists. Today, few farmers are left, the resort industry is much smaller, and most people in the work force commute toward the city of Toronto. A few people work locally in the retail or service sector.

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1 Based on figures found in Jim Pesce, "Georgina Community Analysis: A Demographic View for Social Work, Church Growth, Church Planting," (Self-published study, April, 1994).
Knox United's members include no more than five or six farm families, along with many active and retired professional and business people. The informal structures of the church are dominated by members of the original farm families. A significant number of the newer people at the Knox church live in a retirement community that lies halfway between the Virginia and Knox-Sutton churches. Virginia United's members include less than five farm families. The rest are retirees, skilled or semi-skilled public and private sector workers, and a few summer vacationers.

The Knox-Sutton church is a beautiful stone building on a street just off High Street. It was built in the 1950's after a fire gutted the small church that had once been the Knox Presbyterian church. Since the 1989 installation of an elevator, all the worship and meeting areas within the church are wheelchair accessible. Many community groups, like Moms and Tots, Alanon, Scouts, and the V.O.N. use the church building throughout the week. It is a well-used facility.

Many of the people who choose to worship at Knox seem to desire a worship atmosphere that is formal and stately. Some people report that they find Knox to be a friendly place. Others say they find it cold and unfriendly. Knox has four choirs: an adult choir with approximately twenty members, two children's choirs, and a youth choir. Fifty children are enrolled in the Sunday School which has classes for children age four to grade eight. Average Sunday worship attendance is 100. Fifty percent of those present on a given Sunday attend regularly. The other fifty percent attend
periodically. The total number of people involved in the Knox church is considerably higher than the total number involved at Virginia. Attendance is usually higher than average when the children’s choirs sing. A few very wealthy and a few fairly poor people are part of the Knox congregation, but most have middle to upper middle-class incomes and life-styles.

The Virginia church is a small old two-storey brick structure on Highway 48. Originally, it was part of a Methodist preaching circuit. Some of the older people in the congregation remember stories about their fathers and grandfathers making bricks to build the church. The sanctuary is upstairs. An all-purpose/Sunday School/Fellowship room, with kitchen area, is downstairs. The sanctuary is not wheelchair accessible. The tap water in this building, like the tap water in many of the beach communities, is not drinkable. The worship atmosphere at Virginia is informal, warm, and welcoming. Its choir has about ten members. Average Sunday attendance is forty-five, and those forty-five are essentially the same people week after week.

Eighteen children are enrolled in the Sunday School. Within the Virginia congregation, there is a broad spectrum of economic levels, but on average, most members are less affluent than members of the Knox congregation.

In both churches, you can expect to find older couples coming to church together. Many widows come to both churches. We see both parents from a few younger families, but among the “young marrieds” far more women than men come to
church. A reasonable number of married women with pre-school and school age children worship and work at our churches. Both teenagers and their parents tend to drift away. My informal observation suggests that women who have been active tend to withdraw from the church when they become separated or divorced. Very few single or childless young people come to either church.

As I looked at the folk living in the Sutton and Virginia area, and then looked at the folk who come to church, I found myself wondering if people see the United Church as a club for those who are middle class, and married or widowed. Because I have been poor and known the feeling of disenfranchisement that often goes with being poor, I realized that some residents of the Sutton/ Virginia/ Jackson's Point community might see the church as just one more oppressive big institution. Because I have been a single mom, and have experienced a sense of other's assuming I was both a bad parent and a threatening "other woman," I realized that some residents might see the church as a place where they will not be welcome.

1.4 The Churches' Women's Groups

The pastoral charge has a women's Bible study group that draws women from both congregations. It has been meeting twice a month on Thursday morning, since sometime in the 1950's. Its present membership is about twelve. The discussions are lively and thought provoking. No one in this group is under seventy years old. Most younger women's schedules do not permit them to attend daytime meetings.
There are three United Church Women (U.C.W.) units at the Knox Church. Most members of two of the units are over seventy. The youngest women in the third unit are over forty. The Virginia Church has one U.C.W. unit. Nicknamed "The Golden Oldies", members of this unit are all over sixty.

Over the years, members of the U.C.W. have worked hard in the kitchens and classrooms of our churches. They have been the backbone of fund-raising events. Almost all of their work has been done "behind the scenes". Some of the older women have told me that the friendships, sense of belonging, and sense of purpose found in their U.C.W. units are cherished, core elements in their lives. Looking back to the time when families' lives were centred in the work of the family farm, it seems safe to assume that U.C.W. functions were the primary social activity of many women, one of the few opportunities they had to interact with anyone besides members of their immediate family.

Life in the 1990's is very different. Many women work outside the home. Their jobs bring them into social contact with others. They have limited time for volunteer activities. Their children are often involved in the Scouting movement, school programmes, sports activities, and music lessons . . . and these activities need moms to work as volunteer leaders and volunteer fund-raisers. Church work is but one choice amongst many.
In addition to lack of time, I suspected that other younger women may have responses similar to my own when they think of the U.C.W. I do not attend U.C.W. meetings. From my perspective, the business of the U.C.W. is conducted with unnecessary formality. Matters that I consider trivial and inconsequential\(^2\) are discussed at length. I am uncomfortable with the subservient "behind the scenes" (i.e., behind the men) position I associate with the U.C.W. On a few occasions, when the U.C.W. has had a special speaker that interested me, I have attended their meetings. Even then, when I may have appreciated the speaker they have sponsored, I have felt like an unwilling captive to the formal U.C.W. rituals that are a part of the event. At these times, I resent being expected to conform to a set of behaviours and attitudes that simply do not fit the person I am.

The fact that few younger women are not likely to participate in the church's long-standing women's programmes does not mean that younger women do not need opportunities to come together as members of a faith community, to work and share with one another. Since coming to Sutton and Virginia, I have established two women's spirituality groups for women in the "under 50's" age bracket. There are

\(^2\) E.g., whether to have sandwiches or cookies at the next meeting, and what kind of sandwiches and what kind of cookies, and who will bring them. In a different pastoral charge, I actually sat through a two-hour meeting where the only thing the women decided was who would host each of their monthly meetings in the upcoming year, who would give the devotional reading for those meetings, and who would thank the hostess and the devotional leader. The roster they had at the end of the meeting was identical to the one they had had the year before.
approximately ten women in each spirituality group. They gather monthly in one another's homes for personal sharing, for discussing biblical and faith issues, and for exploring different prayer and meditation techniques. I have observed that membership in these spirituality groups has had a strong, positive impact on the women's sense of closeness to each other and on their sense of commitment to the life and work of the church.  

1.5 The Context Gives Rise to the Research Question

Because the church fails to meet many of my needs, I suspect it fails to meet the needs of other women who are like me. Therefore, I decided that in this research project, I wanted to learn about what the younger women who are connected to our churches need in order to feel closer to God and to one another.

I chose to focus my study on women in our local congregations who were born between 1950 and 1960. Some of these women work for the church as elders, coffee servers, Sunday School teachers, choir members and ushers. Some send their children to church and appear only when their child's choir is singing. Some send their children but never attend any church functions themselves. Some continue to think of themselves as church members but have no obvious connection with the church.

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3 At the time of this writing, three women who belong to a spirituality group serve as church elders. Four years ago, no "younger" women were elders. Three women from the spirituality group are, or have been presbytery representatives (a position that in the past seemed to belong only to men). Informally, these women support one another in a great variety of ways.
My research question was: What do the women of our church communities who were born between 1950 and 1960 need to help them feel more connected to God and to one another? I chose this question partly because I wanted to reach out to these women and partly because I hoped that together, we might begin to create new, more relevant ways of being the church.

The women in my target group are members of the baby boomer generation. Generally speaking, baby boomers have lived through the upheavals of the 60's, have learned to question traditional religious practices, and feel free to seek spiritual fulfilment in a wide array of contexts. They are discriminating consumers. Just as they might sample new foods set out in an open air market, they are prepared to sample new religions and spiritualities. If it fits, if it works for them, they stay to taste more. If they do not like it, they move on. The baby boomers in our local congregations and in churches and communities all across the country present us with both challenge and opportunity. Their tendency to want quick fixes and fast results may seem foolish, but it is real and needs to be addressed. Their questing hunger can be seen as fertile ground for spiritual renewal and a rediscovery of gospel concerns.

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4 Baby boomers are defined as North Americans born between 1945 and 1960.

Those of us who believe the Christian gospel message has something unique and meaningful to offer seekers, would be well advised to listen to "boomers" concerns as we seek to find ways to meet them in their context. The old church ways that worked 25 or 50 or 100 years ago belong to a different context.

A generation ago, fewer options were open to women. They knew that they could expect to be stay-at-home moms, tending to the needs of their children, while their husbands worked on the farm or at 9 to 5 jobs. They did not have to deal with Sunday sports, Sunday shopping expeditions and Sunday work schedules. It was a common occurrence for families to go to church together on Sunday morning.

The goal of my research was to identify the spiritual aspirations, longings and understandings of baby boomer women in my congregations. In the process, I hoped I might discover congregational approaches and programmes the church could use to help these women find relevant Christian meaning and purpose for their lives.
CHAPTER TWO

2. PERSPECTIVES AND LENSES: A THEORETICAL BASE

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will look at my Quaker background and my feminist perspective as influences in my choice of research topic. Because the women who participated in this project are baby boomers, I will report the findings of some recent studies on the spirituality of baby boomers. And finally, I will summarize stages of faith development as one lens for understanding the aspirations and longings of the women in my churches.

In the history of the church there has always been a dialectical tension between the church as historical institution and as Spirit-filled community. However... the relationship between the two seldom stays in tension as Spirit-filled groups reject church institutions and traditions, and institutions make exclusive claims for their rituals, words and symbols as the only means of grace.⁶

In many ways, the tension identified in this quote is embodied in my person. I am an American Quaker in the United Church of Canada. I am a "60's dropout" living and working among the middle class. I am a woman functioning within an order of ministry traditionally reserved for men. I am a feminist in a patriarchal religion.

Undoubtedly some personal need to understand and make peace with this dialectical tension within myself has been an important influence as I developed and

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implemented my research. Would I find common ground between myself and the women of my congregations? What might they teach me about a United Church spirituality that I have trouble discerning? How might we enrich one another?

2.1 The Quaker Influence

My sense of what it means to be a spiritual person and my longing to bring an awareness of the Spirit's presence to those around me have been shaped by my Quaker upbringing. The Society of Friends (Quakers) was one of many Christian splinter sects existing in seventeenth-century England. Most of what we know about its founder, George Fox, comes from his Journal that was first published in 1694. As a young man, Fox was apprenticed to a shoemaker. He also worked as a shepherd, an occupation that allowed him to enjoy many hours of quiet meditation. The most critical event of his youth occurred in 1643 when he went to a tavern with a cousin, who was a "professor" (that is, one who had made a profession of faith). The cousin challenged him to a drinking bout. Fox was deeply disturbed, and left the tavern in disgust. That night he was unable to sleep. He spent the night pacing and praying and crying out to the Lord over the sinfulness of his peers.7

The tavern incident led the youth into four years of wandering about, seeking the truth. He conferred with preachers and professors of all stripes, but found that they

had no satisfying answers to the questions that burned within him. In 1647, it came to him that he could not receive answers to his questions from other people, but that "there was one, even Christ Jesus", who could speak to his condition. He wrote in his journal, "I saw . . . that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. And in that also I saw the infinite love of God."\(^8\)

Disillusioned by the imperfection and corruption of the priests and preachers of his day, Fox embarked on a mission. He wandered about the countryside, delivering a message of disdain for "hireling" preachers and ungodly "steeplehouses". He did not restrict his preaching to purely "religious" issues, but believed that God also had laid upon him the responsibility to call others to act justly and fairly in their business transactions. His first public ministry was an occasion when he spoke out at a fair where poor folk were offering themselves for hire. He urged prospective employers to pay fair wages to any they would choose to hire.\(^9\) In 1649, George Fox was imprisoned for interrupting a preacher's sermon.\(^10\) Between 1649 and 1675, he was imprisoned eight times. He spent a total of six years behind bars.

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\(^8\) Ibid., 19.
\(^9\) Ibid., 37.
In many ways, George Fox was a product of the Puritan culture in which he was nurtured. His truth, the Word of God as it was revealed to him, built upon, and sometimes extended, basic Puritan teachings. In his preaching, he taught that there are no barriers between God and ordinary individuals, so human intermediaries between God and individual persons are unnecessary; that receiving money to preach the word of God is contrary to the teachings of Christ; that Christ is a living presence, not a dead fact, and that Christ alone should be each person's teacher, leader and prophet; that God's temple is to be found in human bodies, not in buildings constructed by human hands; that the Bible, which he loved dearly, did not contain the final word of God, for truth is to be found in the Spirit which inspired it; that integrity in all matters, both worldly and spiritual, is of the utmost importance.

I was born into the religious sect founded by this unusual young man who taught that however young or old, poor or rich people might be, they can hear the voice of God speaking within them. He believed that there is always more truth to be discovered. For this reason, I began life with some uncommon points of view. My Quaker background has left me with some special gifts and perspectives for my ministry in the United Church of Canada. The Quaker belief in "that of God in every person," or "the Christ within" has given me a rich appreciation for the accessibility of the Spirit, an awareness of God's immediate presence, and a respect for the potential greatness inherent in all people, including myself. For my seventh birthday, I was
given an autograph book. My mother used the first page of my new book to impart some Quaker wisdom. Quoting from Thomas Kelly, a Quaker mystic, she wrote:
"Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continually return." These words have formed part of my core truth through all the different stages of my life. As a young child, I learned that these words applied to all people, whatever their age, gender, race, nationality, or education. The sense of both the nearness of God and my personal responsibility to live according to the "promptings of the Spirit" have been with me since my earliest memories.

Growing up Quaker has given me intimate, real experience with a lived practice of the "priesthood of all believers." Members of the Society of Friends do not rely on clergy to teach them the Word of God or help them approach God. In meetings for worship, Friends gather together in silence to "wait upon the Lord." Out of the silence, any Friend who feels "prompted by the Spirit" may stand and speak. The manner in which Friends conduct their meetings for business bears witness to their belief that the Spirit of Christ has an ongoing involvement in the everyday affairs of life. Their group decisions are made, not by taking a vote, but by reaching a "sense

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of the meeting," which means a decision is made only when, guided by the Spirit, Friends have reached a consensus.

Quakers have a long history of willingness to defy civil authority and go to prison for reasons of conscience. Their peace and social action projects are respected throughout the world and have served as prototypes for programmes set up by governments and other churches. A passion for actualizing my prayer life by working for peace and justice for all people is another example of a perspective that took root in me during my Quaker childhood.

I have named some of the positive aspects of my Quaker heritage. There is a darker side as well. George Fox's friends thought him to be a good and saintly man. His detractors found him ungracious and infuriatingly self-righteous. Fox experienced anguish over the condition of the world around him, but he never doubted his own purity and goodness. In his journal he wrote, "In my very young years I had a gravity and stayedness of mind and spirit not usual in children . . . when I came to eleven years of age, I knew pureness and righteousness." Fox sets himself up as one who is over and against the sin of the world, rather than as one who recognizes and accepts his intimate connection with all who suffer because of the personal and corporate sin that is part of the lived experience of all human beings. Because he did not know himself

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12 Fox, Journal, 1.
to be a sinner, he also could not experience the grace that comes to those who know themselves to be forgiven sinners.

Because I grew up in a religious sect founded by a man who claimed he "knew nothing but pureness, and innocency and righteousness," I was never taught anything about the inevitability of my own sin and the forgiveness of my sin. As a Quaker child, the Biblical admonition, "Be ye therefore perfect" (Matthew 5:48) was the guiding principle for my life. Throughout my childhood and youth, I experienced intense feelings of guilt, struggle and hard-driving determination. My inability to believe I could be forgiven for my inevitable mistakes and sinful behaviour and thoughts was a source of personal anguish. I directed some of my discomfort outward in the form of a self-righteous attitude toward others that was harsh and judgmental. This is still the attitude to which I default when I am tired or stressed. Over time, I am learning to recognize a strengthening relief that can be found in the knowledge that God accepts me with my imperfections; that God's love for me exists even when I fail to allow the light of Christ in me to burn brightly.

Undoubtedly, my desire to share the fullness of a Christian spirituality that includes the promise of forgiveness has some roots in my own struggles. I found it was not helpful to grow up believing that it is my individual responsibility to be

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13 Ibid., 27.
perfect. My understanding of many New Age, self-help Spiritualities is that they too admonish individuals to become perfect through efforts of self-determination and practices of self-discipline. I believe that because we are born into a world which is already contaminated by sin, we are all caught by sin, and can only experience wholeness through the grace of receiving God's ongoing forgiveness. I want to be instrumental in helping others learn to recognize and receive and live with this grace.

Robert McAfee Brown, when writing about today's church, identifies a "remnant within a remnant" - a self-conscious minority within the church that realizes that the church must become a self-conscious minority within the world. This imagery is consistent with the historical image and role of the Society of Friends. Quakers have always spoken with a prophetic voice, as they seek to call a society that has gone astray back into an awareness of God's good purposes. I have always felt I had a personal responsibility to "speak truth to power." I identify strongly with remnant imagery.

2.2 Women and the Church

I am beginning this section of my paper with a long excerpt from a Theology of Ministry paper I wrote in 1991. It recalls some of my subjective experience at the service where I was ordained to Ministry of Word and

Sacrament in the United Church of Canada. I include this account because it speaks so vividly of my personal need for the kind of spirituality more and more Christian feminists are naming and seeking, and because it contains images that came to me not as a result of intellectual academic study, but in response to deeply-felt emotion. In my life as an individual, as a minister, and as a student conducting a research project, I try to honour both the subjective, emotional realities and the more objective, intellectual realities found in myself and others. Here is a partial account of my subjective, emotional reality one day in May, 1988:

I am sitting on a wooden pew inside a grey stone building. I don't like being here. I don't like the cold hardness of the stone walls that shut us in, and cut us off from green trees and blue sky and warm sun and cool shadow. Here there are no breezes, no moving waters, no growth, no life . . . I feel like I am choking, suffocating . . . I want to run screaming out of the building . . . "O God," I pray, "What am I doing here? I can't stay. I feel . . . like I am joining forces with the enemy."

And suddenly, God lifts me up out of the forbidding grey stone structure, and carries me through the air to a green and sunlit grotto hidden in a woodland whose existence has long been denied by the patriarchal institution that threatens to trap and capture me. Gently, God sets me down amongst the women who are gathered by the water in this greenlit place. Here, there is music and silence, dancing and stillness, worship and healing, laughter and tears. Here there is the beauty of strong, yielding compassion. Here, the vibrant flowing mystery of interconnected life is acknowledged and honoured. Here, with gentle caresses, growing unfolding truth delights the minds and hearts of the gathered spirits. Here is where I want to be. Here is where I belong.
... my attention is drawn [back into the church] by the thin voice of a young child uttering a prayer ... from the heart ... Throughout the service, my awareness jumps back and forth between the cold and mostly dead sanctuary and the warm, vibrantly alive woodland grotto ... when my awareness leaves the sanctuary for the sweet sights and sounds and smells of the grotto, I feel at home and at peace; and I am afire with the realization that I am collaborating with a patriarchal institution as a means of helping others learn to recognize this other, pregnant, fecund reality to which God has brought me.¹⁵

This was my inner experience on the evening I became an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada. The United Church came into being in 1925, with the amalgamation of the Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian Churches of Canada. It is primarily a mainline, middle-class denomination. Its members tend to be well-educated, with leanings toward a liberal theology. Its Methodist social gospel roots feed its concern for social justice. Its polity is an interesting, sometimes confusing mixture of congregational autonomy inherited from our Congregational parents, and a locally elected representative court system that mimics the Presbyterian system.

The United Church of Canada is aptly named. Its ethical teachings are firmly based in the value system of English Canada. Sex role expectations have been an integral part of this value system. For many years, women worked as cooks, Sunday School teachers, flower arrangers, and at fund-raising events; while men were

expected to sit on boards that determined church policy. Unmarried women could serve as deaconesses, teaching children at home and abroad or caring for the sick or elderly, but as soon as a woman married, she was required to renounce her deaconess status. Much of the important work of the church was done by women, but it was done in the context of a gender-determined, two-tiered system.

Today, on the surface, much has changed in the United Church of Canada. While a few rural congregations still have only male elders, trustees, and ushers, it is not unusual to find women on church boards as well as in church kitchens. At our theology schools, there are often more women than men preparing for ordered ministry. Women hold important administrative positions, and even have been elected to the office of church moderator.16

This does not mean that we have shed our patriarchal attitudes or our hierarchical organizational structures. The tension I experienced at my ordination service continues to be an ever-present reality in my ministry in the United Church of Canada. Our decision-making processes still tend to be controlled by those who are comfortable with the formal rules of parliamentary procedure, and women still tend to interact in placating and self-effacing ways. The following description, written by Regina Coll, accurately describes the reality of many women in our local churches:

16 This office has a two-year term and is the most high profile position in our denomination.
... Women... suffer from fear of freedom... [because]... they are, after all, better off than their mothers and grandmothers... They have learned that life proceeds more easily when they are compliant. Rocking the boat threatens not only their position in society, but also their image of themselves as a good woman. 17

Ursula King suggests that the church often undermines women's self-esteem by telling them that their tendency to define their worth in terms of giving and self-sacrifice is an indication of maturity and great religious capacity, when it is actually a mask for a vulnerable sense of dependence, insecurity and self-refusal. She goes on to say that "traditional religious institutions... can turn out to be hiding places from women's wholeness, "18 and Sandra Schneiders reminds us,

> It is entirely possible for women to have a very patriarchal spirituality. In fact, it may well be the case that the spirituality of most women in the church is still at least unreflectively if not militantly patriarchal.19

But there is also a sometimes small but ever growing feminist consciousness present in our churches. Many feminist women are asking "with radical sincerity what in the past of religion is, and remains, usable for women today."20 An increasing

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20 King, Women and Spirituality, 34.
number of feminist women are choosing to leave the Christian church. One of the first and most prominent was Mary Daly.

In 1971, [Mary] Daly was invited to be the first woman preacher in Harvard Memorial Church. Her sermon topic was "The Women's Movement: An Exodus Community." She ended her sermon by walking out of the church in protest against it, and inviting the other women present to do likewise. She defended this exodus in her sermon, saying: "We cannot really belong to institutional religion as it exists. It isn't good enough to be token preachers . . . Singing sexist hymns, praying to a male god breaks our spirit, makes us less than human. The crushing weight of this tradition, of this power structure, tells us that we do not even exist."\(^{21}\)

Mary Daly continues to develop her powerful, colourful, linguistic style, and claims to speak for a group of angry separatists who call themselves post-Christian feminists. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether, one problem with this approach is that in a church that exists as a dialectical tension between spirit-filled community and historical institution " . . . the spirit-filled community deludes itself by imagining it can live without historical structures . . . and at their best, historical institutions create the occasion for the experience of the Spirit."\(^{22}\)

I have further problems with Daly's approach. I have difficulty with any group that excludes others for reasons of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Post-Christian

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feminists most commonly adopt a separatist, exclusive position that will countenance no input from any men. It also appears to be a movement that defines itself more in terms of what it is not than what it is. While I understand and respect the frustration and anger these women feel, I believe that when the primary focus of any group becomes defeating the enemy, it is not long before that group inadvertently embraces the basic characteristics of the hated enemy.

There are many feminist women who feel deeply rooted in and enriched by their Christian faith and do not want to abandon it as "post-Christians." Sandra Schneiders tells us there seem to be at least two general groups of women who are both Christian and feminist: those who are trying to function within mainline Christianity while carrying on a continuous, radical critique of the tradition; and those who are still formally within the institutional church, but have relocated their primary sense of identity to alternative gatherings of women that are sometimes called "womenchurch."²³

Whatever their level of feminist awareness, Christian women could benefit from time alone together to become more adept at finding their own voices, more able to trust their own experience, and less apt to rely on men to tell them who they are. Carol Christ writes,

²³ Schneiders, Beyond Patching, 95.
We women have not told our own stories. The dialectic between experiencing and shaping experience by story telling has not been in our own hands . . . the discovery and recovery of women's experiences will not be accomplished overnight . . . We are in a time for ripening . . . Not only time, but also community is required to rediscover our experience.\(^{24}\)

Are women born morally and spiritually different from men? Are men made by God to be more aggressive than women? Are women made by God to be more dependent than men? "Scientific" theories, personal testimony, and religious authority can all be cited to give both affirmative and negative answers to these questions. We may never succeed in untangling gender-related biological differences from socio-cultural influences and individual personality differences. We can, however, acknowledge that gender-related expectations exist in every culture. Linda Woodhead identifies some of our culture's gender-related expectations when she writes,

> It is quite clear that in our culture women are generally encouraged to care for others and to establish loving relationships and that they are valued for so doing whilst men are assessed more in terms of their achievement outside the realm of personal relations. Men may even be looked down on for taking personal relationships too seriously.\(^{25}\)

If we accept her premise that women are valued for their success with relationships, and men for their independent, autonomous achievements, then we can

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begin to construct some possible differences in the spiritual understandings of women who are learning to trust and speak for themselves and men who have traditionally assumed their perspectives to be normative and universal.

I have already acknowledged the fact that many women unquestioningly and even militantly accept the patriarchal/hierarchical spirituality that is traditionally associated with mainline Christianity. This spirituality of estrangement\textsuperscript{26} puts God in charge of clergy; clergy with the help of God in charge of men; men with the help of clergy in charge of women; women with the help of men in charge of children; and all the rest of creation (i.e., that which is not human) a soulless resource for human exploitation and use. It has been a spirituality that is dualistic, pitting body against spirit, people against nature, and men against women. It is a natural spiritual cousin of a life-style ethic that encourages competition, winning, aggressive adventure, and personal, individual accomplishment. Within the feminist movement, an effort is being made to embrace a different kind of spirituality, one that might be called a spirituality of immanence. The character Shug, in Alice Walker's novel \textit{The Color Purple}, gives us some insight into what this spirituality is about when she says,

\begin{quote}
Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white . . . then she sigh . . . My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} In "Power-Over and Power-From-Within," the first chapter of her book, \textit{Dreaming the Dark}, (Beacon Press: 1982), Starhawk outlines the differences she sees between an \textit{estrangement} consciousness and an \textit{immanence} consciousness. I have borrowed these terms as I name two types of spiritualities.
and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it.\textsuperscript{27}

A spirituality that "is not about the regulation of the competing demands of separated individuals but about the recognition of our mutual interdependence and responsibility for one another,"\textsuperscript{28} it is holistic and focuses on the unifying aspects of creation. It "has more to do with being embodied spirits than with being enspirited bodies,"\textsuperscript{29} and it "interweaves themes of search, promise and quest for wholeness and healing in a world torn asunder."\textsuperscript{30} Starhawk describes this spirituality (or consciousness) when she writes,

\begin{quote}
Estrangement permeates our society so strongly that to us it seems to be consciousness itself. Even the language for other possibilities has disappeared or been deliberately twisted. Yet another form of consciousness is possible . . . This is the consciousness I call immanence -- the awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, interacting, and infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} Alice Walker, "God is Inside You and Inside Everybody Else", in Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, eds., \textit{Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality} (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1989), 102-103.

\textsuperscript{28} Woodhead in Elwes , 64.

\textsuperscript{29} Coll , 174.

\textsuperscript{30} King , 6.

\textsuperscript{31} Starhawk, \textit{Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 9.
Christian feminists are living in a difficult in-between time. As feminist women and men in the United Church move into positions of greater power and authority, collaborative, non-confrontational models of decision making are appearing. Here and there, at all levels of the church, consensus building is emerging as an alternative to parliamentary procedure. At the same time, at all levels of the church, there are still women who delight in the opportunity to "make it" in a man's world, and who want no part of the sharing and mutual empowerment found in women-church alternatives.

We do not know what the church of tomorrow will look like. Ruether says that "constructing a church liberated from patriarchy will require the dismantling of clericalism." Christian feminists may in fact be today's prophets led by the Spirit, calling the churches to a new vision and a new life. In the introduction to their book of faith-life stories of women in the church, Gillespie and Matthews tell us that at this particular time in history, we are witnessing many attempts to clarify and articulate women's spirituality. They go on to say:

What seems significant and valuable is the process, the journey — how women live out their spiritual lives — rather than a product, a new theology to package and market . . . We do not intend to define women's spirituality for them, in imitation of patriarchy.

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32 Ruether, 75.
33 King in Elwes, 150.
I am one of the Christian feminists who believe that women need time alone together to find their own voices and to learn to trust their own experience. My interactions with women in my congregations, have caused me to believe that some of them are afraid of freedom and change. A few may even be among the churchwomen who cling militantly to patriarchal spiritualities. Aware of this diversity, I entered my research with a genuine desire to understand how the women I interviewed experienced themselves in relation to the structures of the church; how they would describe their inner spirituality and prayer life; and how their personal spirituality related to their experience of the church. I was careful not to assume I already knew the form and content of their experience. Listening carefully to the women's own stories was therefore the way for me to enter into an understanding of their spirituality. This approach is consistent with the research methodology I describe in the next chapter of this paper, a methodology that seeks to understand the motives and beliefs behind peoples' actions, and the subjective meanings they give to their experiences.
2.3 The Baby Boomer Factor

The women in my research project are part of the baby boomer generation. Baby boomers are individualists in a context that defines maturity as the ability to separate and differentiate. They are consumers in a context that promises personal fulfilment through the acquisition of more things and more experiences.

The media message that bombards every person living in the North American context is You are not good enough, big enough, rich enough. You need to be more, have more, do more. In a class lecture, Mary Jo Leddy claimed that this message has become the self-definition not only of the people of our congregations, but even of the church itself. She said that the result is a frequently dispirited institution and dispirited individuals whose raison d'être has become simple survival; a people and an institution who do not know what they live for and what they would die for; a people and an institution who have succumbed to the most prevalent sin of the North American middle class: feeling hopeless and powerless.\(^\text{35}\)

Leddy may have been overstating and oversimplifying, but I began my study with a keen awareness of the possibility that many of the middle-class, materially comfortable women in my congregations may be spiritually impoverished. Would they fit a pattern described by Douglas Hall, of being people who may experience a

certain restlessness, a certain feeling of emptiness or lack of meaning, but resist calling it a serious problem? Hall's explanation for this resistance is that those who are in good health, with money in the bank, a promising career, and two lovely children are not likely to cry out for help, forgiveness, or salvation.36

John Kavanaugh believes that by accepting the cultural message that we will always need to be and have more, the church and the people of North America have become unable to hear the promise that,

God's is a profligate love, indiscriminately given to any of us — not on the condition of our achievement, but on the condition of our free acceptance.37

He maintains that the attitude of our culture and of our church is that God's promise cannot be meant for us! We are not good enough. We are not rich enough. We are not big enough. As I approached my research, I wondered if the women's stories would reveal a spiritual poverty, a lack of purpose, and a sense of unworthiness.

Studies of the baby boomer generation suggest that the ways they understand and express their spirituality are uniquely shaped by the life experiences common to people born between 1945 and 1960. One of the guiding beliefs of the baby boomer


generation is their belief in the legitimacy of questing for whatever "answer" will be personally and individually fulfilling. Wade Clark Roof reports:

They move freely in and out, across religious boundaries; many combine elements from various traditions to create their own personal, tailor-made meaning systems . . . The concern is to experience life directly, to have an encounter with God, or the divine, or simply with nature and other people, without the intervention of inherited beliefs, ideas, and concepts.38

But Roof also says that as they mature, the quest of baby boomers is more than a quest for individual contentment. Increasingly, they are moving toward a concern for self-giving. They are acknowledging the importance of both needs and responsibilities.39 The tendency to move away from organized religion without abandoning the spiritual quest is found in the population as a whole, and baby boomers in particular. Roof reports that many baby boomers wish their individual quests could provide them with rituals and a coherent set of beliefs to pass on to their children.40

This generation's freedom to explore new life-styles based on new belief systems and new spiritual practices could help create a new and brighter world. Their commitment to individualistic pursuits could create a culture of lonely, alienated individuals.

39 Ibid., 129.
40 Ibid., 87.
In a survey conducted in the mid-eighties, Reginald Bibby found that most Canadians regard the church as one more consumer product that can meet their needs, but is mostly tangential to their lives . . . and yet, he found that there was no decline in the inclination of both adults and teenagers to raise the so-called "ultimate questions" concerning life and death. Wade Clark Roof reports that many baby boomers have decided that religion, as it is found in churches, is spiritually empty.

Some churches have responded to the challenge of baby boomers as discriminating consumers by seeking to find ways to "sell" the church. Listed in the administration section of a 1993 catalogue of church supplies, is a book entitled Church Marketing. It is described as a book that tells us how to put successful marketing strategies into action at any church to attract newcomers, as well as how to keep the business side of the church in step with its ministry. Marketing Congregations, another book listed in this catalogue is described as a book that will help pastors overcome objections to marketing religion and to meet the needs of people more effectively. There is a very real danger here of becoming so enamored with increasing our numbers and selling our product, that we forget why the church exists in the first place. John Kavanaugh warns us:

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42 Roof, p. 5.
43 Augsburg Fortress Supply Catalogue for Congregations (Minneapolis, 1993), 83-84.
A church can become so acculturated and powerful as a natural institution that it finds itself in bondage to its own historicity. . . . The particular cultural milieu in which the Christian life is to be preached becomes the center and foundation of belief, rather than the life of Christ himself becoming that center and foundation. As a result, the church serves as a powerful source of cultural legitimization. It is identified with the interests of culture and its most powerful institutions. As such, it can easily collaborate in the enslavement of men and women rather than in their liberation.  

He continues with the observation that using the excuse that they are merely rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, Christians have not infrequently rendered unto him their consciences, their life purposes, their hopes, and even their children. He suggests that sometimes there seems to be little to distinguish those in our society who claim a church connection from those who are unabashed atheists or agnostics, and claim no church connection.  

While my Quaker roots tell me that the church is supposed to be a group set apart for the purpose of calling an erring society back "home" to God, Walter Brueggemann suggests that many middle-class people in today's mainline churches, co-opted by the values of the surrounding culture, do not sense their exile. Instead, they have fooled themselves into thinking the present arrangement is home. He goes on to say,  

The central task of ministry is the formation of a community with an alternative, liberated imagination that has the courage and the

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44 Kavanaugh, Following Christ, 105
45 Ibid., 149.
freedom to act in a different vision and a different perception of reality.\textsuperscript{46}

I entered my research believing that there is a positive potential in the acquisitive individualism of baby boomers that could awaken in them a longing to live in a truer, more spiritual home. As people who have learned to question old traditions and feel free to seek new realities, they might already be seeking to find this different vision. In my research, I wanted to learn what the women are seeking; whether and where they are finding what they seek; and how the church, with integrity, might help them in their search.

2.4 Faith Stages

When I started to process my interview transcripts, I realized that understanding the stages of faith development in the women I interviewed could further my general understanding of them and their needs. While I acknowledge the fact that no intellectual constructs perfectly represent anyone's lived reality, I am impressed by the usefulness of James Fowler's pioneering efforts in identifying and describing faith stages. During the 1970's, working in dialogue with the cognitive development theories of Jean Piaget and the moral development theories of Lawrence Kohlberg, Fowler and his associates interviewed 359 people. As a result of this work,

he has identified six Stages of Faith. In the following paragraphs, I present thumbnail sketches, highlighting some of the characteristics found at each stage of faith development.47

The first, Intuitive-Projective faith, is typically found in three to seven year olds. In this stage, the imagination, unrestrained by logic, creates powerful images and stories that reflect the child's intuitive understandings and feelings about the ultimate conditions of existence. The desire to distinguish between what is real and what is imagined, which comes with the emergence of concrete operational thinking, is the primary motivating factor causing a child to move on to the second stage of faith.

The second stage, Mythic-Literal faith, is typically the faith of the school child (although it can be the dominant structure for adolescents or adults). In this stage, persons begin to take on the stories and beliefs of their community. Beliefs, moral rules and attitudes are understood as one-dimensional and literal in meaning. Meaning is both carried and "trapped" in the narrative. Movement toward Stage 3 is initiated when an individual notices contradictions in competing authoritative stories (e.g. the Genesis creation story and the theory of evolution)

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Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional faith, is typically found in adolescence, but is the permanent stance of many adults. In this stage, persons are acutely aware of the expectations and judgements of significant others, but do not yet have a sure enough grasp of their own autonomy to construct and maintain an independent perspective. Stage 3 persons have a tacitly held "ideology" that consists of a more or less consistent clustering of values and beliefs. Their self-reflection is limited to comparing themselves with others. They dwell in their beliefs and are unable to step outside to examine them. They see those who are different only as individuals, not as members of a group. A move to Stage 4 is initiated by a figurative or literal "leaving home." For a genuine move to Stage 4 to occur, there must be both a critical distancing from the value system they once took for granted, and an interruption in reliance on external sources of authority.

Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective faith, is most appropriately the stage of young adulthood. In this stage individuals begin to take responsibility for their own commitments, life-styles, beliefs and attitudes. It is marked with tension between individuality and group expectations. It is the stage where individuals begin to reflect critically on both their identity and their ideology. They want to be able to articulate meanings that fit a world view that makes sense. They are able to see both themselves and others not as isolated individuals, but as members of groups that have shaped and influenced them. They are able to advocate with one group for the rights of other
groups. A recognition that life is more complex than Stage 4's logically clear distinctions and abstract concepts marks the beginning of a move toward Stage 5.

Stage 5, Conjunctive faith, is unusual before mid-life. In this stage individuals begin to reclaim and rework the myths of their past. Stage 5 individuals "know the sacrament of defeat and the reality of irrevocable commitments and acts."\(^{48}\) Accepting paradox, they are ready for closeness to that which is different, and can appreciate symbols, myths, and rituals because they have some understanding of the reality to which they refer. They are able to live comfortably with Mystery.

Stage 6, Universalizing faith, is extremely rare. Stage 6 individuals are transforming saints and martyrs who are likely to be more honoured and revered after death than during their lives.

Fowler has named seven categories which serve to identify the dominant features of a person's faith stage. They are Form of Logic, Perspective Taking, Form of Moral Judgement, Bounds of Social Awareness, Locus of Authority, Form of World Coherence, and Symbolic Function.\(^{49}\)

A person in Stage 2 or 3, for instance, would have a **locus of authority outside themselves.** In stage 2 the authority could be parents who are perceived almost as an extension of self. In Stage 3 the authority could be a peer group with whom the person

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\(^{48}\) Fowler in Conn., 231.

\(^{49}\) A Summary of Faith Stages by Aspects can be found in appendix E.
unself-consciously and unreflectively identifies. In Stage 4 the locus of authority resides inside the self. Stage 4 people seek to create logically coherent constructs to explain everything they encounter. In Stages 3 and 4, individuals characteristically experience struggle and personal disquiet. In Stage 5, they are able to be both accepting and prophetic. They no longer feel a need personally to explain or fix things. They care deeply, do what they can and then, almost like the Stage 1 children who are able to enjoy what they do not understand, they leave the rest up to God.

Reflecting on her experiences as a United Church minister, and drawing on the work of James Fowler and John Westerhoff, Wilena Brown has identified a faithstyle that seems to typify the personality of many local church congregations. She calls it the community faithstyle.\(^{50}\) It is similar to and compatible with Stage 2, the Mythic-Literal faith as described by Fowler. It expects churchgoers to believe literally whatever the preacher or the Bible says. It clings to traditions of the past (e.g., singing the same hymns in exactly the same way as your grandparents sang them.) It values the life of the community over the needs of individuals. It expects individuals to know and abide by the community's unwritten rules and informal structures. Its decisions are often made on the basis of relationships (what my influential neighbour thinks)

rather than on the merits of an issue. It can be difficult for newcomers to feel at home in these congregations. Brown says,

Seekers are often hidden from view. They tend to take on the protective colouring (language and behaviour) of the dominant community faithstyle . . . those who question or pursue a different goal are not really welcome . . . Some remain hidden in the congregation. Some set off fireworks . . . and are seen as "difficult." Others simply leave. . . . 51

Brown believes that it is very important for ministers and members of mainline churches to welcome and respond appropriately to people of all faith stages. One of my goals as I analyzed the stories of the women I interviewed was to understand their needs in terms of their faith development.

2.5 Summary

A rapidly changing and increasingly diverse culture presents North American churches with new and ever-changing challenges. A growing feminist consciousness has been one factor influencing the shape of this context. Baby boomers, people born between 1945 and 1960, have grown up in a context of change and diversity. In their adult life, they have been exposed to a wide range of spiritual options. Following the ethic of a consumer society, they have been encouraged to choose what they want from the smorgasbord of religious choices that are available.

51 Ibid., 13.
Both people and churches respond to these changing realities in a variety of ways. Often churches are seen to be caught in old, irrelevant styles of thinking and being. I believe that the Christ-centred faith our churches strive to live and teach can be a powerfully relevant foundation on which to base one's life, whatever the cultural context. I also believe that, in part, being Christian means being open to new understandings of how we are called to express Christ's Love and Truth. At the same time, we must be careful not to allow our churches to be too closely tied to the values of the surrounding culture, past or present. And finally, I believe that the Spirit of Christ is present and available to all who take time to ask for help in discerning how we should live our lives and how we should be the church.
CHAPTER THREE

3. CONDUCTING THE STUDY: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

My research question for this study was WHAT DO THE WOMEN OF OUR CHURCH COMMUNITIES WHO WERE BORN BETWEEN 1950 AND 1960 NEED TO HELP THEM FEEL MORE CONNECTED TO GOD AND TO ONE ANOTHER?

My research methodology involved three distinct phases: gathering data; coding and organizing the data gathered; and presenting and analyzing the findings.

I conducted the data gathering phase in two stages. In the first stage, I distributed a four-page questionnaire52 to all the women in our congregations who were born in the targeted decade. In the second stage, I conducted in-depth interviews with eleven of these women. The purpose of the questionnaires was to help me find a representative sample of women to interview. The purpose of the interviews was to learn what the women have experienced and want from the church; how they experience God; how they talk about the spiritual dimensions of their lives; and what they want in their relationships with other people.

52 A copy of the Questionnaire is in appendix A.1.
After I had transcribed the interviews, I began the second phase of the research: coding and organizing the data. In this phase, I looked for emerging themes and patterns in the data bits contained in the transcribed interviews. I coded the data bits and sorted and refined the emerging patterns until I was able to identify bodies of material that related in significant ways to my research question.

In the third phase, using many extensive quotations from the interview transcripts, I reported my findings. I then analyzed findings in terms of the women’s experience as baby boomers living in relationship with others, their level of faith development, and what they need from the church. Finally, I made a few proposals about how congregations in the United Church of Canada might use my findings to help them design programmes that will appeal to baby boomer women.

3.1 Phase 1: Data Gathering

3.1.1 Developing the Questionnaire and Covering Letter

I developed the questionnaire in consultation with my Ministry Base Group, which was made up of ten women from our church communities. The final product contained thirty questions on four pages. Most of the questions could be answered quickly by checking the appropriate response. The questionnaire asked about the women’s level of involvement in worship and other church groups, why they do or do not attend, their church background, and their participation and level of satisfaction in community groups. Three questions asked them to indicate their education, the number
of people and number of wage earners in their home, and their total family income. I chose these questions because I believe that all of these variables are likely to have a significant effect on a person's attitudes and perspectives, and I wanted my survey sample to include many perspectives. The final page of the questionnaire asked for their level of agreement with statements about themselves and the church. Two open-ended questions asked them to identify other factors that would be relevant to the research.

Along with questionnaires, I included a covering letter which introduced me. my research question, some of my reasons for doing this research, and the fact that after collating the questionnaire findings, I would be interviewing ten respondents.

Kirby and McKenna, in their book on research methodology, advise,

> Before contacting prospective participants, you must work out precisely how you want to describe your research project, what you would like from the participants, what you can provide for them and what you anticipate you will be doing with the information afterwards.  

3.1.2 Identifying Those Who Will Receive the Questionnaire

To identify the women of our pastoral charge who were born between 1950 and 1960, I accessed Knox United’s computer-based record of members and

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53 A copy of the Covering Letter is in appendix A.2.
54 Sandra L. Kirby and Kate McKenna, Experience, Research, Social Change, Methods from the Margins (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1989), 111.
adherents, and retrieved the names, addresses and phone numbers of all women who reported 1950-1960 birthdates. I then identified women who had no recorded year of birth whom I thought might have been born in the targeted decade. For Virginia United, which has no computer records, I made a similar “best guess” determination. This resulted in a master list of seventy-three women.

I assigned a random identification number to each woman on the master list so I could determine who had received and returned their questionnaires, and simultaneously process information contained in the returned questionnaires without identifying the respondent. Using numbers rather than names assured more objectivity when I chose women for the interview phase of my research.

3.1.2 Distributing the Questionnaire

I began to distribute the questionnaire and covering letter in October 1994. A week after distributing them, I returned to pick them up. As I delivered the questionnaires, I learned that four of the women on my original master list of seventy-three had moved away, so I was able to contact sixty-nine women. Ten were the wrong age, but returned completed questionnaires anyway. (I did not process those responses.) One woman who was the right age refused to participate. I delivered the material to forty-six women at their homes, and quickly learned that the supper hour is the best time to find people at home. I gave out ten questionnaires at church, and took two to women at their place of work. In the end, I distributed fifty-eight
questionnaires to women born between 1950 and 1960. By the end of November 1994, fifty-six questionnaires had been completed and returned. The two women who did not return the questionnaires live out of town most of the time.

I decided to deliver personally and pick up all the questionnaires because I wanted to have face to face contacts to establish some rapport with the women and their families at the very start of my research project. Kirby and McKenna state,

Since rapport is essential to good communication, it is important to be able to establish and sustain interpersonal harmony and understanding throughout all stages of the research. . . Each step must take into consideration the effect on the research participants.\footnote{Ibid., 99.}

In the process of delivering and picking up the questionnaires, I had many meaningful pastoral contacts. Twenty-five were short, friendly contacts, with a bit of conversation at the door on topics such as children’s activities, or new jobs, or parents’ health. Four were short but significant contacts, where even though we remained standing at the door, the woman revealed more about herself and her situation than is customary for a brief interaction. Twice, I was invited in for a half-hour visit. Three times I was invited in for extended visits which lasted one to two hours, and dealt with deep pastoral concerns. In addition to my visits with the women being surveyed, I had brief interactions of fifteen minutes or less with six of their husbands, and one lengthy
visit with a husband who has no church affiliation.\textsuperscript{56} At many homes I had opportunity to interact briefly with other family members.

The excellent level of return (56 out of 58) suggests that having a personal face-to-face contact when delivering questionnaires is a good method to use. My commitment to valuing the women and their experience, even at this initial stage, was already establishing an atmosphere of co-operative interest in my research.

3.1.3 \textit{Choosing the Interview Sample}

In January 1995, using a very simple computer programme that can generate frequencies and comparisons, I began to sort through the raw data which the questionnaires provided.\textsuperscript{57} The most significant variable to emerge was frequency of attendance at worship services. Those who attend frequently seemed to be more involved in other church activities, and to have a positive attitude toward church and community. Those who attend infrequently seemed to be generally less involved in both church and community, or to have some difficult history with the church. Therefore, frequency of attendance at church became my primary sorting category. As I worked with the questionnaire results, I recognized other significant variables. The ones I chose to use as secondary sorting categories were: number of years associated

\textsuperscript{56} As a result of this interaction, this man called me during a time of emotional turmoil, and is continuing his friendship toward me and the church.

\textsuperscript{57} A \textit{Summary of Responses to Questionnaire} is listed in appendix B.
with the pastoral charge, involvement in church and community activities, level of perceived happiness, educational level, ages of children, family income, and denominational background.

I tried to keep a representative proportional balance between the population I chose to interview, and the population who had completed and returned the questionnaires. For the most part, I think I succeeded. By selecting questionnaire respondents with these variables in mind, I managed to interview a diverse group of eleven women. A number comparison of women in my total sample and women I chose to interview for each of the selected sorting categories, is summarized in the following table:
Comparison of Numbers of Women in Significant Categories
Total Questionnaire Sample, 56; Total Interview Sample, 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Attendance</th>
<th>Q</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Years Affiliated</th>
<th>Q</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 or more times/month</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>20 or more years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10-19 years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 times/year</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4-9 years</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or 2 times/year</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1-3 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>less than 1 year</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td>56</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involvement in Church Groups</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Denom. Background</th>
<th>Perceived Happiness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 or more groups</td>
<td>Less than grade 12</td>
<td>United</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 groups</td>
<td>Secondary Graduate</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 group</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no groups</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual Family Income</th>
<th>Denom. Background</th>
<th>Perceived Happiness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>under $15,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 - $24,999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000 - $39,999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 - $59,999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,000 - $74,999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>above $75,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did not answer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are three categories which I intentionally allowed to be over-represented in my interview population. I interviewed two divorced or separated women, two former Roman Catholics, and two women who no longer come to church, when for each of these variables, one would have been more proportionately correct.

I chose two separated women because I believe a general cross-section of Canadian women in this age category would yield a much higher percentage of
separated/divorced people than I found in my survey group, and because over the years I have noticed that many separated and divorced people have very little contact with local churches. I want the church to learn how to attract and welcome those who are single, separated or divorced. I felt it was important to hear from more than one unmarried woman.

I chose two former Roman Catholics because in our congregations people who used to be Roman Catholic contribute a disproportionately large amount of helpful time and effort to the church when compared to their numbers.

I chose two women who no longer have any involvement in the church because I think there is a pattern in our church for families to come for a while, and then stop. Often, we do not know why they started or why they stopped, so I was particularly curious to hear what these women would say.

3.1.4 The Interviews

Before each interview, I compiled a detailed personal profile based on the woman's returned questionnaire. Using this personal profile and the General Interview Guide from my Thesis Proposal, I drew up a semi-standardized list of questions to ask at each interview. This list of questions grew and changed as I analyzed the

58 Only 4 of the 56 women who answered the questionnaire reported that they are separated or divorced.

59 Sample Personal Profiles are listed appendix C.

60 The original Interview Guide is found in appendix A.3.
women's ability to understand and respond to the questions, and any new topics that seemed to emerge during the interviews. My first interview guide contained twenty-one questions. Later interview guides contained over forty questions.61

I decided to base my interview questions on each woman's questionnaire responses, and to use information gathered during each interview to help shape questions to be asked in subsequent interviews. This decision is consistent with the phenomenological research perspective I had chosen to use. In describing the phenomenological perspective, Taylor and Bogden write,

Central to the phenomenological perspective ... is experiencing reality as others experience it. Qualitative researchers empathise and identify with the people they study in order to understand how they see things ... the researcher seeks ... a detailed understanding of other people’s perspectives. All people are viewed as equals.62

The first interview took place in the living room in the home of one of the women, one evening in early February 1995. The pot of tea she brought out before we began helped create the relaxed atmosphere I was seeking. It took one hour and fifteen minutes to complete the interview.63

When I transcribed this first interview, I discovered that I was nervous, tentative, apologetic and talkative. In fact I talked almost as much as the woman

61 First and later Interview Question Guides are found in appendix D.
63 Subsequent interviews took one to two hours.
whose opinions I was seeking. I think I was motivated by a desire to assure her that even though I am a minister, I am just a regular, ordinary person. She, in turn, tried to please me, and was somewhat guarded and careful about what she said.64

A week later, I interviewed a second woman in the living room of her home. Again, when I looked at the transcript, it seemed to me that I had talked too much. The transcripts of these first two interviews include much valuable, useful material. I had successfully given the women permission to speak candidly and honestly, but I knew I wanted to improve my interview technique. Members of my Collaborative Learning Group read some excerpts from the transcripts of these interviews and suggested that I ask only one question at a time, save discussion until after the interview is over, and make an inventory of personal assumptions and biases that might be getting in my way.

I followed their suggestions. I wrote a couple of pages to myself, that made explicit some personal biases that were clouding my ability to listen freely to what the women were saying. I studied these pages, and then said to myself, "Now you know this is what you think. The purpose of your research is to learn what others think."

64 Before we began the interview, we talked about her 6 year old and some of the troubles he is having at school. She told me that she had once talked to a school counsellor who wanted to know all about her marriage, when she thought they were there to talk about her child. She told me she experienced the counsellor as more nosey than helpful. I wondered if she was warning me to not be a nosey interviewer.
When you are conducting interviews, forget about your opinions, and listen to the other person."

Thereafter, I introduced the interviews by explaining to each woman that the purpose of the interview was to give her a chance to tell me what things are like for her, and that we would save any responses I might want to make, until after the interview. I told her that from time to time, she might see me writing a reminder to myself of something I wanted to pick up later. I worked hard at asking only one question at a time.

I now began each interview by asking the questions the woman herself had written in response to questionnaire item, *What question is missing from this questionnaire that should be here?* I did this in an effort to send the message that I honoured her sense of what is important. A reading of subsequent interview transcripts suggests that the more I simply restated and built on what the woman said, keeping my editorial comments to myself, the more relaxed and open she became.

I interviewed eleven women over a period of seven months. Each interview was recorded on audio-tape and later transcribed. Depending on what was most convenient for the woman being interviewed, I conducted six interviews in women's

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65 See the final question on final page of Questionnaire in appendix A.1.

66 During this seven month period my research was interrupted by the serious illness of my husband. Because he is the second minister in our churches, there were 14 weeks when I had to give my full attention to local responsibilities and gave no time to my research project.
homes, three in my home, and two at the church office. My interview technique contributed to a relaxed and affirming atmosphere, which allowed the respondent to give lengthy replies to the open-ended questions I posed.

3.2 Phase 2 - Data Analysis: Coding and Organizing Data

Each of the transcribed interviews filled 30 or more single spaced typewritten pages. In September 1995, I began processing the material found in the transcripts. Initially, I examined the material using seven coding categories: *Church, God, Prayer, Jesus, Serendipity, Family of Origin, and Family Today*. Using coloured crayons to distinguish each coding category, I went through every transcript and marked the passages that seemed to fit the chosen categories. It soon was apparent that the seven initial categories were woefully inadequate. I began writing additional coding notations in the margins: *CF* meant "something said about close friends;" *T* meant "major turning point;" *B* was "Bible;" *N* stood for "nature."

As I continued to pour over the transcripts, new categories kept emerging. Other categories disappeared or collapsed into a single, more general category as I learned that the women had not said as much about something as I thought they had. Some categories had to be expanded. *Church* expanded into *Struggles with the Church, Early Church Experiences and Positive Church Experiences*. The category *Family of Origin* became insignificant except as it related to *Early Church Experiences, Prayer and God*, so I allowed it to be subsumed into those categories.
Crayons and marginal notations soon became too unwieldy a medium for me to manage. I was, after all, working with over 300 single spaced pages of material. It was time to learn how to make use of the search and find feature of my computer's word processing programme. Using key words, such as children, or child, or kids or the name of the woman's children, I searched through each transcript to discover what the woman had said about her children. I then copied her statements into a new file that had been set up to hold material related only to her statements about her children. I did this kind of exercise with all the coding categories that had emerged from the data until I had twenty two separate files that contained everything the women had said about such things as God or Prayer or Children or Sunday School.

Eventually I put all the verbatim transcripts into a three-ring notebook because I kept misplacing and losing track of the loose pages. I used three other three-ring notebooks to hold the coding category files. The length of the coding category files varied. The women's comments about their husbands fill twenty three pages, while their thoughts on U.C.W. fill only two pages. In one notebook I put everything I found that the women had said about relationships and their day to day lives. There were seven files in this notebook with category headings such as Close Friends, Jobs, and Dreams and Goals. Another notebook contained eight files of the women's statements about their experiences with the church, with category headings such as U.C.W., Struggles with the Church, and Church Music. The third notebook contained seven
category files concerning what the women had said about their faith and theology, with category headings such as God, Prayer and Ethics.

When these notebooks were complete, I began working with the category files more than with the transcripts themselves. I read and re-read the material contained in them, as I tried to gain an accurate picture of what the women had said. In the back of my mind, I was always asking the question "What do they need?" A new set of fourteen category files emerged, with category headings like Acceptance at Church, Personal Interactions, Sense of Belonging and Community, and Need for Lack of Demands.

Working back and forth between this new set of files and the original transcripts I compiled lists of quotes that I thought might appropriately appear in the Findings chapter of this paper. I sorted the quotes into eight subject areas, with headings such as Spirituality and Prayer, Relationship to God and Reasons for Returning to Church. I was finally ready to begin to write about what the women had told me.

3.3 Phase 3: Reporting and Analyzing The Findings

Two concerns guided my work of reporting the findings: first, how to organize the material in a way that would be intelligible and meaningful to the reader, and second, to make sure that I accurately presented the many different opinions and situations the women had talked about with me.
The organization I had developed when putting together the notebooks of coding-category files carried through into my Findings chapter. Thus material from the notebook that contained files dealing with the women's relationships and day to day lives went into the Day to Day Reality section of the Findings chapter. I put material from the notebook on experiences with the church into a section with the same name. The notebook filled with what they had to say about their faith and theology formed the basis of the section entitled Theological Beliefs and Practices.

Some quotes so powerfully illustrated a woman’s feelings toward how she felt when she went to church or how she experienced God at work in her life that I knew I must include them. Sometimes in the interviews, important perspectives were given by women who were less articulate and spoke less powerfully. I had to make sure their reality was also represented in my findings.

Because I had spent so much time reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, I had a deep appreciation for who the women were before I ever started writing. Writing the Findings chapter was probably the easiest part of my research. The women had given me such a wealth of material. Now all I had to do was make it accessible to those who would be reading my thesis.

On the other hand, I had a lot of difficulty writing the Analysis chapter. I began my analysis by reading through the findings, with an eye to answering the question, “What are these women telling me they need?” This resulted in several two
to three page files on what they need, for instance, in terms of family, in terms of their relationship to God, in terms of their belonging in the church. The first draft of the analysis chapter grew out of those file headings. As I wrote it, however, I would remember something a woman had said that I had not included in the Findings chapter, but that illustrated the point I was making. So I would include the remembered quote in the Analysis chapter. When I showed this first draft of my analysis to my thesis committee, they told me that while I had some interesting analysis, the chapter seemed to be full of new findings. I responded by transferring those “new findings” to the Findings chapter.

Now my task was to make sure my analysis was based on what appeared in the Findings chapter. The Analysis chapter began to grow. My next step was to realize that I needed to relate the analysis of the findings to the questions and theory contained in the theory chapter. This led to a complex process of moving back and forth between the findings and the theory and my memories of the interviews. The process was further complicated by my tendency to jump to premature programme implications and include them in my analysis.

The organization of the Analysis chapter took its final form at the end of this complex process. The chapter is grounded in what the women told me in the interviews. I have simply tried to put some order and context to it by relating it to the theory I have outlined in Chapter Two.
CHAPTER FOUR

4. THE WOMEN SPEAK: MAJOR FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will report what the women told me about the reality of their day to day lives, their experiences with the institutional church, and the nature of their spiritual beliefs and practices. My choice of subject headings was determined by my research question. The women I interviewed have powerful stories to tell. I found their eager willingness to talk with me 67 a testimony to their hope that they might find something of value within, or at the edge of, the United Church. It was also an indication of their hunger for someone to care about them and their stories. Their words, as I became intimately familiar with them, showed a ready desire to articulate their experience. I invite the reader to receive their stories as insight into who they are, not as a final word on any subject.

The women I interviewed, although they come from different backgrounds and different present-life situations, nonetheless revealed experiences and perceptions that seem to be true of many women of this generation. They lead very busy and very pressured lives. These pressures affect the amount of time they have to give to

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67 In every instance, the response to my request for an interview was an immediate "Yes!" This was true of the women I did not know prior to contacting them about my research project, as well as the women I already knew.
themselves, their families, their friends, and their church. Their comments also suggest that sometimes their husbands negatively affect their freedom to follow their longings.

They spoke of their perception of the church, as they related their childhood impressions and their adult experiences. Their stories of why they left the church, returned, and in some cases left again, show that many different and sometimes contradictory needs and expectations can be found within this sample. In their stories we also see a church that has found it difficult to know how to welcome and accept them.

Most of the women were reluctant to talk about their concepts of Jesus and of the Bible, because they thought they "didn't really know enough" to say anything. Their belief in God, although it has changed over the years, remains a conceptual reality, and through prayer, is sometimes an intimate part of their present experience. A sense of the divine, found outside the beliefs and practices of their church, is an important aspect of their inner reality.
4.1 Overview of Women Interviewed

In an effort to ensure the anonymity of the women I interviewed, I have given a pseudonym to each participant. In a few instances, I also have made minor alterations in the stories they tell. The table found on the following page may help the reader keep track of who's who, as they read through the next two chapters of this paper. The names are listed in alphabetical order. The first two pieces of information—how often the woman goes to church and how often and with whom she went to church as a child—come from the questionnaire. The rest of the information comes from the interviews. I present it in the following order:

- when/if the woman stopped going to church
- when/why she returned to church
- her level of involvement in church activities
- her employment status
- her general feeling about church
- one or two of her spiritual/theological beliefs or practices
- whether or not she thinks she has close friends
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Church Attendance</th>
<th>Church Involvement</th>
<th>Time &amp; Activities</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Christ's Age</th>
<th>Church Support</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Church Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>nearly every week</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>every week, with family</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>occasionally by part-time</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginny</td>
<td>every week, with family</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>nearly every week</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>nearly every week</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>nearly every week</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>nearly every week</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nell</td>
<td>nearly every week</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>nearly every week</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>nearly every week</td>
<td>church is important in life</td>
<td>full-time outside job</td>
<td>12-15 times a year</td>
<td>married &amp; moved to city</td>
<td>several church groups</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>own children are young, 6-10 years old</td>
<td>6th-10th grade teacher</td>
<td>never let</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Day to Day Reality

The economic and family pressures experienced by the women I interviewed are complex and often difficult. Five of the eleven work full-time outside the home; three work part-time outside the home; one helps out in her husband's business; two are full-time homemakers. They all assume primary responsibility for the care and nurture of their children.

Diane, one of the women I interviewed, is perhaps an extreme example of how complicated their lives can become. To make ends meet, she finds it necessary to work seven days a week in a high pressure job. Her husband's work often requires him to live out of town for weeks and even months at a time. Her work day can start at 7 a.m. and end at 2 a.m. She sees herself as being a very protective parent and struggles to provide a solid warm home-base for her children. It is hard to imagine how she would cope, without the co-operation of her father, who lives nearby and helps out with child care.

Sarah, on the other hand, has had the economic luxury of choosing to stay at home with her children. With the children all in school now and very few other women on the street at home in the daytime, she sometimes feels alone and isolated. She thinks she may be "one of these people that became unemployable at home with children," and wonders if she has made the right decision.
It is not easy for these women to be involved in the life of the church. The three who do not work at jobs outside the home say that both the church and the community have unrealistic expectations about how much volunteer time this small group of "available" women has to give. The others, after working all day, tending to household chores, and facilitating their children's activities, have little or time or energy left over for volunteer work, social activities or personal growth and development.

4.2.1 Employment

When asked what would make their life better, some women responded by saying things like: to not have to work so much, to not have to be on call all those hours, to have my bank book balance, or to have a little more economic security.

During our hour and a half interview, Diane's beeper went off twice, even though in her rush to get to the interview, she thought she had turned it off. Lisa said that any problems she has had "stem around money." She is not sure if she will want to work when the children are older. She knows she will have to retrain if she decides to go back to work.

Nancy's husband used to work regular hours in a town halfway between Sutton and Toronto. Now he is doing shift work in downtown Toronto. He has not changed jobs; in order to keep his job, he had to accept the new location and new hours. On the days he works, he leaves before the children are up and does not return home until
after they are in bed. His work schedule varies from week to week, making it impossible for him to participate in any regularly scheduled activities. Nancy told me,

when his job changed, that's when we stopped going [to church], because the kids didn't want to go when Daddy's home . . . when he's off, that's the time with the kids . . . he'd never hold the kids back. He's even said they should go to church more, but he just doesn't have the time.

Margaret spoke at length about problems she has at work. She heads a team of men in a job that is non-traditional for women. She is both the boss and the only woman at her place of work, and she finds she resented and ostracized. Complaints and verbal abuse are a regular, ongoing feature of her on-the-job experience.

Judy talked about the possibility of going back to school. She said, "I want to do something, but I haven't figured out what it is yet." Bridget worries about being able to send her children to university, but said, "I've got challenge in my job, so that's okay."

4.2.2 Family

When asked to imagine what a perfect life would look like, the women talked about family togetherness and harmony. Diane said a perfect life would be to "spend more time with my family, doing things we like to do." Susan said, "[If] Myself and my husband went to church together." Lisa said she would like "to be able to take the kids and go somewhere and do a few things." Bridget spoke of her wish for
Harmony . . . I have a regret that I haven't been able to bring a unified sense of spirituality to my family. If I had a choice, I wish that I could have done that. I'm sorry that I had such a chequered road getting here, that I haven't brought the children along with me to the extent that I would have liked to.

Family togetherness is what they dream about. It is what they want. It is not always what they have. Susan and Nancy used to go to church with their whole family, but do not anymore. Sarah and her family occasionally attend church but no longer work as church volunteers. Speaking about her husband, Sarah said,

I think if life were simpler he's probably more inclined to go than I would . . . I think we're pretty much on the same wave-length . . . we definitely had discussions when we have had periods of not going . . . ideally we would think our kids should be going more. Life gets away on you.

Carol's husband and children go to church with her nearly every week. When Carol has to work, her husband goes to church with the children. Diane's husband goes to church on Christmas Eve.

The remaining eight husbands (or ex-husbands) have no present connection with the church. Some of these men are mildly supportive of their wives' interest in church; some are indifferent to their wives' efforts to be involved in church; some are openly hostile.

Lisa's husband, who has no personal involvement with the church, wants the children to go to Sunday School and is happy for Lisa to take part in church activities.
She told me that he tries to be supportive by looking after the children when she has something to do at the church.

Like, he tries to be home when I have a meeting at the church, and I tell him ahead, but he doesn't remember. I've got this thing next week and I told him and told him and I showed him on the calendar. Watch him on Tuesday, though. But that's the way he is. He's in the middle of this project, and he wants to get it done because it'll make some money.

Bridget, who is separated from her husband, believes her spiritual development was temporarily stunted by her husband's attitudes. She said,

I think his lack of a need for God held me back . . . because he's a totally rational person. He has no need, no perceived need. I think he has a big need for God, personally, but he doesn't perceive it and never has perceived it, although he was very involved in the United Church when he was a teenager . . . and I think that's something I liked about him. But I didn't realize that it had no basis in faith, and religion. . . . I think I thought I was going out with somebody who had some church in his life, as I had some in mine. But it didn't turn out that way.

Nell is very sad that her children do not go to church. Often, they have sports on Sunday morning, but she is learning that even when they do not have a schedule conflict, getting them to church can be more hassle than it is worth. She told me a rather long story about the last time she took her youngest child to church with her. He was surly, and would not take his coat off, and would not sit with the other kids. When she got home, she cried because she felt so embarrassed and humiliated. Nell does not really know what her husband thinks about religion. She told me,
If we were both getting up and going, I mean even once in a while . . . [the kids would go too] because Dad's kind of old fashioned, and what he says goes. . . . I've always been envious of couples [that go to church together]. I've often thought, my husband wouldn't come out on a Sunday . . . he wouldn't dream of it . . . he's a workaholic . . . He just wants to get out to his work.

Margaret's husband "is not a religious person at all and doesn't think I should take the children to church." Ginny says she wishes she could share religious expression with her husband, but he does not want her to go to church. She told me that if she has gone to church and then happens to be cranky during the following week, her husband ridicules her and calls her a hypocrite, and makes sarcastic remarks about the church to the children. She said,

the ironic part is, when I first started going to church . . . [it was] because he said a Christian . . . can have a very loose interpretation . . . but now he's not tolerant at all and doesn't really want anything to do with church and doesn't want to have his children go to church . . . and I think it's important for us to do something as a family, so that can become a priority for that particular day [Sunday].

Judy, who is separated from her husband, also spoke about his lack of cooperation. She said,

When I came back to church . . . my husband would not come to church with me . . . And that bothered me . . . Now my kids won't have anything to do with church. And I think a lot of it is their dad's influence . . . They know what my beliefs are, there's no doubt about that. But, I think that their dad, because he's not with us, tends to have more sway with the kids.
4.2.3 Friendship

When asked if they have any close friends, Carol and Sarah both said that their husband is their one truly close friend. Sarah said she also is close to other members of her family, like her sisters.

Susan was one of three women in my sample to say she has a close friend outside the family. She said,

It takes me a long while to get to know somebody, a long, long while to open up to somebody. I'm talking years...I have a very good friend who comes down often. She works much the same shifts as I do. We have very good conversations. She's very good for me. And probably I am for her too.

Judy and Bridget, the two separated women, also say they have close friends who are not relatives. Bridget said that she can talk about things that are important to her with her co-workers and the people in her women's spirituality group as well as with her teenage children and her mother. She has recently come to realize that "most of the people that I've maintained friendships with have had that searching and that interest in the spiritual side of things."

Judy remembers a very special friend from a few years back, saying,

I had a girl friend who was also on her own...and she came to live at my house. She brought her children. She didn't have any place to go. So she asked if she could come and stay at my place, and I said "yes." And that was probably the best support system I ever had...And then she moved away...I still think of that woman. When she moved away, I was like, "Oh no!" When I joined the women's
[a couple of years later] that was when I finally felt like I was sort of replacing my girl friend that had moved away.

Judy speaks about her experience of finding these new friends in this way:

[When I separated from my husband] I found that people who I expected to support me weren't supportive. You know, the family members, the people who are closest to you . . . since then I guess I've heavily relied on the people that I work with . . . they like to see people growing and changing, so if I'm interested in making some sort of a change in my life then I usually discuss it with co-workers that are close friends . . .

All the women I interviewed were able to say what a close friend is. They said a friend was "someone you can talk to about anything;" "someone you can be yourself with, even when you're in a rotten mood;" "someone who won't judge you;" "someone who even in the bad times, you value the friendship enough to pursue it."

Lisa gave an excellent example of a person who fits these definitions. She and her husband, after a failed business venture, thought they might have to declare bankruptcy. They had one small child and were expecting their second. They had moved three times in four years, just to keep themselves from financial ruin. In times of trouble she had always received support from her parents, and had always been able to be open and honest with them. She told me,

It was during that time that I gave birth [to our second child] . . . I got worried about myself because I had never shouted at the kids before, and I'd never spanked them . . . [but] all the stress was affecting me, and I was screaming at these kids and there was no reason for it. I

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69 This is a group of professional women, none of whom have close ties to any church.
just couldn't help myself... and I could tell her [my friend] about it. I couldn't have told my mother, but I could tell her... she was one of these nice calm people, and she wasn't judgmental about it... she just listened to me.

She told me about this friend with a sense of great appreciation, almost a sense of wonder, that anyone could be so caring and accepting.

Diane talked to me about a close friend she had years ago.

She was very much a part of my every day... We had work. We had family. We had everything together... and you just built a bond... Like when I was expecting. I'm a diabetic when I'm pregnant, and I really do not feel horribly well... It was very, very hot. We were moving and we were building a house... She would take me and say, "Okay, that's enough. You're not well. You're gonna come over and get in the pool and cool down."... and she'd put up the umbrella and we'd have a tea or a club soda... Usually I'm in charge. I'm responsible for everyone's care, looking after everyone, and that was unusual to find someone who wanted to look after me.

Five years ago, this friend died in a car accident. Diane told me she...

... was devastated, because we had had an argument, and hadn't spoke for a little bit of time... When I lost her... I decided I would never pull anyone close to me again. I just can not see it... I've got some friends. I'll laugh with them. We say things... but [we're] not close.

Unlike some women who are able to find friends at work, Margaret cannot.

She is employed in a field that traditionally has included only men. Except for a secretary, she is the only woman in her department. And she is the boss. She has found that neither the men nor their wives are comfortable with her. Margaret told me she has no close friends.
Nell describes her husband as a workaholic who works 6-7 days a week. She finds that his workaholism, combined with their friends' unstable marriages make it difficult for her to have close friends. She told me,

I like to meet with people but my husband wouldn't want to . . . He has to really know people . . . Like we've had a few friends that have divorced, and our friend list is getting rather short . . . either I see the girl or he sees the fella, but it changes the couple perspective. I've often said we need to make some more friends, but . . . it takes him a long time.

Ginny also reports that she has no really close friends. She said, "Ideally, I'd like to foster the spiritual bonds between myself and other people," but she doesn't know if even the people who live at a distance whom she considers her close friends, "experience spirituality in any way." Locally, she has no "friend I'm really private with." She keeps in touch with one friend from university days with whom she can sometimes talk about her spiritual beliefs and longings.

4.3 Experiences With the Church

The questionnaire results gave a clear indication that the women in the survey sample went to church when they were children. During the interviews, I learned that many of these same people stopped going to church in their teens and early twenties. They returned with their children. Upon returning, some of them became

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69 Fifty-five of the fifty-six women in the survey reported that they went to church as children. The one other remaining woman did not answer the question about childhood attendance at church. Forty-four, or 79% of those who answered the questionnaire said that, as children, they went to church every Sunday.
actively involved in the life of the church; some went to church occasionally; and some, after a year or two, stopped going to church. Their answers to the questions: How has the church been helpful to you? How has the church disappointed you? Why do you think the church is important for children? helped me understand their youthful reasons for leaving; their reasons for returning; and their reasons for staying or leaving once they had returned. In this section, the women tell us what draws them to church, and what discourages or drives them away.

4.3.1 Childhood Experiences

Most of the women I interviewed see the church first and foremost as an institution that teaches us right from wrong. As children, they all experienced the church as a place where they were taught how to behave properly. At church, they had to be well dressed, quiet and mannerly. Some of the women responded well to these expectations. They enjoyed being good little girls. Lisa remembers her small village church as just being the place where everybody went and "everybody did everything." Diane, on the other hand, remembers the church of her childhood as a place that was "Very restrictive. Very staunch. Very uncomfortable. Almost like you wouldn't smile. You wouldn't be laughing." Bridget remembers the church as the place where you were expected to know and follow the right rules. "It wasn't 'til I was well into my teens, or an adult," she said, "that it dawned on me that God probably wasn't all that interested in rules."
The women had general impressions about the church of their childhood, but were not able to remember details. For three women with a United Church background, church was a place to be with friends, make music and do other fun things. One woman remembered that she liked going to Sunday School in the United Church, but she could not say why. A former Anglican remembered church as scary; another former Anglican remembered it as a place where she had "a sense of safety and well-being, and could enjoy "the words and the rhythms." The two former Roman Catholics could associate no particular feelings with the church of their childhood. For them, going to church was just something you did, and you learned to say the prayers, and tried to follow the rules. Holidays, especially Christmas, have a special place in the women's memories. They remember liking the church's holiday traditions.

Seven of the eleven women I interviewed went to Sunday School or church every Sunday with a parent or parents. Two were dropped off at church every Sunday by their parents. One had a family that was not involved in church, but she sometimes found her way to the local Sunday School on her own. One went to church with her grandmother when she was very little, and then did not attend until her adolescence when she began to go with her friends because "it was the thing to go to church."
4.3.2 *The Teen Years*

Eight of the eleven women I interviewed stopped going to church some time during their youth. Two, Ginny and Bridget, left for ideological reasons. Ginny told me,

I was always from a very young age taught to not go along with everything in the commercial world, and that there was meaning beyond what we see here, and for that I am very thankful. On the other hand, I guess the struggle came with . . . having to adhere to a certain code of ethics, or code of interpretation of the Bible that didn't seem to fit with the person I was.

Bridget struggled with the expectation that both her thoughts and actions should conform to narrowly defined rules. She said,

When I gave up certain religious practices early in my teen years, Mom felt that I was wrong and she couldn't really tell me why. It's just you're supposed to do that, and I was letting down my faith, and that was the end of it. But my dad would allow me to explore my reasons . . . I just felt it was a shallow ritual . . . It just wasn't anything from the heart.

Two women left the church as the direct result of a single difficult or embarrassing experience. Judy's story is very simple. She said,

Around confirmation time . . . I had a fainting spell in the church, and I wouldn't go back for years because I was so embarrassed. I had to be carried out of the church by the minister, and it was humiliating.

Diane's experience was more infuriating than embarrassing. It happened when she was in her early teens,

I remember having cut both my knees and I was always in the choir. I was gingerly on them, you kneel over there . . . and the elderly lady
who was behind me didn't feel that I was far enough down, and she pushed me down on both my knees. That's it. I got up and I walked out, took the gown off, left. I didn't go back anymore.

During their later youth, Sarah and Lisa, just kind of drifted away from the church. As a secondary school student, Sarah went to church, because she "had to," but she said that once she got to university she didn't go because "nobody was telling me I had to." Lisa was very involved in church activities until she married and moved to the city. She said,

I lived for 10 years in Toronto, and . . . I never had any inclination to go to church, because I had no sense of community with where I was living.

Nancy and Margaret also drifted away. Nancy went to church in her early teens because "at that age you were getting interested in boys, [and] that was the place to go [be]cause they all went to church." Margaret said, "As a teenager, boys were far more important than church."

Three of the women interviewed did not stop going to church during their youth. Carol, who went to church irregularly during her childhood, married young and immediately became an active church member. Nell has always had some involvement with her church. Susan went to church with her parents until she married outside her faith. Then she and her husband chose to go to the United Church, because it was different from what either of them was used to; it was conveniently located; and they both wanted to continue to go to church.
4.3.3 *Reasons for Returning*

All of the women I interviewed are mothers. All eight who left the church in their teens or twenties returned only after they had children. Diane came back because she wanted her children to learn about God. Diane said,

> When we first came back to the church, I was having the children. We had been away from the church for some time. . . . There were some things that happened that offended us . . . [but] I said, "No, I want the children to have a religious upbringing. I know what it is to be out there for long times in the middle of the road, in the middle of the dark, in the middle of the night, where you feel alone, and know that you are not alone. And I want my children to know that they are never ever alone." And the church here does that for me and for them.

Nancy and Bridget returned because they wanted to have the children baptized. Nancy told me,

> I guess we really started coming when I was pregnant . . . we thought it's time now we got back. She's coming along. We'd like to have her christened. And I just didn't feel comfortable walking into this church and saying, "Well here we are. We've got this baby we want christened . . . do it!" So we started coming that Christmas . . . I guess she was christened on Mother's day. But we were going pretty regular by then.

And Bridget, who made a first step back toward the church in order to have her baby baptized, said,

> When my son was born, I dabbled in . . . [a church where the priest was a friend of ours] . . . he agreed to christen the baby. But I had to go to the church for a while, and I discovered that I didn't like it . . . They sang hymns that were so Victorian . . . And they started trying to pull me in. I just felt I was being reined in. They had groups for young mothers, and all these nice church ladies . . . I felt really
uncomfortable. So then I stopped going altogether. I went long enough to get him christened.

Eventually, it was not her children but her feeling of "complete emotional despair" that drove her to find a church that could meet some of her needs. She told me,

... then my husband got really ill and I think he asked if I would make contact with somebody to come and talk to him. Which was an odd request, really, because he never really followed through on anything... but anyway, that's what motivated me to make that connection, and I called... [and the minister came]... then I felt really bound to go to the church, and take that step... But I really liked that church. I did feel comfortable there, and several of my friends also started going to that church... our next child was dedicated at that church. And I went there 'til we moved up here.

Lisa's reasons for returning were partly for the children and partly because she herself enjoys the church community now that she is living in a small town.

Concerning the children, she said,

I think my kids should go to Sunday School... whether they go to church when they are older... is not something I have control of, but at least they have a background... they have some beliefs, hopefully... they're more likely to meet kids... who have the same interests... maybe not so much trouble, we hope... if you can keep them in the church.

Ginny also wants her children to be exposed to the teachings and influence of the church. She said,

... it's important in terms of our culture, to know those [Bible] stories, and in terms of my children... to learn the lessons and how to live in accordance with those stories... and the celebrations, that's one of the main things that I like about the church, Christmas, Easter,
and Thanksgiving... I enjoy those times, and I want my children to understand the origins of those holidays.

Ginny's actual return to the church was sparked by a desire to meet her own needs. She said,

I was still being haunted by this spiritual side of myself that wasn't getting any support or nurture. So I thought, maybe I'll go back and see if there's some kind of medium position...

Ginny is wary of church. She talked to me about a TV program she saw about a person who is seeking God through Wiccan rituals. She felt she could "really identify" with what she saw in that programme. When I asked her if she considered herself to be a Christian, she said

I don't know... I guess my spiritual expression would be Christian. Whether I am a Christian, depends on how it's defined... because I don't believe that the only route to God is through Jesus... I certainly have a Christian background... [but]... I do not want to limit my spiritual expression.

Margaret thinks her children helped her feel able to return to church, something she wanted to do as much for herself as for her children. She said,

There's always been sort of some connection to church for whatever reason. I can remember being fascinated by religion... It's easier to walk into church, a group of people you do not know, if you have children to sort of act as a buffer.

Sarah did not make an explicit statement about why she returned. When their children were small, both she and her husband were active in the church. She thought
they might have come back to church simply because that's what you "should" be doing. Now she wonders if maybe they "did too much too soon."

Judy also made no clear statement about why she returned. She said that she and her husband, who has a Pentecostal background, attended the People's Church in Toronto when they were first dating. She found the people there "very friendly . . . but I didn't have the same beliefs they had." After they moved to Georgina, she came back to church, and both she and her children became very involved in church activities.

4.3.4 Reasons for Staying

It is rare for anyone in this generation of women to say they go to church because that is what is expected of them. Their reasons range from seeking ritual (e.g. baptism) and wanting their children to have some exposure to the Christian story to wanting to satisfy a spiritual hunger and longing in themselves. Some find what they are looking for and keep coming back.

Ginny's early family life was centred in the church, and she was a committed, witnessing Christian until she was almost twenty. In her early twenties, she left, and as she puts it, "for twenty years never darkened the door of a church". Her return to church is tentative and wary. Going to church creates something of an image problem for Ginny. She said,

For many years, I felt very guilty, because of . . . [my life-style choices] . . . I thought that it was probably sinful, and I guess I was condemning myself for it . . . so whether anyone in the church would condemn me, I do not know, but that's how I felt.
I think some assumptions are made about people [who] go to church that are not necessarily the case. I find that very difficult... sort of an assumption that might be made by someone in the church...

"Well, if you go to church, then you believe x, y and z," or someone that doesn't go to the church, "Oh you go to the church, then you must believe x, y and z", so it's like coming from both directions.

In spite of her reservations, Ginny serves the church in two very helpful volunteer positions, and from time to time is present at worship. The following comment indicates that she has some positive reactions to her return to church.

How I feel when I'm in church: I was thinking of going through the door, and I'm greeted by friendly people, which is nice. The children are always recognized, which is nice... I feel there's a strong female presence at this particular church, which is good... not much connection among or with the men, but I do not know, because I'm not a man. But I feel that among the women there's a pretty close bond. I feel somewhat a part of it, but not real close.

Lisa said she goes to church to find friends. New to town, and at home full time, she found that she had no problem fitting in at church. She quickly became involved in a variety of activities. She said,

The church is a community. At least I feel good when I go there... I have people I know. I go out into the town and I meet people that I see in church... We can talk about something... It's just... in a small town, I think it's important. It's part of the whole makeup of the town.

Bridget found it difficult to explain churchgoing to her friends. She said

Ten years ago, I didn't move in a circle that talked about Christianity at all. When I started going to church, people in our community in Toronto were surprised... It just wasn't done.
She spoke with great delight about the music she found in the church she started to attend during the time of her husband's prolonged illness. She said,

We had one service that was totally musical... a hymn sing, basically, and the reason we did that was because that denomination has a reputation for not liking to sing. But really it's not that we didn't like to sing, it's that we didn't like to sing anything that we didn't agree with, and were so busy reading the words that we didn't sing very loud. And I thought, "Yes, that's why I went to that church." Because I was trying to find a theology that I could sing, and not disagree with Victorian sentiments and the rigid, patriarchal figure of God.

Bridget started coming to our church so her son would have some exposure to religion. She became involved in the children's programmes. Then, one day, a few years ago she remembered,

I was talking with Terry [a person at church]... and she said, "If your son stops coming then you'll have to decide what place church has in your own life." And that was kind of a turning point in my thinking... for the first couple of years... I wasn't sure whether I would stay for me. But then, [the new ministers] came, and initiated a whole lot of things that are meaningful for me, in terms of my own spiritual development. And my son is doing just fine. The church is filling a need, and that's pretty nice...

Bridget rarely misses a worship service. She serves on several committees, and is a very important member of the congregation.

Diane experienced the church of her childhood as a pinched and joyless place. She has recently returned to church, and she is finding our church to be a much more welcoming and helpful place than the church of her childhood. She described her more recent experience of the church in this way,
Even if it's been an extremely hectic week, and like I run from one week to another . . . there's no break . . . So that little bit of time [Sunday worship] . . . Nobody demands anything of you . . . There's other times when I'll . . . remember what they were saying in the sermon, and I'll check myself . . . You're [Knox United Church] helpful to me when you don't even realize that you are, because, number one, I know that you're here. Even if they won't let me get here when I want to get here, I still know you're here. Like, when my son comes over to Bible school . . . and he had a lot of fun and enjoyed it very much, and I felt good about him being here . . . you're here, and you do not put pressure on me. You know that when I can get here I'll be here, and I like that.

A single positive encounter with someone at the church can be the reason a person keeps coming back. Susan told me about moving to a new town and starting to go to a new church. She said,

First day I went I can just remember being so very uneasy, I didn't know anybody, not a soul. Jim Tucker came up to me and made me feel so welcome, and he's the reason I went back. He was a lovely man.

4.3.5 Reasons for Leaving

All but one of the the women told me the church is not a place where they make friends. They said that if they are friends with someone who goes to church, it is because they interact with them at work or in some other way in the community. The fact that the friend goes to church is coincidental. Diane said, "I don't expect to find a close friend at church . . . [just] friendly people."

Two women expressed regret that they go to church with people week after week, and never really get to know them. Nell said that "knowing somebody's
background or something can be so interesting" and there are probably "really interesting people" at church. She continued,

You can sit beside them in church forever and you really do not know [anything] about them. . . . superficially, you just say, "hi, how are you? Fine." And that's as far as it goes, but I do not know how you tap into that.

Bridget said,

You go to church on Sunday and everyone is very nice and you've known them for years, but you don't know most people on more than a surface level . . . maybe there's some protection there, too . . . you don't want to divulge everything to everybody, but maybe there could be some smaller forums for people . . .

Judy sees the church as a place that caters to the needs of intact families. She said,

It makes a big difference if you're married. You're part of a family unit. And, when I was no longer married it seemed to be that was the goal: to become part of a family unit to fit in still . . . One of the things that really bothered me is I had an older woman who had come up to me at some point and said she didn't trust me with her husband . . . At the time I was [serving on a committee with him] and saw him on a regular basis, and it made me feel very uncomfortable.

Judy also reported an incident that suggests that the church can be experienced as a place that expects members and attenders to be in a comfortable income bracket.

One day a member of the congregation who had no personal involvement in the children's choirs made a comment that made her feel unworthy and unwelcome.

She remembers,
While the kids were in choir it was pointed out to me, this was after I was separated from my husband, that on Sunday the children . . . were supposed to wear dress shoes, not running shoes. And what really stood out in my mind was that I didn't have dress shoes for my kids because I couldn't afford to buy them.

Judy still feels affection for some of the people who are a part of the church. Spirituality is important to her, and sometimes she wonders if she should engage in some kind of religious studies or work. She never comes to church. She participates in no church activities.

Two women felt that the church makes unreasonable demands on those who come to church. Sarah spoke at length about her belief that "if all you can handle is just going to church, and being there, that should be okay." She said, "I think people often forget that you could be busy in many other places." She used the example of her husband's community volunteer work, and went on to tell about a time when she was doing a lot of work for the church:

I really felt that the more you did in the church, the more it was expected. Far easier to do nothing. No one expects you to do a thing. . . . The only way out was to quit. I tried to cut back, and that just didn't work . . . I even went and said, "I cannot handle this. I'd like to do this part of it." It couldn't be done, or I wasn't allowed to . . . I was just drowning. And so as I say, the only way out was to quit, to get out. And we probably drifted more since then. When you're not involved you do less and less.

Today, Sarah attends church when some member of her family has a part in the service. She is a very competent woman. She serves on no committees.
Nancy thinks the church is out to grab your money and your time. She said,

You know, if you go you're expected to put money in . . . I asked this person once, I said, "How much do you think you have to give?" She said, "Probably at least five dollars." And I said, "I don't." And she said, "Well don't you feel they look at you?" . . . And there was once I helped in the nursery . . . I don't mind helping, but my idea was to come to church and put my child in the nursery so I could listen to the service . . . I was told that if I was going to put my child in it, I should volunteer . . . it was around that time too that I kind of stopped.

Nancy never comes to church. She is involved in no church activities.

Even a church that prides itself on the warm welcome it extends to newcomers can feel unfriendly to a person whose life has followed paths that are unfamiliar to most of the members of the congregation. Margaret, who moved to this area only a couple of years ago, "feels like an outsider." She said

I don't feel real close in the church . . . I've felt a sense of being the outsider. But I just think that's natural. I don't think there was any unkindness on anyone's part . . . People build community and friendships and are known to each other and someone new comes . . . There was a welcome, but there was a distance between us . . . Everybody's got their seats. That's why I come in late, just to make sure I haven't taken anyone's seat.

Some of the women feel resentful toward a church that does not practise what it preaches. Sarah told me that some people who go to church are hypocrites who are "no better than anyone else." She said that she found that sometimes people who sit on church boards are less ethical than people she has met in other organizations. Susan also found it difficult to worship with a co-worker whose behaviour at church is very
different from her behaviour at work. She said she could not be comfortable with that kind of hypocrite.

4.3.6 Women's Groups

Only one of the women I interviewed is able to feel at home in the United Church Women (U.C.W.), the traditional women's group in the United Church. Historically, the U.C.W. is the place where women made friends. For many churchwomen who are 70+ years of age, it is still where they go to be with friends.

About this group, Lisa said,

I belong to the women. I like working with the women. We've got a real nice bunch of ladies . . . I don't have a lot of money to contribute to the church, so I feel if I contribute myself and do a bit here and there, at least I'm doing something to help out somewhere along the line.

Only three other women mentioned anything about the U.C.W. Judy found she had "very little in common" with the women at the U.C.W. meetings once she started back to school. Bridget went to U.C.W. meetings a couple of times, and decided it really was not for her. "I was afraid of being pulled into the kitchen," she told me, and she felt unable to raise questions and interact freely because "it was such a well established group."

Sarah's attitude was openly negative. She said:

I think a church is into stereotype. To me U.C.W. is the worst place for that. It's a women's group. You do women's things. [You] wouldn't THINK of asking the men to do that stuff . . . [I remember there] was the church dinner where I was phoned and [asked to]
bring pies. Well, I really DO NOT make pies. [It's] a family joke. [So I said] "Sorry, I don't make pies." Hung up. Five minutes later, "Well, DO you make mashed potatoes?" . . . It didn't seem the thing to say no.

Judy and Sarah wish that women could gather together for interesting educational programmes. Carol and Bridget feel close to the women in their recently organized small "spirituality group". Several women acknowledge the presence at church of an unorganised, growing group of women, who work together in Sunday School events and who know each other through their children's involvement in church, school, and community activities.

4.3.7 Concluding Comments

Even though there are many life-style pressures that make church attendance a practical challenge, these women, to different degrees, have given church a "chance" in their adult years. Their desire to give their own children some of the benefits of belonging to a place of positive moral influence is a strong attraction. Those who have positive memories of the church of their childhood returned with hopeful, enthusiastic attitudes. For others, the moral strictures they sensed in the church when they were young remain as a caution, making their return tentative and hesitant. Upon returning, some found compatible people and nurture for their own spiritual needs. Others could not stay, because the church seemed irrelevant, demanding, hypocritical or lacking in understanding.
4.4 Theological Beliefs and Practices

I asked the women a number of questions about their understanding of God and Jesus and the Bible. I asked them about their concepts and practice of prayer. While none of them accept the simplistic answers that satisfied their childhood questions, they all have a sense of "Someone there," and a willingness and desire to pray, at least in times of crisis.

4.4.1 Who is God?

A question I asked each of the women I interviewed, was, "Who was God for you when you were a child?" They answered this question quite easily, and had very similar answers. For Bridget, God was "a grandfather figure . . . a kind of distant authority figure . . . everywhere all the time so you couldn't sneak around him." Lisa said, "He was male . . . just sort of something up there." Nancy thought "He was someone who sat on a cloud and watched us." For Carol, God was simply "Jesus' Father." Of all the women, Sarah's childhood notion of God was the most abstract. For Sarah, God "was a being." She laughed as she told me

In my mind it was always sort of a shape, like a gingerbread man? . . . someone up there with no features. Not a person, in other words. Definitely not a person . . . and yet I think I had to make it into a shape of something, so that it wasn't just open sky or whatever.

After listening to them talk about their childhood concepts of God, I asked the women if there was ever a time in their life when that concept changed; did they have a different image of God today from their childhood image?
All of the women's adult pictures of God are different from their childhood notions. Nancy said she no longer thinks of "Him as this person sitting on a cloud," but she wondered aloud, "What is God? Is He a healer, or just a watcher?" While they all believe in the existence of God, none of them felt able to define God. Bridget said she's really "fuzzy" when she thinks about God, and her notion of God keeps changing. She said,

Sometimes I picture God as just a sort of floating energy field. Sometimes I put a face on God. I have a picture in my room of an old crone and sometimes she's God for me. . . I think what I like about the energy field is that it's like a fog, almost, it can go through you, can be internal as well as external. . .

Ginny talked about the way she and her mother sang hymns together every night before she went to sleep, and about how, at that time she had "a faith that Someone was looking after me; how no matter what happened, God would be there." That's not the way it is for her now. She reported that much of the time she feels like she is "out on a rim" and all alone, and she admitted,

I do not even know when I'm praying whether anyone really is listening. I guess on an intuitive level I believe there is a God, but on a logical level I don't know.

Margaret said, "God's like having a good friend . . . someone you're pretty sure won't judge you." But she confessed that,

I've always struggled with the fact that it's a man and, then you hear people say, "God is a woman" . . . [but] . . . how do you change everything? There's a sense that there is someone up there, and beyond that, I don't know.
Margaret said, "God's like having a good friend . . . someone you're pretty sure won't judge you." But she confessed that,

I've always struggled with the fact that it's a man and, then you hear people say, "God is a woman" . . . [but] . . . how do you change everything? There's a sense that there is someone up there, and beyond that, I don't know.

Diane talked about guardian angels, and about how she believes that no matter what happens, God is looking after us. The way she put it was,

I believe everyone has a guardian angel . . . I figure that Jesus and God can't be everywhere all over for all those people so they send someone . . . because I figure they love you so much and they don't want anything to happen to you . . .

The women in my study also find God in nature. Ginny feels the "spirit of Christ" as she is "canoeing on the lake, or cross-country skiing in the woods, and it's very quiet." Diane speaks about the family cabin where they've "got a canoe and there's no hydro and it's pretty." At the cabin, she said, "I sit . . . and look out over the lake and I know for a fact He's there and it's okay." Margaret knows God is present "if the sun is shining and Spring has arisen . . . or on a quiet night." Nell also finds that when she is out in nature, "skiing or something . . . [she] . . . feels very thankful in my mind, out loud."

Relationships are another place where the women experience God. Lisa experiences a sense of God when her "kids do something you feel good about." Carol feels close to God when she has "helped someone realize there's always something to
smile about.” Margaret is aware of God when she feels that someone else really understands her. These women made it clear that for them, having good and helpful relationships with others is an important way they have of being with God.

Lisa speaks about experiencing a sense of God in music. For Sarah, God's important "just because I think there's always gotta be something beyond us." For Judy, "God is the highest power there is."

4.4.2 Is Jesus Important?

I asked each of the women who Jesus is for them. They gave very different responses to that question, ranging all the way from "He's my life! The most important thing to me!" to "Jesus is of no real importance to me."

Five women said Jesus and God are one and the same person. Only one of these five had any sense of personal connection with Jesus. Carol was troubled by the question of whether or not it is okay to pray to Jesus. She said

I have this thing in my mind, who do I pray to? Do I pray to God? Do I pray to Jesus? . . . I don't know if there's a right person to pray to . . . Do you pray to who you feel comfortable with or do you pray to God? . . . Are all these prayers going to two different people, or are they ending up in the same place? That's just what I don't understand.

Some short responses to the question about who Jesus is, were: "Protector of children, someone very loving and warm;" "the Messenger, the one who spread the word;" and "a Representative of God."
Two women talked about the problem they have with the literal notion of the virgin birth, and Jesus being God's son. Ginny thinks Jesus lived a very commendable life and we can learn from his example and teachings, but she is not sure she can go any further than that. Nell said,

I sort of picture him as a real disciple of God ... the son bit ... is very difficult to conceptualize. But that's a literal thing ... and I don't need to take it so literally, do I?

Carol, who said "Jesus is my life!" explained something of what she meant when she said,

To pray to him makes me feel so safe ... I don't know how I used to get by without [him] ... what I have now is growing all the time ... Jesus makes me feel like I'm somebody that can maybe help somebody else feel the way I feel ... he takes our burdens ... give them to him ... I mean I talk to Jesus about things I would never talk to anybody else about ... if you can talk to him, it's like it eases your mind ... when there's nobody else I can turn to, I can always turn to him. If I feel like bawling my eyes out, I can do it and feel better ...

Jesus is also important to Bridget, but in a very different way. She said,

Whether or not I believe in the divinity of Christ, I'm not sure. I'm confused about that. I mean, Christ was a wonderful man. And he has had such an influence on our world, so many people at least profess to follow his ways ... He must have been such a powerful figure in his quiet way. There's something awfully special about him. But does that mean that I can pray to Jesus, and he's still there? ... I was trying to work this through in the car yesterday. If I believe that MY spirit isn't going to go away, when my body dies, then Jesus' spirit is still with us now. And if he was such a powerful figure, and he was such a special spiritual energy, then, well maybe he is divine. But I dunno. And does it matter? I'm not sure that it even matters. You know, if it's the idea of Jesus that can get me through, maybe that's all that's important.
4.4.3 Does Anybody Read The Bible?

All of the women admitted that they do not read the Bible and do not know a whole lot about what is in it. They know, and sometimes love, some of the stories that they learned in Sunday School, but the Bible itself they find intimidating. Diane said,

I get lost in the Bible, I guess, because I think, What does that mean and how do you say that? and they have all these long names . . . I read the Children’s Bible to the children almost every night.

Carol and Judy read a women’s devotional bible that refers to a biblical text and then has some contemporary commentary on the text. Judy admitted that she never opens her Bible to look at the text, but she likes the commentary because it's in "a layperson's terms." Both of these women were concerned that they not be seen as "Bible-Thumpers" who go around "preaching the Bible at people."

Carol and Margaret both spoke of a time in their youth when they decided to read the Bible from cover to cover. Neither of them got very far, even though they had good intentions.

At least four of the women wondered about just how literally the Bible stories should be understood. Nell said she would like to have opportunities to get together

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70 This is what two women called a daily devotional book that has a Scripture reference, followed by contemporary commentary.
with other people "to talk about how literally people take the stories in the Bible and that kind of thing." Sarah felt it was an individual matter. She said,

I'm sure on a Sunday morning there are people that take what's read out of the Bible very literally, and those that really do not . . . I think that's more of a personal thing, and that can be different to everyone.

Margaret spoke about a personal struggle she is having with the stories and attitudes that are in the Bible. She said,

I guess I have to come to terms with it as a document. But the Bible doesn't figure a lot into my religion. It's probably more because I don't know it . . . I struggle with the Bible itself, and the stories in it, like this choice that Abraham had to make . . . [I've] thought a lot about that story in the Bible . . . and have questioned my association with the church because of that. I mean, my knowledge of the Bible is very limited and I guess that's the worst story I've heard.

4.4.4 When God Seems to be Absent

After I had heard about their ideas about who/what God is, I asked the women if there was ever a time when they felt that God had abandoned them.

Susan felt abandoned when, as a young wife and mother she and her family moved to a dilapidated, vermin infested house in a new community where she had no friends or neighbours. Carol felt abandoned by God when she was a child and her father would come home drunk. At those times, she "never even thought about praying, not because God wasn't there, but I just didn't know how to connect with Him."
Diane spoke about her parents' divorce when she was a teenager. The children stayed with their father. Being the oldest child, she had to keep house and look after her brothers and sisters. For a while, she decided that "God isn't."

In university, Bridget kept trying to figure out "how intellectual people still believe in God when they know through history and literature what people have done with the concept of God." She told me that no one was able to come up with satisfactory answers to her many questions,

So I found it very hard to hang on to faith. But I kept exploring that. It was like a wound... I have a really spiritual need, and I really wanted that to be fed, and it wasn't being fed on any rational level.

Nell said she's "never felt God's not there... just maybe times I haven't reached out..." Bridget made a similar comment when she said, "I don't know that I felt abandoned by God. I think maybe it makes more sense to say I had abandoned my opening to God. I had abandoned God."

4.4.5 Is God in Control?

Not surprisingly, talking about times when they felt abandoned by God, led to the question, "Why, if God is so good and loving, do so many bad things happen?"

For Nancy this was a rhetorical question; something you asked, with sadness or anger and frustration, when tragedy or illness struck, but not something you really tried to answer. Others made some effort to answer it, either by accepting the folk wisdom of
the surrounding culture, or by trying to reason their way through to an answer that was more satisfying.

Judy had a clear answer. She stated simply,

I believe in fate. I believe that whatever happens, there's a reason for it happening, that it's in God's plan for you . . . so whether it's a tough time or whether it's easy-going, it's there for a reason . . . My mother always said to me that when people die, especially people who are young, or people who you couldn't understand why they would be killed in a car accident, or whatever, my mother would always say, "Well that was part of God's plan, and that they were needed." And even though I'm forty-two I still believe that.

Carol, whose eighteen-year old son was killed in an automobile accident, would disagree. Concerning her son's death, she said, "I don't think it was his time to die. It was an accident." She also believes "He [God] is involved in our lives everyday and some days we are more attuned to it than others." Then she gave a powerful example of what she means.

The night Allen was killed, and I couldn't sleep, I went and sat on the porch, and bawled my eyes out. I hung onto his coat and bawled my eyes out and said, "God, if you took him, then you send me a sign, and you tell me that he's with you." . . . I was sitting outside, and it was in July, and there was thunder, and there was lightening, and I saw lightening like I have never seen in my life . . . like fireworks were going off in heaven, and I looked up, and I said, "Okay, you've got him. Fine." . . . and whether anybody believes, I don't care. Like that, to me that's just like peace . . . when I saw this lightening, these fireworks going off, it was, "Okay. Thank you . . . that's what I was looking for."
Ginny's mother taught her that God doesn't give you any more than you can handle, and Ginny figures, "I think I've probably internalized it to a degree . . . that I will be able to work through and survive whatever life throws me." Judy expressed this sentiment in another way when she said, "I understand that you are only dealt what you can handle."

A variation on the theme of not being given more than you can handle is the assumption Susan made when she said, "I understand things happen for a reason."

When telling me about her struggles with a serious illness, she said of God,

He did it for a reason. It was probably a trial. For some reason it was my trial. I do not know why.

Margaret is more equivocating. She thinks it is possible that God is involved in the day to day ups and downs of our lives, but she is not sure. She said,

I don't know if there's a destiny . . . Or if someone, if God is actually out there directing the show. I haven't figured this out.

Nell recognizes that there are "lots of times when it [life] isn't fair . . . but there's reasons we don't know . . . I just think it's something we can't grasp . . ."

Bridget states emphatically, "It [God] is not somebody sitting up above passing judgement, or sending down help, or instruction." She adds,

I think I lost the sense that it was a particular spirit guide along the way, and maybe I'm closest to rediscovering it now in my life . . . from further reading in native spirituality, and different kinds of spirituality . . . bring that idea forward rather than . . . the Christian guardian angel sense, but . . . in the last year or so, I've been re-connecting with that protective feeling that I had as a child.
Diane told about her way of working through the question about why an all-powerful, all-loving God allows bad things to happen.

I went through different stages . . . I would go through these confusion things when I didn't understand why if He was God and He had so much power, why He would allow these bad things to happen . . . And then I got it in my head, to deal with these things, that perhaps He doesn't have control, where I had thought He controlled everything.

4.4.6 The When and How of Prayer

I asked the women to tell me when they pray. Two women told me they pray every day. Judy said, "God's somebody that I talk to every night . . . I guess sort of like the childhood prayers." Carol reads her "devotional bible," and has a personal prayer time before she leaves the house each day. She said, "My daily prayer [is] to be a better person so that through me, someone else can see that . . . there are still things to smile about."

The rest of the women are more apt to pray only when they are struggling with a crisis or in some way are needing help. They said they are not likely to pray when things are going well. Nell, for instance, told me that on the way to making a presentation, she may ask God to be with her to help her do a good job, and then, when it is all over, she will speed home, and forget about saying thank you.

Personal illness, or the ill health of a family member, can move people to pray. Nancy and Susan both talked about praying when they were diagnosed with cancer.
Ginny told me that she has "been praying a lot lately", because her mother has had cancer surgery, but not all the cancer was removed. Bridget said,

I don't think I felt any emotional need for God until my husband got sick. Up to that, I had an intellectual curiosity and was deciding intellectually whether I needed this stuff, and whether there was any truth to it . . . He came back in March, quit his job in October to stay home with the kids, got sick in February. And that's when I went looking for God . . . We couldn't get the doctors to say whether this was something that was going to happen once, he'd get over it and he would be fine, or whether it was going to be a chronic condition . . . I spent a lot of time alone, because he spent weeks in the hospital at a time, and I had a lot of time late at night to think and probably pray.

Margaret and Diane spoke about having ongoing conversations with God about what was going on in their lives, and about how they sensed God's presence, even though it was not really anything specific. Lisa and Sarah both said that God is not something they think about on a regular basis. Lisa would "occasionally pray if something really bad was going on . . . [but] . . . prayer is just not part of what you do." Sarah figured people probably pray in times of trouble "even if it was simply because you need someone to talk to that isn't a human."

I asked the women if they could tell me something about how they pray. Seven of them were able to talk about how they pray. Carol has the most disciplined prayer life. Every morning she takes time to read her "devotional bible" and say her prayers. She begins her prayers "by asking to have my sin forgiven." Then she prays for her kids and her husband and friends and family who seem to be in special need of prayer.
She closes with the request that God will help her "give something" to others in the day ahead. In church, she learned about "arrow prayers," which she uses "I can't tell you how many times a day." Usually, Carol has her prayer time in her bedroom, but sometimes,

when the kids have all gone to school . . . and the weather is nice, I go and sit out in the sun, and I shut my eyes, and I feel the warmth, and that warmth comes right through, and not just on the outside of you.

For a long time, Diane thought that the only way to pray was to recite the formal prayers she had learned at church. "Don't ask me where it changed," she told me. "I just realized I could talk to Him, and say whatever I want." Diane's father helped lead her to this realization. She remembered his telling her,

"[The reason] I don't go to church has nothing to do with God. It's the people that's over there [at the church]. Some of them, I just can't deal with . . . You [can have] God driving down the road . . . I talk to God every day, all day long, in my dump truck."

Diane said, "I knew my father wouldn't be saying a formal prayer . . . so I thought, well I guess you could say just anything."

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"Arrow prayers are quick thoughts shot toward God while doing something else. They might be a quick thank you or a brief request for oneself or someone else. They are a reminder that God is present and available."
Bridget continues to explore different ways to approach and understand God. but in times of great need, she finds herself returning to some familiar mantra-like phrases from her childhood.

... in times of need. It's just Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, this holy family, and I'm darn sure that I said that a lot... It would be used to override the anxious thoughts that were going through my head, so that I could go to sleep... I remember [here she recalls an extreme family crisis]... My husband had several beers and went to sleep. I Jesus Mary and Josephed myself all night that night, and that's not the first time that I used that. So, if that can be considered praying, I was sure shouting out for help.

In bed at night seems to be a favourite time and place for praying. Ginny, whose not even sure there is anyone listening, still prays,

... not regularly... only when I'm in a very difficult place, like in a crisis... It's usually before I go to sleep. I associate being in the dark with no distractions and my eyes closed... that's how I pray, and it's not usually for something specific to happen, it's usually more, what should I do? This is what's happening, and what can I do about it? Show me what to do.

Susan prays privately when she is alone, and admits that when the "family's all here and things are going crazy" she probably puts prayer "on the back shelf." But when it is quiet and she is alone, like in the shower, then she prays, "not to the Father, but to Jesus, and maybe if my kids are concerned I pray to Mary... because Mary was a mother."
Nell talks to God about her deceased father. Actually, she uses prayer as a way of talking to her father. Margaret has "ongoing conversations" with God in her head. She senses that she is being heard even though no one is talking back.

4.4.7 The Benefits of Prayer

Five of the women in my interview sample spoke about experiencing a sense of peace after praying. Carol said,

It's like a very personal thing with Jesus. It's not something you share with other people . . . I mean I talk to Jesus about things I would never talk to anybody else about . . . it's like it eases it from your mind . . . I need that feeling of security that I have when I feel closer to Jesus, so I feel safer . . .

When Diane talks with God, she "knows she's not alone." Ginny reported that after she has prayed for guidance, "sometimes things are told . . . and I see the direction it's going in." Although Margaret has never heard God answer her prayers, she has found,

There are times when I feel a sense of peace and happiness and things are working themselves out, and I assume these are the answers God has given me.

4.4.8 Concluding Comments

The women I interviewed are busy people, exposed to the ideologies of an increasingly secular society. Some of them are a regular part of the life of the church. Some are not. And yet, they all believe in God, and most of them pray.
Many of their beliefs are expressed, not in the reasoned language of traditional theology, but in the popular and partial images of their semi-Christian culture. Nonetheless, their faith in God is deeply rooted, self-consciously present, altered but not destroyed by the problem of why there is suffering. And their God is personal, an integral part of their lives, however informally they share themselves with God in prayer.
CHAPTER FIVE

5. A CLOSER LOOK: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.0 Introduction

My interviews with this sample of baby boomer United Church women suggest that they do not feel the strong connection with their church and their faith that was characteristic of United Church women in their mother's and grandmother's generations.

Faced with a cultural reality that encourages a free-er life-style and presents them with a broad range of opportunities, these women drifted away from the church when they were young. Having once made a break with the on-going traditions of the church, they would henceforth look at the church from a different perspective. They have tried returning to church when they had families, seeking wholesome community and moral guidance for their children, and spiritual and emotional support for themselves. Some found that their church met their needs. Others did not. Some appreciate the church for the sense of place it gives to their lives. Some have only a tentative connection with their church. Some have found groups outside the church to meet their need for intimacy.

Their faith has never quite left them, but they are not as sure of what they believe as an earlier generation appeared to be. They inwardly question the teachings of their childhood. The Bible is not foundational to their faith. They continue to
believe in the existence of God and most of them have found their own ways to reach out to God in prayer, but their concepts of God and Jesus are based primarily on their own thoughts and experiences. Christianity is but one resource for their private belief systems.

In this chapter, I analyse the Findings I have recorded in Chapter 4 in the light of the questions and theories I included in Chapter 2. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section seeks to answer the question, Who are these women? (1) in terms of their level of faith development; (2) as members of the baby boomer generation; and (3) as women in relationship. The second section seeks to answer the question, What do they need from the church? (1) in terms of acceptance; (2) in the form of quality relationships; (3) as Christian challenge.

5.1 Who Are They?

In the Findings chapter I have tried to let the women describe themselves in terms of their own self-understanding. In this section, I seek to bring further insight into who they are by naming their diverse faith stages, their formation as baby boomers, and their problems with valuing their gifts and perspectives. In some instances, in a further effort to assure their anonymity, I do not identify them even by the pseudonyms I have assigned them.
5.1.1 Who Are They in Terms of their Faith Development?

Wanting to understand how their stage of faith development affects their spiritual needs, I have attempted to view each of the women through the lens of faith-development stages. This was an interesting but difficult task because of the importance of distinguishing between the content of a person's belief system and their level of faith development. For instance, the frequently heard statement of belief that "Everything happens for a reason and God never gives us more than we can handle," could be made by someone at Stage 2 who is accepting without question the teaching of an authority figure. It could also be made by a someone at Stage 4 who is trying to make sense of their experience of the world. The temptation for me was to assume that when a woman believed something I believe, she was functioning at a more sophisticated faith stage, and when a woman made a belief statement that contradicted my beliefs, she was functioning at an earlier faith stage.

What I learned from this exercise is that, in terms of faith stages, the women I interviewed are a diverse group functioning at three or four different faith stages.\footnote{This conclusion is consistent with James Fowler's observation that "Any time a pastor or priest greets a congregation of any real size gathered for worship, he or she addresses persons whose range of stages of faith and selfhood includes at least three or four stages." James Fowler, Faith Development and Pastoral Care, ed. Don S. Browning (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 82.} One woman appears to be approaching Stage 5. She is learning to be comfortable with ambiguity and appreciates the power and usefulness of symbols she cannot literally

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accept. When reflecting on the divinity of Jesus, she said, "Maybe he is divine . . . I'm not sure it matters . . . if it's the idea of Jesus that can get me through, maybe that's all that's important." This woman is also beginning to be able to reclaim the myths of her childhood. Reflecting on the possible presence of personal spirit guides, she said "In the last year or so, I've been reconnecting with that protective feeling that I had as a child." 

Others seem to exhibit the beliefs and behaviors more characteristic of Stages 3 and 4. For instance, some of the women had a tendency to look outside themselves for definitions of right and wrong. During the interviews, some seemed to be seeking permission to have the ideas they were expressing. They would say things like, "I'm not sure I'm supposed to believe this, but . . ." or "Is it okay to think . . .?" The source of authority for others seemed to be their own experience and understandings. These women were apt to feel estranged from the community of the church.

It became apparent to me as I looked at the women from a faith stage perspective, that personal trauma is a prime motivating agent for causing the women to begin to move beyond their present faith stage. Women who had experienced comfortable, routine lives were apt to be at one of the earlier faith stages. Those who

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73 Bridget, Section 4.4.2. p. 95.
74 Bridget, Section 4.4.5. p. 100.
are approaching later faith stages have had to struggle with significant personal hardship or tragedy.

What is most significant here for the church is the fact that I found so much diversity in such a small sample of baby boomer women. This diversity presents local congregations with a complex challenge. When Wilena Brown identified local congregations within the United Church of Canada that operate with a community faithstyle similar to Fowler's Stage 2, she could have been writing about our congregations. Community faithstyle congregations are comfortable, and even insistent upon using traditionally accepted theological phrases, and will resist any attempts to examine or challenge what they "have always" done and said. Therefore, in community faithstyle congregations, seekers are not welcome. Those who stay keep quiet about who they really are. The rest leave. The women I interviewed are seekers who have a wide variety of perspectives and needs. According to Brown's analysis, they should not expect to be warmly welcomed by our congregations.

Another characteristic of community faithstyle congregations is that they expect people to both know and abide by their unwritten rules and informal structures. Only one of the women I interviewed belongs to one of the church's "old

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75 W. Brown, cited in Section 2.4, pps. 41-42.

76 Some examples of unwritten rules and informal structures could be: "Jim Parker always arranges the altar display for the Thanksgiving service;" "Mary Jones always makes the advent wreath;" "It is the job of the choir to choose the hymns for the lessons and carols service;" and "The memorials and furnishings committee decides what can be put on the bulletin boards."
families." None of the others could possibly know the rules and structures that the old timers expect everyone to embrace. It is easy to understand why some of the seekers I interviewed have chosen to end their relationship with the church. They do not “fit in.” What is surprising is that some have chosen to stay with the church community.

5.1.2 Who Are They as Members of the Baby Boomer Generation?

In typical baby boomer fashion, the women in this study feel free to extend their spiritual search beyond the sphere of any kind of church orthodoxy. Their answers to my questions indicate that they personally hold a variety of unorthodox beliefs that range from "everyone has a guardian angel" to "really identifying" with Wiccan rituals. Their perceptions about what Christians are supposed to believe causes some women to feel uneasy about going to church. One has never joined the church because she does not believe in the virgin birth and she does not believe Christianity is the only true path to God. She assumes she must agree with these traditional beliefs that she learned when she was a child in order to qualify for church membership. Others expressed a sense of discomfort over being expected to sing sexist hymns or listen to scripture lessons written by and for patriarchal cultures.

77 Diane, Section 4.4.1, p. 93.
78 Ginny, Section 4.3.3, p. 81.
79 Ginny, Section 4.3.3, p. 81.
80 Bridget, Section 4.3.3, p. 79.
81 Margaret, Section 4.4.3, p. 97.
On the other hand, it can happen that a woman is really helped by church, like the woman who said that the new church leaders "initiated a whole lot of things that are meaningful for me, in terms of my own spiritual development . . . and the church is filling a real need in my life."82 This woman plans to stay at church even when her children no longer come.

Because they left the church as teenagers or young adults, these baby boomer women know very little about the Bible apart from the Bible stories they learned in Sunday School. They think they should want to read it, but when they try, they do not find it interesting or understandable. They cannot accept the extravagant claims they have heard about the importance of the Bible and the Truth that is contained in it, but they have not discovered or been taught alternative ways of understanding it. For these reasons, the women think they do not know enough to be able to read the Bible. They also have negative images of people who do read the Bible. The two women who told me that they read a women's "devotional bible," were quick to assure me that they are not "Bible thumpers."

For many, Jesus also seems to be more of a problem than a help. The problem does not centre around his goodness and mercy, but around church dogma that makes no sense to them. They have trouble accepting the church's teachings about the virgin

82 Bridget, Section 4.3.4. p. 84.
birth and the physical resurrection. Some of them openly admitted their problems with these teachings of the church. Others were afraid to speak of any such difficulty. Some women said they are unable to accept the idea that Jesus Christ is the only true path to God.

Some baby boomers have reacted to their youthful questioning of received tradition by returning to the narrowly defined "faith of our fathers" found in fundamentalist churches. My study suggests that baby boomers associated with the United Church still question received tradition. They are not looking to church fathers to answer their questions. Still, having rejected the simple faith of their childhood, they believe in the existence of God and most would like to be able to have some connection with the church as institution.

Most of them have grown up thinking of prayer as a plea for help, and have not been exposed to prayer as an ongoing recommitment of self to a gracious loving God. Those who do pray, whether regularly or irregularly, say prayer gives them a sense of peace and comfort and strength.

Their sense of God as a personal reality ranges from those who report that they experience the comforting nearness of God every day to those who say that they seldom think about God. There appears to be no correlation between how often and

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how intensely the women sense God's presence and how often they go to church. Women who both go to church every Sunday and who seldom or never go to church are found at both extremes.

They all agree that they do not need to go to church to encounter God. Some of the places that they say they encounter God are "in the dark before I go to sleep;"\(^{84}\) when "I'm alone, like in the shower;"\(^{85}\) or outside "on a quiet night."\(^{86}\) They report experiencing moments of great beauty and peace, when they were filled with a sense of gratitude and appreciation for God's goodness. In order to be able to encounter God, some women have needed to discard the lessons they learned at church. For instance, there is the woman who became able to pray again only after her father told her that he talked to God "everyday all day long." Realizing that he would not be saying the kind of formal prayer she had been taught in her Anglican upbringing, she decided that when praying, "you could just say anything."\(^{87}\) The freedom to pray in her own words allowed her to begin to develop a whole new relationship with God. Another woman had seen church solely as the place where you were expected to know and follow the right rules. One day it dawned on her that "God probably isn't all that

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\(^{84}\) Ginny, Section 4.4.6, p. 104.

\(^{85}\) Susan, Section 4.4.6, p. 104.

\(^{86}\) Margaret, Section 4.4.1, p. 93.

\(^{87}\) Diane, Section 4.4.6, p. 103.
interested in rules." Only then was she ready to begin to find out more about the complexity of who/what God is.

While there is no apparent correlation between current church attendance and experiencing God, there does appear to be a significant correlation between denominational background and experiencing God. There were three women who said they seldom think about God. All of them grew up in the United Church. There were three women whose stories indicated that they experience God as a significant, consistent, ongoing reality. None of them have a United Church background.

The United Church ethos can lead to a picture of a demanding rather than a gracious God. I see the dominant spirituality of the United Church as a "horizontal" spirituality that focuses on relationships and doing good rather than a "vertical" spirituality that focuses on connecting with an empowering, transcendent spirit. The United Church women I interviewed say they have an awareness of God when their "kids do something you feel good about," when they have "helped someone," when someone else "really understands me." The relational, community-focused spirituality of the United Church is an important element of spiritual understanding.

88 Bridget, Section 4.3.1, p. 75.
89 Lisa, Section 4.4.1, p. 93.
90 Carol, Section 4.4.1, p. 93.
91 Margaret, Section 4.4.1, p. 93.
and expression. It can do much to enhance the lives of those it touches. At the same
time, these women would benefit from finding opportunities within the church to
encounter contemplative spiritualities that help open us to the wisdom of a
transcendent God.

All of the women who left church in their youth have attempted to find a place
in the church as parents of young children. Even if their stated reason for returning
was to have their children baptized, many, in fact, were looking for more. They speak
appreciatively of the Church's Christmas and Easter rituals, expect these rituals to be
an ongoing part of the life of the church, and hope that their children's lives will be
enriched when they are exposed to these rituals.

They may reject some of the church's traditions, but are reluctant to reject the
church itself. They are aware that potentially, the church could bring spiritual
enrichment to their lives as it honours them and their quest.

5.1.3 Who Are They as Women in Relationship?

The women in my study tend to be uncomfortable with the gender-based role
expectations that were once a solid part of United Church traditions. Almost all of
them, for instance, resent being asked to bake for bake sales and try to avoid the church
kitchen. Still, they are apt to use a "don't rock the boat" tactic when confronted by
these expectations. Only one woman explicitly named her perception that "the church is into stereotype." 92

Their priorities, however, clearly reflect their formation as women in a culture that "values women for their ability to care for others and establish loving relationships." 93 They derive their greatest sense of meaning and purpose from their primary relationships, not from how successful they are at work.

All the women who answered questions about their dreams and goals spoke about doing things with their families. Their concerns about their children's well-being, happiness, and value systems appear to be the most important consideration in all their decisions. They will do for their children what they would never do for themselves. This is true whether their children are pre-schoolers or young adults. The next most important consideration for those who are married is that they should have good, meaningful and helpful relationships with their husbands. For those who are no longer married, quality relationships with their friends have very high priority.

The women clearly would like to have their families join them at church. It was quite astonishing for me to come face-to-face with the fact of that most of their husbands have nothing to do with church. 94 It was upsetting to learn that some

92 Sarah, Section 4.3.6. p. 89.
93 L. Woodhead, cited in Section 2.2. p. 27.
94 I was so astonished that I referred back to the list of 56 women who completed the questionnaire survey to try to determine whether or not I had a disproportionately large number of uninvolved husbands in my
husbands are non-supportive and even obstructive of their wives' efforts to seek personal spiritual nurture. When there is a conflict, they choose family activities over church attendance, even though they feel disappointment when a habit of non-attendance develops in their children. That they accept their husbands' behaviour and attitudes as normative suggests to me that, at least in some areas of their lives, they have low self-esteem and are prepared to interact with others in self-effacing ways.

With its high regard for acquisitive, individualistic pursuits, our culture puts a lot of pressure on women to feel that unless they can successfully compete with men, their accomplishments are not important. They have trouble recognizing the merit of the skills they have developed as they look after the needs of others. They fail to realize that their concern for others may point to a spiritual maturity in which they have joined Alice Walker's Shug in having "that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all." Unreflectively, they seem to conduct their lives with what Starhawk identifies as "an awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, interactive and infused with moving energies." They do not realize that their priority of attending to the needs of home, children, and family, as

interview sample. I discovered that while 73% of the women interviewed have husbands who do not go to church, 63% of the husbands in the larger sample do not go to church. My interview sample is a bit skewed, but clearly, many more women than men in this age group are connected to our church community.

95 A. Walker, cited in Section 2.2, pps. 28-29.
96 Starhawk, cited in Section 2.2, p. 29.
well as the sometimes demeaned "mere women's work" of the nursery and kitchen, may lead to a better lifestyle than the pursuit of "success" as defined by today's competitive, acquisitive, frenetic society. These women sense, but seldom are able to articulate, that their interconnectedness with others, indeed with all of creation, is what gives the most meaning to their lives. Until they become able to articulate and thereby honour their ability to sense their interconnectedness, they will always be in danger of allowing self-refusal, not self-giving, to direct their lives.

The women in my interview sample all spoke about the church as the place that teaches you how to be good, where you learn what is right and what is wrong. They returned to church partly because they want their children to learn these moral precepts. They are, however, more comfortable with the concept "good values" than the concept "right rules." Their word preference is more than semantic. Living in a culture of diversity, they have come to understand that good people can be found within the context of a wide variety of lifestyles. They are not sure the church shares their understanding. One woman felt her life-style choices "were probably sinful" and the church would condemn her for them. 97 Another spoke about her own and others' assumptions that she would be criticized if she did not put enough money on the offering plate. 98 A woman who had been giving a lot of volunteer time to the church

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97 Ginny, Section 4.3.4, p. 82.
98 Nancy, Section 4.3.5, p. 88.
found that "the more you did in the church, the more was expected." And earlier, when she was talking about some specific expectations, she said, "they would never think of asking a man to do that stuff."^99

The fact that all of the women could define the qualities of a close friend suggests that they have sometimes imagined it would be nice to have one. Some of the most moving parts of my interviews were when these women described how they can, or cannot, speak with someone about what is truly important without being judged; how good it was to find someone to look after them; and how they would like to be able to share their most intimate and spiritual beliefs and longing.

5.2 What Do They Need From the Church?

The Findings chapter reported what the women said about their longings for God and others. They are finding some of what they need in their personal musings, through personal relationships with family and friends or through their participation in the church. At the same time, they appear to have given up hope of finding more than occasional moments of spiritual satisfaction. In this section I examine what their interviews suggest about what they need from the church to help them in their spiritual quest.

^99 Sarah. Section 4.3.5. p. 87.
^100 Sarah. Section 4.3.6. p. 89.
5.2.1 What They Need from the Church: Acceptance

What the women I interviewed want most from the church is to be recognized, accepted, and valued for who they really are. They need a church that can respond to the realities of their lives with flexibility, compassion and respect. Too often, they have experienced a church that feels inflexible, judgmental and unaccepting. Those who carry negative baggage about the church from their childhood and youth need to encounter a tender friendliness when they go to church.

At some point, each of these women outgrew her belief in a two-tiered universe controlled by an anthropomorphic God. They have had varying degrees of success in replacing it with beliefs that are both intellectually and spiritually satisfying. In the midst of their uncertainty, they tend to regard the church as a place that claims to be certain about who God is and what life is all about. One of the first things church members and church leaders need to offer these women is the assurance that none of us, not even the clergy, have complete and definitive answers to life's ultimate questions.

They need to know that it is all right to ask questions and have doubts about the religious concepts they were taught when they were children. They need to sense that they are worthy people even when they do not abide by the rules they have learned to associate with church morality. They need to find support from others for their
struggles and longings. Once they are able to feel that the church has welcomed and accepted them, they may be able to start to receive spiritual nurture.

The women I interviewed also need to know that they are valued and accepted by God. The Gospels of Mark and Luke\(^{101}\) tell of a woman who tentatively and self-consciously, reached out to touch the hem of Jesus’ cloak, in order to be secretly healed. My study suggests that baby boomer women in the United Church today feel a similar need to be careful and tentative about reaching out to God. Unsure of their questions and longings, they need permission to voice their doubts about Jesus' special divinity in order to have a chance to move beyond narrow doctrines that prevent them from meeting the risen Christ. Unsure they will receive a welcome from the One who knows their failings, they need to know that God welcomes and accepts them as they are. They need to sense the grace of God. When they do, they may even be freed to become one of Jesus’ new disciples.

My Quaker upbringing led me to believe that God expects us to be perfect. I did not learn about God’s grace. The ordinary theology of the United Church is a mixture of both “law” and grace. There is the law of moral standards and respected traditions and volunteer work. There is also grace clearly proclaimed in songs and sacraments and stories of God’s love. The fact that ten of the eleven women in my

\(^{101}\) Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48
study reported that they turn to God for help in times of trouble suggests that at some level they believe in a gracious God who understands, guides, and supports them in their lives. They need to have this dim belief reinforced. They need to know that God’s accepting and understanding love lies at the centre of the Christian message.

Because the Bible is a stumbling-block to faith for some of these women, they need not only a more grace-filled concept of God, but a more liberating understanding of the Bible. They need to be given permission from the church to believe that the Bible is a human book, meant to be reflected upon with the mind as well as with faith. They need to know that it is difficult and confusing to try to read the Bible “from cover to cover,” and that they can reach greater understanding when they read the Bible in small sections and reflect upon it with the help of devotional commentaries. They need to be encouraged to use or to continue their use of these commentaries, and even children’s Bibles, if that is what helps them grow in their faith.

For these women, acceptance by the church includes acceptance of their children. Family life is their priority. If the church is to be a place that helps these women feel close to God and one another, it must also become a place that is attractive to their children. Like the maturing boomers Wade Roof describes, these women feel a need for rituals and a coherent set of beliefs to pass on to their children. Most of them say this was their primary reason for coming back to church. And then, with characteristic boomer respect for individuality, they say that they do not expect that
their children necessarily will accept these beliefs and practices of the church once
they are grown. This "open-mindedness" is not surprising when you realize that the
women themselves question and doubt many of the teachings of the church.

It could be argued that accepting such open-mindedness may cater to the baby-
boomers' consumer approach to religion, where they take what they like and discard
what is uncomfortable to them. Although there is potential danger in letting faith
concepts be a merely individual choice, the primary need of this generation of women
is to be free to find a faith that fits. To some extent, the faith perspective of each
generation has been selectively chosen, although in the past it tended to be a cultural
rather than an individual choice. The need for acceptance and freedom to be
themselves is so strong in this baby boomer generation in the United Church, that their
greatest need may be to know that God is with them in their search for authenticity.

An immediate question local churches must face if they want to attract and
minister to baby boomer women is: What is our reason for being? Is it to reach out
and invite people to experience the surprising grace of God or to keep alive culture-
bound traditions of a bygone era?

My research shows clearly that the tendency of local church congregations to
be bound by tradition, external authority, and narrow belief\textsuperscript{102} impinges directly on

\textsuperscript{102} Brown. \textit{Faithstyles}, passim.
the lives of real women who long to find God for their families and for themselves. The women could be helped by the knowledge that the local church is not the whole church, that local theology is not necessarily the theology of the denomination. The church is, in the analogy of one of Jesus’ parables, a field that produces both weeds and wheat. What may have been nourishing wheat for an earlier generation, such as carefully taught morality and doctrines, uplifting ritual, and the gathering of women to work and be friends in the comfort of the kitchen has become weeds for women who want to think for themselves, develop their own styles of religious expression, and find ways to be friends and do volunteer work compatible with the time constraints of their busy lives. A challenging question facing the church at this time is: Can we dare to wait for the weeds to wither and die of their own accord? Women of this searching generation need to feel free to name their discomfort with some of the traditions that nourish the older generation and be helped to find what nourishes them as women in the church.

Like the woman in the gospel story whose illness was a mark of shame, many baby boomer women feel their church finds them unworthy. Since they, therefore, cannot be truly at home in a church which is controlled by an older generation, they come with hesitations, come infrequently, or give up trying to feel at home in the church. A few are successfully creating a space for themselves in the church. It is my opinion that this small hardy group of women has a more mature and gracious faith
than the tradition-bound faithstyle which controls the dominant ethos in their local church.

5.2.2 What They Need from the Church: Quality Relationships

The woman in the gospel story came to Jesus alone. Her medical problem may well have caused her to live with a sense of shame that drove her to lead a lonely life. However, when she reached out to Jesus, she received not only healing, but welcome. Jesus introduced her to the crowd and honoured her for her faith. She was now welcome to become a disciple. She no longer needed to remain hidden. Tradition suggests that she became an important figure in the early church, and that she found new life in the company and comfort of others.

The importance of the quality of personal interactions within the church community cannot be overemphasized. A single positive interaction can make a person feel "this is the place for me." The woman who was greeted by a friendly person on her first day at church continued going to church with her family. Likewise, a single negative interaction can make a person feel "this is not the place for me." The newly separated woman who was told, "I don't trust you with my husband" and the woman who was told that if she was going to put her child in

\[103\] Susan, Section 4.3.4, p. 85.
\[104\] Judy, Section 4.3.5, p. 86.
nursery, she should be a nursery volunteer\textsuperscript{105} no longer go to church. The woman who was told that if she would not make pies maybe she could at least make mashed potatoes,\textsuperscript{106} rarely goes to church anymore.

These women need a church that welcomes their relationship-centered approach to life. These women are looking for fellowship, opportunities to just enjoy being together. This kind of gathering is a long standing tradition in the life of the church, but in these busy times there is a tendency to neglect fellowship/friendship gatherings and give priority to the "more important" business of running the church.

The church also needs to make room for those who express a desire to feel free to come to church simply to sit and be with God, without being asked to do more. They need a church that understands that being with God is as important as working in the Sunday School or attending a business meeting.

Family harmony, and opportunities to do things together as family are a central concern for these women. One woman's prompt response to the question, about what a perfect life would look like, was for herself and her husband to go to church together.\textsuperscript{107} Another, said she had "always been envious" of couples that go to church together.\textsuperscript{108} The women I interviewed need a church that provides opportunities for

\textsuperscript{105} Nancy, Section 4.3.5, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{106} Sarah, Section 4.3.6, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{107} Susan, Section 4.2.2, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{108} Nell, Section 4.2.2, p. 70.
them to come together as individuals and as families for no purpose other than
enjoying the company of one another. If somehow husbands could be encouraged to
join their wives in their church-life, these United Church women would find it easier
to allow the church to help them grow closer to God and one another.

The way the women opened up and talked so freely and intimately with me
suggests that they need opportunities for meaningful interactions with other women.
The testimonies of the few in my study who can actually claim to have close
relationships with other women have affirmed my suspicion that women need safe
places to come together and to share their stories. Through informal contact as they
work and worship in the church, and in the women's spirituality groups, three of the
women are already learning to trust and appreciate other women in the church
community. A fourth woman senses "a pretty close bond" among some of the women
that she is "somewhat a part of." ¹⁰⁹ These women appreciate the experience of
discovering their own realities as they listen to one another's stories. Other women
would likely appreciate similar opportunities to express themselves in the company of
trustworthy friends.

¹⁰⁹ Ginny, Section 4.3.4, p. 83.
5.2.3 What They Need from the Church: Challenge

The women in my study need more than acceptance of their struggles, questions, and questings. They need more than closer relationships within the church, with their families and with trusted friends. If they are to be closer to God and to one another, they need to be challenged to move forward, spiritually, into a deeper, more vital faith. The woman in the gospel story who reached out and touched the fringe of Jesus' robe was healed. She was no longer ill. But Jesus wanted to offer her more than health, and addressed her in words that offered her new life. The baby boomer women in my congregations believe God is there, and in quiet, private ways, sometimes reach out for some divine assistance. I did not find, however, that they expect to receive new life.

As I reflected on these interviews, I realized that although they could name their disappointments, and give voice to their longings, they had no passion to claim a greater wholeness for their lives. I suspect that I am seeing what happens to people who are daily bombarded by a media message that tells them they will never be good enough or big enough or rich enough to be valuable worth while people. Indeed, these women show signs of having succumbed to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness that leads to a raison d'être of simple survival for themselves and their families.  

110 M.J. Leddy, cited in Section 2.3, p. 32.
They need to be challenged with hope. They need to be helped to believe in a greater good than the excitement of accumulating more things, experiences, and skills. They need a church that dares to articulate a different vision for their lives, a vision that invites them to recognize the voice of the Divine Spirit, assuring them that they are significant to God, that their longings for inner peace and significant relationships may indeed be God's way of beckoning them toward new life. These women need a church that will invite them to hear and trust the Divine Voice addressing them through their spiritual longings.

It is my observation that the women I interviewed are caught by crushing expectations when they feel they must work to earn money, provide rich experiences for their children, be supportively present for their husbands, meet demands for community involvement, and perhaps find a little time for themselves. Caught up in all this activity, they are unable to realize that the disappointing restlessness they feel is not so much the result of personal failure as the natural outcome of the false expectations of our society that we should be able to "have it all."

They need a church that has not become so acculturated as to be in bondage to its own historicity. They need a church that can help them critique society's definition of a good life, a church that can help them stand back and evaluate their

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111 J. Kavanagh, cited in Section 2.3, p. 36.
activities in the light of the Christian gospel. As questing, questioning baby boomers, these women feel free to question the values of their parents' generation. Now they need to be prophetically challenged to question their own unexamined assumptions and values.

These women also need to be challenged to extend their concern for others beyond the limits of their own life experiences. They all believe it is important to be helpful and caring, but their sense of responsibility for doing good seems to be restricted to acts of personal kindness. They appear to be unconcerned about, or perhaps unaware of, the problem of unjust institutions and social structures. While some of them participate in worthwhile social endeavours within the local community, they did not name these activities as being vital to their person or their faith. Although the United Church regularly highlights the social justice aspects of Christian living, these women made no mention of this dimension of spirituality.

Studies of baby boomers show that as members of this generation mature, they become concerned with self-giving and develop a sense of responsibility for more than their own well being. Congregations of the United Church, a denomination that includes local advocacy programmes and supports social change in the wider arena, could offer these women many opportunities to become involved in meaningful social

\[112\] W.C.Roof, cited in Section 2.3. p. 34.
action. As they mature, and begin to cast about for opportunities to make a positive difference, these women need a local church community that has the courage to risk controversy as it challenges its members to expand their sense of doing good to include not only charitable acts of kindness but also agitation for social change.

Have the women I interviewed been co-opted by the surrounding culture? Do they sense their exile and yearn for an alternative reality, or are they comfortable and at home with things as they are?

Once again, I found diversity. Those who are at earlier stages in their faith development are most likely to mistake their present reality for home. They are not able to step outside and critique the group norms that define their world view. Their personal life experiences closely resemble those who are described by Douglas Hall as being too comfortable to pay serious attention to any twinges of restlessness they may feel. The women who are at later faith stages know they yearn for more, but it is unlikely that they would say they are living in exile. These women would be helped if they were challenged to think more critically and hopefully about their society and their world so that they might sense their exile and begin to develop and work toward an alternative vision of what the world could be.
"Without a vision, the people will perish," the proverb tells us. In order to feel close to God and to one another, the baby boomer women in our congregations need to accept the hope and the challenge of creating a better way of life, for themselves and for others. The sense of purpose that comes from following Christ’s promptings within them could bring them new wholeness and meaning.

5.3 Concluding Comments

My study revealed that these baby boomer women, in a deep, seldom acknowledged part of their being, seek a gentler and more harmonious way of living. They find it difficult to trust their yearning for a better way, because in our culture the busy, restless, relentless pursuit of personal achievement and acquisitive power are recognized as the right and normal way to live. These women need a church that by its life-style demonstrates a gentler way of life, a way of life that makes it clear that God loves us not for what we do and what we have, but simply because we are. This means that they need a church that is less demanding and more accepting of its members. They need a church that will welcome them and their families with all their questions and doubts and problems. They need a church that can challenge them to give expression to their desire for more harmony in their lives, with a proper balance of work and Sabbath, ambition and relationships.

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Proverbs 29:18, K.J.V.
The church has been given the stories of Jesus healing the sick, comforting the bereaved, and challenging unjust structures. It has also been given stories of Jesus going apart to be with God, spending time with his inner group of disciples, taking time to bless young children, enjoying the fun of a good party. The church is in a position to encourage people like the women in my study to follow Jesus into new, more balanced, more effective, more joyful life.
CHAPTER SIX
6. EXTENDING A WELCOME: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

6.0 Introduction

My own impatience with tradition-bound practices within our local congregations caused me to suspect that my research might lead to the conclusion that we need to abandon our traditional church structures and go out into the highways and byways in order to invite women and their families to encounter authentic, new life in Christ. To my surprise, I found that the first implication of my research was that we need to work on improving, perfecting, and sometimes changing what happens inside our churches on Sunday morning. A second implication was that we need to revive, improve, and create new ways for the women and their families to gather together as friends, both in ongoing groups and for special events.

These implications suggest that we need to appropriate and update the venue and programmes of the existing church. The church is full of rich possibilities for providing spiritual and educational nurture and challenge to people of all ages. I have concluded that it would not be helpful to abandon local churches activities. At the same time, we must be willing to learn to worship and work in new and different ways.
6.1 Sunday Morning

Meaghan Jones\textsuperscript{114} is married and has two children: Justin, who is four years old, and Krystal, who is almost two. Meaghan was raised Roman Catholic. When she and her husband Tim were married they had an unpleasant confrontation with the priest because they were already living together and Tim was not Catholic. They ended up being married in their backyard by a United Church minister. Meaghan still goes to the Roman Catholic church on Christmas Eve because she loves the music and the candlelight and the beautiful Christmas story. She thought about having the children baptized, but could not face the possibility of another confrontation with the priest. Now that the children are no longer babies (Justin will be starting school in the fall), she wonders if she should start taking them to church. She has good memories of the United Church minister who married them and of a Moms and Tots programme at the United Church. She decides to take the kids to the United Church next Sunday morning and see what it is like.

If they receive a warm welcome, if the children are happy in Sunday School and nursery, if the worship service seems intelligent and inviting, she probably will return. If she or the children have a cold and uncomfortable experience, they probably will never return.

\textsuperscript{114} Meaghan Jones is not a real person, but is a realistic composite of baby boomer women who come to our churches.
Sunday morning may be the most important time segment in the life of local church congregations. This is when most people make their first attempt to return or have their first contact with church. There are more people at church on Sunday morning than at any other time of the week. Women who go at a "dead run" all week would like to be able to look forward to Sunday worship as "that little bit of time when nobody demands anything of you, and the sermon helps you check yourself." They need to feel it is acceptable to do that much and nothing more.

Many local churches are judged on the basis of what people experience in them on Sunday morning. Sometimes superficial criteria are used, such as whether or not the minister is an amusing preacher or the choir has high quality singers. However, anyone who is going to church simply to be entertained will not stay long because our churches do not have the resources to compete with the entertainment industry.

Usually, people have deeper reasons for coming to church. The women in my study have come to church because they are seeking wholesome community and moral guidance for their children, and spiritual and emotional support for themselves. What they meet as they enter the church is important. A friendly greeting is a good start. Attractively displayed pamphlets in the narthex, including daily devotional Bible study guides, fliers that tell about the local church, and information about the mission

\[115\] Diane, Section 4.3.4. p.85.
projects of the wider church can help newcomers feel less like a stranger. An inviting library with books for both children and adults, and a knowledgeable person stationed near it to answer questions about available titles and check-out procedures would also be helpful.

The Sunday morning atmosphere and activities need to be inclusive and welcoming. Parents are looking for Sunday School programmes that are led by adults who treat the children with respect and kindness. In the worship service, they need to hear prayers that express the doubts and longings of their hearts, and sermons that introduce them to a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the Bible. They come seeking words that assure them of God’s gracious love. They are enriched by words that challenge them to become instruments of that love. They want to be able to learn new hymns with tunes that set toes tapping, and to sing “golden oldies” that represent the faith statements of many generations. They will enjoy children’s moments that respect the gifts and interests of their children and are filled with stories about the love of God, and the goodness of Jesus, and the kindness God invites us to show to one another. They will keep coming back if they find that the Sunday morning programmes are pleasing to their children. They will keep coming back if what they find on Sunday morning touches their own imaginations and heartstrings.

Other things can happen on Sunday morning besides Sunday School and the standard worship service. The sermon could be given by guest church workers who
tell about their efforts on behalf of campesinos in Latin America or substance abusers on inner-city streets, or refugees in war-torn countries. During these services, members of the congregation could learn about opportunities to respond to the church's Urgent Action letter writing requests, an opportunity to be a voice of Christian conscience speaking to government officials throughout the world.

Intergenerational and interactive styles of worship meet the needs and longings of some. Sometimes children and youth could lead the service. There could be a service of mostly music. Coffee hour before or after church works well for some, while others prefer to come for Sunday School and worship only. In many churches 11:00 a.m. seems to be the sacred worship hour. Busy families may prefer an earlier time for worship.\textsuperscript{116} It is essential that leaders of existing church committees learn ways of welcoming newcomers other than trying to "sign them up" for their next work project.

These are just a few suggestions about how churches might welcome, teach, support and challenge baby boomers on Sunday morning. There is a tendency in church leaders to defer to the demands of members of the dominant \textit{community} faithstyle congregation who want to cling to a worship style created for passive,

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{116} Twenty-three of the fifty-six women (50\%) who returned questionnaires in the first part of this research project indicated that they would prefer a different hour of worship. Eight of the fifty-six (14\%) indicated they like the present hour.
\end{footnote}
disembodied listeners, sing only familiar old hymns, and hear messages that confirm what they already know.\(^{117}\) Defference of this sort is unwise and unhelpful. If we want to attract people like the baby boomer women I interviewed, we must begin to recognize that Sunday morning is the golden opportunity of the church week. It behooves us to dare to be innovative and to plan our Sunday morning programmes with a carefulness that considers the diversity of family situations, faith stages, and needs and longings present in the body of people who attend, rather than carry on with the patterns and traditions of an earlier generation.

6.2 Ongoing Programmes

It became clear to me as I read and coded the interview transcripts that the women in my study need to feel free to express their theological and doctrinal doubts. This new understanding was fresh in my mind as I went off to Thursday morning Bible study where a group of elderly women regularly gather. The passage that was being read and discussed on this particular day was the Easter story. I wondered if the women in this group ever wanted to express doctrinal doubts. I felt a bit nervous as I took a deep breath and applied my research findings, by asking, “Do you believe in the bodily resurrection?” There was a stunned silence.

\(^{117}\) Brown, *Faithstyles.*
Then a seventy-five year old granddaughter of a Presbyterian minister answered, “Well, that’s kind of central to the Christian faith, isn’t it?”

“Not everyone thinks so,” I replied.

“Well, I’ve never been able to really believe the Easter story,” an eighty-one year old, sitting to my right, said quietly under her breath.

A moment later, an eighty-five year old to my left remarked, “Neither have I, not really.”

Apparently these women, some of whom had been meeting together for Bible study for over forty years, had felt it was not permissible to admit that they had questions about the literal truth of the Easter story. In the discussion that followed their first tentative admissions, they did not try to decide what the historical truth is. Instead, they talked about the hope they have found in the story and the variety of ways it could be understood. Later, several of the women who had taken part in that discussion came to me individually to tell me how much it had meant to them. The deepest needs of these older women may be the same as the needs of the women in my study.

Clearly, baby boomer women could be helped by a church that gave them an opportunity to be part of an ongoing study group where they are encouraged to
develop trust and honestly share their thoughts and struggles with one another.\textsuperscript{118}

Two such “spirituality groups” for younger women presently exist at Knox-Sutton and Virginia. They meet monthly. Because they encourage the women to be intimate and share confidences, membership in them is restricted to no more than ten per group. Meeting in one another’s homes instead of at the church helps to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere. The meetings begin with a prayer, followed by a check-in time that is framed by a question such as, ”What is the best thing that has happened in your life since we last met?” or ”What did you have to do just before you came to make it possible to get to this meeting?” Usually, check-in takes ten to fifteen minutes. Occasionally check-in becomes the evening’s primary agenda when, for instance, one of the women is experiencing a major disruption in her life and needs understanding and support from her friends. Normally, after the check-in, the women do an individual exercise such as praying with a scripture passage, or paraphrasing a psalm, or using their non-dominant hand to draw or write a response to a Bible passage. This individual work takes about a half-hour. They then come back together and talk about what they did and learned in the individual work. Everyone has the right to say nothing, if that is what feels most comfortable. Toward the end of the evening, they

\textsuperscript{118} Writing about questing, questioning individualists (Stage 4 Individuative-Reflective) James Fowler, says, ”It is imperative that we develop groups where persons . . . can find trustworthy community with peers. We need to provide circles where the armor of their defenses can be ventilated and where they can submit their images of self to one another — and the gospel — for correction.” James Fowler, \textit{Faith Development and Pastoral Care}, 91-92.
exchange information about books they have found helpful, or they may play a favourite recorded song for the others to hear. At each meeting, the women are given a “homework” journal assignment that they can choose to do or not. They close with prayer, followed by refreshments and informal conversation.

These groups are designed not to give women answers but to give them an opportunity to encourage one another in their search for answers. They are semi-structured, with an agenda that can guide the evening’s activities, or be set aside if it becomes apparent that it is best to give priority to something else. The trust level in the groups is high. The women phone one another between meetings to share their joys and concerns.

Spirituality groups of this sort may well be the seedlings of women church within our local congregations. Not long ago, some of the women from a spirituality group came to me and asked what would happen if they started having a different kind of Sunday worship, where they sat in a circle and gave everyone a chance to participate. I will encourage and support their efforts to become a “church within the church.”

The two women in my study who belong to a spirituality group named it as a significant part of their church experience. My experience in establishing the two existing groups and my analysis of the interview transcripts tell me that baby boomer women in our congregations need to belong to this sort of study-support-sharing
group far more than they need to belong to a women's group that organizes church suppers, and bake-sale fund-raisers.¹¹⁹

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that small groups of this sort will become the "church within the church" as we move into the twenty-first century.¹²⁰ Commonplace features of modern life such as being separated from extended families, commuting long distances to work, and having almost no leisure time can lead to feelings of purposeless isolation and loneliness. Churches that are attracting new, younger people, are putting effort into establishing ongoing, informal, lay-led, small groups.

In addition to spirituality and study interest groups, it might be helpful for the church to become involved in establishing small support groups for women with special interests or circumstances, such as for those who are going through a separation or divorce, for parents of pre-schoolers, or for parents of teenagers. These groups could follow a format similar to that of the women's spirituality groups.

In response to the women's desire to do things together as a family, the church might organize small, ongoing family cluster groups. Based on children's ages, or

¹¹⁹ Instead of naturally expecting women's groups to take responsibility for food preparation activities, our churches could establish a kitchen committee of men and women and youth who like to cook and work together in a kitchen.

¹²⁰ e.g. Bill Easum, Dancing With Dinosaurs, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) and Thomas G. Bandy, Turning the Laity Loose, (Toronto: Self Published, 1996).
geographic location, these groups could provide opportunities for the whole family to come together on a regular basis to have a picnic and play ball, or to play board games or miniature golf. If these family activities were successful in creating friendships, the adults might then arrange to get together sometimes without the children. Once a year, all family cluster groups within the church might come together for a social evening such as a potluck supper skit night.

6.3 Special Events

The church could help baby boomer women feel closer to God and one another by organizing and facilitating relevant, appropriate ongoing study, support, and fellowship groups. There are also special one-time events that could be helpful to these women.

Last fall, the Sunday School teachers from the Knox Church came together for a day long retreat at the Eaglewood Camp in nearby Pefferlaw. The retreat was led by a minister from outside our congregation. The snacks and noon-time meal were provided and served by a caterer from outside the church at no cost to the teachers. The day’s activities included Bible reading, a walk in the woods, small and large group discussion, and playing/creating with clay.

The motivation for this retreat came from recognizing that the teachers give so much to others, maybe the church could give something back. The retreat location was carefully chosen. It could not be held at the church because that is where the
teachers work, and being in the church building might put them in a task-oriented frame of mind. It was held in a place of quiet, natural beauty so the teachers could have the chance to spend some time “getting back to nature.” An outside facilitator was chosen so that all the teachers could just relax and enjoy the day and not feel responsible for making it happen. And we did not want them to have to plan and make and serve the food.

This was to be a day of personal nurture and inner reflection. There was to be no talk about lessons plans or ordering curricula and crayons. And it worked! Ten of the fourteen teachers found time in their busy schedules, found baby-sitters for their children, and found courage to drive through the season’s first surprise snowfall to be together in this day apart. They laughed and relaxed together. They talked openly about their faith. They played in the snow. They prayed aloud and ate good food, and at the end of the day knew one another better than they might have done from six months of sitting beside each other at church or deciding who should prepare next Sunday’s craft project.

Baby boomer women in our congregations are hungry for moments of serenity and peace and quiet. The mere act of getting away to a different physical setting can give a person a whole new perspective. Add to this setting a programme which gently invites them to reflect on what they think God wants for them, and something as
simple as a one-day retreat can become a cherished memory to hang onto in the midst of life’s crushing busyness.

Local churches could develop a variety of weekend or day long retreats for women only, for men only, for couples, for teens, and for families within the congregation. It is also important to encourage people to go to events sponsored by the wider church. Many United Church women have been deeply challenged and inspired by the bi-annual Ontario Women’s Conference. United Church conference centres such as Five Oaks and Naramata offer programmes that enrich the lives of individuals and congregations. A few years ago, a farm woman on my settlement charge went to Five Oaks for a weekend program on Transforming Bible Study with June and Walter Wink. She came home a transformed person. At the time of this writing, she is preparing for ordered ministry as a student at the Vancouver School of Theology.

Some special events can be held right at the church. Family potluck meals and games nights at the church could meet part of the women’s desire to have the whole family go to church together. Programmes for their children are also important to baby boomer women. The children’s choirs at Knox-Sutton have exposed many children in our community to Christian stories and values, and have enticed their parents to go to church on the Sundays when the children sing. Some families, now active, originally came for this reason. The Vacation Bible School and Professional Activity Day
programmes attract large numbers of children. The parents of many of these children have no other association with the church, but their children’s enthusiasm helps them have positive feeling about the church, and one day, like the fictional Meaghan at the beginning of this chapter, they may decide to give the church a try.

6.4 Concluding Comments

The baby boomer women in our congregations need programmes that are sensitive and responsive to their particular life-styles and faith stages. They need a warm welcome that allows them to do as little or as much as they comfortably can. They need programmes that bring their families into the church. They need opportunities, in small on-going groups, and at special one-time events, to share their yearnings and their doubts as they seek to live toward a new vision that allows them to grow ever closer to God and to one another.

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121 This year’s V.B.S. had an enrolment of 112. The P.A. days have had enrolments as high as 60.
Appendix A: Thesis Proposal

TORONTO SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

SPIRITUALITY, TODAY'S WOMEN, AND THE UNITED CHURCH
IS THERE COMMON-GROUND?

A DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROPOSAL

August 1994

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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING GROUP REPRESENTATIVE:
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1 Background and Context of Applied Research Thesis

Personal History

Two distinct contexts defined my belief system as I was growing up. The first was the post war optimism and sense of superiority of white middle-class America. The second was the prophetic spirituality of the Society of Friends (Quakers).

The first context taught me that I was to be pretty and subservient, that my role in life was to find a man and delight in making him happy and so help him to do important work in the world. In this way, I was told, I myself would be doing important work, even if only indirectly.

The Society of Friends taught me that "there is that of God in everyone", whatever their age, gender, race, nationality or education. The sense of both the nearness of God and my personal responsibility to live according to the "promptings of the Spirit" have been with me since my earliest memories.

Quaker beliefs about the intrinsic worth of all people, affect the way they worship, and the way they conduct business. The Society of Friends makes no distinction between clergy and laypeople. For instance, I first responded to a call to vocal ministry in meeting for worship when I was twelve years old. My words were welcomed and encouraged. Believing that the Spirit of God can guide groups as well as individuals, decisions in Quaker business meetings are made according to a "sense of the meeting". This means that decisions are made by consensus, rather than by a majority vote or episcopal decree. Children, women and men can participate in Quaker business meetings.

As I approached adulthood, the conflicting value systems of these two contexts began to battle within me. I decided I preferred the prophetic Quaker way to the affluent middle-class way. In the company of many other 60's youth, I "dropped out". Over the next couple of decades I experienced many faces of counterculture life, from itinerant vagabond to inner city tenement dweller to rural commune idealist to single welfare mom. I learned to enjoy a variety of life-styles. I learned there is a price to pay for defying the norms of the prevailing culture. I learned what it means to be a woman alone with children to support. My economic struggles led me back into universities and middle-class circles.

The Quaker stories of my childhood had included accounts of outspoken women who believed they were called to "speak truth to power". As we emerged from some of the justice and liberation struggles of the sixties, I began to realize that because I was a woman, I was in fact, a disadvantaged person. Since that time, a growing feminist awareness has coloured all my decisions. I became a teacher, and then a teacher administrator in the anti-poverty Headstart programme. I moved to Canada, and became a college instructor, training students to be social service and child day care workers. In my work, I have always felt a special commitment to women and children, especially women and children living in poverty.
My spiritual journey has been eclectic. Needing to be part of a worshipping community, I started to attend the local United Church. The Society of Friends might be called an alternative sect within the Christian tradition, a group set apart for the purpose of calling an erring society back to the ways of God. On the other hand, from my perspective the United Church, almost seemed like the state church of English Canada. I knew that the United Church was a church of Canada's white middle class, but I was living in the interior of British Columbia and it seemed to be the best option available.

No one could have been more surprised than I was when I decided to go to theology school to take a course of study that might lead to ministry in the United Church of Canada. I assumed that if I were ordained, it would be to some special ministry with women. I was ordained, and for the past seven years my ministry has been with middle class people in mainstream United Churches.

Ironically, I had returned to the middle-class context I once sought to escape. Appearances to the contrary, however, I do not subscribe to the values of the middle class. Because of my intimate connection with middle-class life, I believe I have a good understanding of the fears, pressures and limitations middle-class women experience. Because I have stepped outside the middle class, I believe I have a message of hopeful alternatives to bring to middle-class women. I bring a bias some will welcome and some will find threatening. I believe my bias is rooted in Quaker/Christian spirituality that recognizes all persons to be of equal importance to our loving God.

**Ministry Context**

Two years ago, my husband and I were called to be the ministry team for the Sutton West Virginia Pastoral Charge. We share ministerial tasks, such as preaching, youth work, pastoral care and group leadership. He takes primary responsibility for administrative tasks, while I have primary responsibility for the Sunday School programmes.

The town of Georgina, which includes Sutton and Virginia, is north of Toronto on the south shore of Lake Simcoe. It is a community that has gone through a time of transition. Fifty years ago, it was primarily a farming community and a summer resort for affluent Torontonians. Today it is primarily a commuter/resort community.

The pastoral charge includes two preaching points. Virginia is the country church. Its members are farmers, retirees, vacationers, and skilled or semi-skilled public and private sector workers. The worshipping atmosphere at Virginia is informal, warm and welcoming to people of all ages and backgrounds. Average Sunday attendance is fifty, and those fifty are essentially the same people each Sunday. Knox, Sutton is the town church. Its membership includes only a few farmers, and many active or retired professionals and businesspeople. The worshipping atmosphere is beautiful, and more formal than at Virginia. Average Sunday attendance is 100. Fifty percent of those present on a given Sunday, attend regularly. The other fifty percent is a rotating population. This means that the total number of people involved in the Knox church is considerably higher than the total number involved at Virginia.
Like most United Church congregations, members of our congregations are white and middle-class. Seventy-five percent of the people in our churches who are under fifty are members of two parent, first marriage families. In seventy percent of these families, both the husband and the wife work outside the home. Less than twenty-five percent of our members have extended families living nearby to help with babysitting and provide family fellowship.  

Older women form an important part of the backbone of both our churches. There are three United Church Women (U.C.W.) units at the Knox Church. Most of the members of two of the units are over seventy. The youngest women in the third unit are over forty. The Virginia Church has one U.C.W. unit. Nicknamed "The Golden Oldies", members of this unit are all over sixty.  

2. Statement of the Research Problem  

The experience of families living in a commuting suburban context is different from the experience of farm families living in a rural context. The context of the younger women in our congregations is different from that of their mothers and grandmothers.  

For many of the older women, the friendships, sense of belonging, and purpose they found in their U.C.W. units are cherished, core elements in their lives. For many, U.C.W. functions were their primary social activity, one of the only opportunities they had to interact with anyone besides members of their family.  

Today, seventy percent of the women of our congregations who have not reached retirement age work outside the home. They have many opportunities to interact with others. Some, when they have "time off", want simply to relax or spend time with their families. For those who are looking for something more to do, there is a seemingly infinite array of entertainment, sports, service, or travel possibilities. The church is one choice among many.  

My practice in ministry and conversations with members of my Ministry Base Group suggest three sets of questions that women may ask when choosing whether or not the church is a place where they want to spend their limited free time.  

1. What's in it for me and my family?  
   Is it child oriented?  
   Is it personally affirming/supportive/challenging?  
   Is it socially acceptable to my peer group?  
   Is it fun and exciting?  
   Does it provide a sense of community?  

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122 The women in my Ministry Base Group think this isolation from the support of extended families is a key factor in today's family life-styles, and in their relationship to the church and church activities.
2. **Is it a good organization to give time to?**
   - Does it engage in service to the community?
   - Does it and its personnel have integrity?
   - Is it tolerant of other faiths and lifestyles?
   - Does it care about people of all ages?

3. **Does it help me know and serve God?**
   - Does it help me recognize God active in my life?
   - Does it help me discern what it is that God is calling me to do?
   - Is it a community of people seeking to serve God?
   - Are Christian love, compassion, and commitment to justice evident in this group of people?  

   In my action in ministry, I want to identify the spiritual aspirations and longings of women in our church communities. My research will focus on women born between 1950 and 1960. There are some sixty women in this age category whose names appear on the rolls of our two congregations. Some of these women currently work for the church in jobs which range from elder to coffee server to Sunday School teacher to choir member to usher. Some send their children to church, and appear only when their child's choir is singing. Some send their children, but never attend any church functions themselves. Some continue to think of themselves as church members but I have never met them or their families. In my research, I plan to involve a cross section of these women. Specifically, by listening to them tell their own stories, I will seek answers to the question:

   **WHAT DO THE WOMEN OF OUR CHURCH COMMUNITIES WHO WERE BORN BETWEEN 1950 AND 1960 NEED TO HELP THEM FEEL MORE CONNECTED TO GOD AND TO ONE ANOTHER?**

   I cannot predict what I will learn as I interact with these women. I hope my research will open me to new insights and understandings. At the same time, I acknowledge from my experience in both my personal and professional life, I have come to believe that everyone needs supportive forgiving friends. My experience has also taught me that the way we can learn to be supportive forgiving friends is to open our minds and hearts to the God we have glimpsed in Jesus. Therefore, I believe that the greatest gift I can offer anyone is the invitation to join me in searching for roads that lead to the twin destination of loving God and loving one another. The research question I intend to explore in this study is central to the purpose of both my ministry and my life.

   In this study, I am choosing to work with women because I believe we have only just begun to recognize the unique wisdom that is present in women. I am choosing to work with women because I think it is time for broader church recognition of women's reality and more

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123 While all three sets of questions are important, the third is the one that distinguishes the church from other service, entertainment and sports options available to Canadian middle class women.
comprehensive church response to women's needs. I am choosing to work with women because I believe women are in the forefront of developing new paradigms for community interactions, and because I believe these new ways of being together could breathe fresh life and hope into our church communities.

3. Theoretical Framework

Women's Experience and Women's Spirituality

"Though we see the same world, we see it through different eyes."

- Virginia Woolf (in Three Guineas)

Traditionally, women in the United Church of Canada worked tirelessly as cooks, Sunday school teachers, flower arrangers, and at fund raising events. Men sat on boards that determined church policy. Unmarried women served as deaconesses - teaching children at home and abroad, or caring for the sick or elderly - but when a woman married, she had to renounce her deaconess status. Women did much of the important work of the church, but they were not involved in the governing bodies of the church.

On the surface much change has occurred. While a few rural congregations still have only male elders, trustees and ushers, in the past 15-20 years, women have begun to serve on church boards as well as in church kitchens. At our theology schools, there are often more women than men preparing for ordered ministry. Women hold important administrative positions, and twice women have been elected to the office of church moderator.

In spite of these changes, in my daily life as a feminist woman in ministry in the United Church of Canada I experience a lot of tension. Patriarchal attitudes and hierarchical decision-making processes still tend to dominate. Many capable church women still present themselves and their ideas with placating and self-effacing apologies.

The storm of controversy the November '93 Re-imagining Conference in Minneapolis unleashed in mainline North American churches indicates that there are significantly powerful conservative factions within the church that have not accepted women as full and equal partners. As long as women accept men's definitions of reality, they are welcome to work in the

124 Men have begun to enter the kitchens of our churches only in the last 3-5 years.

125 This office has a two year term and is the most high profile position in our denomination.

126 In November 1993 a group of 2200 Christian women and 83 Christian men from around the world, met to celebrate the Church's Ecumenical Decade in Solidarity with Women and to begin working together to re-imagine God, Jesus, Church and community. The Conference lifted up the biblical Sophia as one important but neglected image of the Divine One. As a result, members of the United Church's Renewal Fellowship joined conservative factions in other denominations in issuing a statement asking participants to "renounce the idolatrous worship, false teachings, and syncretism of the Re-imagining Conference," flatly stating that "the Christian faith is a gift of God and not a human invention to be re-formulated or re-imagined."
church; but when women seek to be included in the important work of naming reality, churchmen become threatened, and cry "Heresy!".

I do not know if women are born morally and spiritually different from men. I believe we cannot disengage biological influences from socio-cultural influences. However, we can observe gender-related tendencies within a given culture. For instance, L. Woodhead makes the very important observation that women in our culture are valued for their ability to establish loving relationships, while men are valued for their individual achievements, and may even be looked down on for taking personal relationships too seriously.

A number of feminist theologians suggest that this sort of difference in cultural expectations causes women and men to have different spiritual understandings. In general, women's spirituality is named as a spirituality of immanence, that is concerned with our day to day creaturely experiences; men's spirituality is named as a spirituality of estrangement, that is dualistic and pits body against spirit. Starhawk speaks about these differences in terms of forms of consciousness. She writes

_Estrangement_ permeates our society so strongly that to us it seems to be consciousness itself. Even the language for other possibilities has disappeared or been deliberately twisted. Yet another form of consciousness is possible... This is the consciousness I call immanence — the awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, interacting, and infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance.

Certainly women's experience is different from men's. However, I think we have to be careful about assuming we therefore know the form and content of women's spiritual experience; or that we can define the ways women's spirituality is different from men's spirituality. In the introduction to their book that records the faith-life stories of women in the church, Gillespie and Mathews tell us that at this particular time in history, we are witnessing many attempts to clarify and articulate women's spirituality. They go on to say:

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127 See E. Dodson Gray, "Interpreting the Furor over the Re-Imagining Conference", Women's Concerns, (Summer 1994), 5-7.


129 Woodhead in Elwes says women's spirituality "is not about the regulation of the competing demands of separated individuals but about the recognition of our mutual interdependence and responsibility for one another." (p.64). R. Coll in Christianity and Feminism in Conversation (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994) says women's spirituality "has more to do with being embodied spirits than with being enspirited bodies" (p.174). U. King in Women and Spirituality (University Park, Penn: Penn State University Press, 1993) "feminist spirituality is about an integral, holistic dynamic force in human life and affairs...it interweaves themes of search, promise and quest for wholeness and healing in a world torn asunder." (p. 6)

What seems significant and valuable is the process, the journey — how women live out their spiritual lives — rather than a product, a new theology to package and market . . . We do not intend to define women's spirituality for them, in imitation of patriarchy.\(^\text{131}\)

While there are women in our churches who report satisfaction with the way things are, and counsel the wisdom of working patiently with the men; a growing number of us are impatient with the fact that the rituals of our worship services and the content of our theological precepts were created by men. For us, it is perfectly reasonable to suggest that we need a place of our own: a kind of worshipping community that Sandra Schneiders describes as a place where women can come together for story-sharing, analysis, strategizing, political action, and ritual that is comfortable to women.\(^\text{132}\) We welcome Carol Christ's argument that because we women have not told our own stories, we have been deprived of the opportunity to understand the meaning of our experiences. We are strengthened and encouraged by her observation that:

> the dialectic between experiencing and shaping experience by story telling has not been in our own hands . . . the discovery and recovery of women's experiences will not be accomplished overnight . . . We are in a time for ripening . . . Not only time, but also community is required to rediscover our experience.\(^\text{133}\)

I believe that we women need some time alone together to begin to find our own voices. Finding our own voices will help us begin to dare to trust our own experience, and to stop relying on men to tell us who we are.\(^\text{134}\)

**Spirituality in the Baby Boomer Context**

The women in my target group are part of the baby boomer generation. Roughly speaking, baby boomers are North Americans who were born between 1945 and 1960. They have lived through the upheavals of the 60's. They have learned to question old ways and feel free to seek new ways. They are individualists in a context that defines maturity as the ability to separate and differentiate. They are consumers in a context that promises personal fulfillment through the acquisition of more things and more experiences. They are materially comfortable.


\(^{134}\) Some of the women in my Ministry Base Group disagree with me. "Some of us," they report, "have already found our voices."
Baby boomers' freedom to explore new ways could help create a new and brighter world. Baby Boomers' commitment to individualistic pursuits could create a culture of lonely alienated individuals.135

Sometimes I feel like I am ministering to people who live behind locked doors, both literally and metaphorically. By contrast, I imagine the ministry of someone like Mother Teresa, with people who have no doors to lock. The needs of the people she is with are apparent. This one needs a cool drink, that one needs a gentle touch or a kind word. The baby boomers of my congregations are not physically impoverished, but I believe many are spiritually impoverished. They themselves might disagree with me. They may experience a certain restlessness, a certain feeling of emptiness or lack of meaning, but I think most would resist calling it a serious problem. Douglas Hall comments on this resistance by saying that those who are in good health, with money in the bank, a promising career, and two lovely children are not likely to cry out for help, forgiveness, or salvation.136

My Quaker roots tell me that the church is supposed to be a group set apart for the purpose of calling an erring society back to the ways of God. With this background, I find it easy to agree with Walter Brueggemann when he suggests that many middle-class people in today's mainline churches, co-opted by the values of the surrounding culture, do not sense their exile. Instead, they have fooled themselves into thinking the present arrangement is home. He goes on to say,

The central task of ministry is the formation of a community with an alternative, liberated imagination that has the courage and the freedom to act in a different vision and a different perception of reality.137

There is, of course, positive potential in the acquisitive individualism of baby boomers. As I've already noted, they have learned to question old ways and feel free to seek new ways. This suggests to me that baby boomers are already seeking to find a different vision. They are discriminating consumers. Just as they might sample new foods set out in an open air market, they are prepared to sample new religions and spiritualities. If it fits, if it works for them, they stay to taste more. If they do not like it, they move on.

In a survey conducted in the mid-eighties, Reginald Bibby found that Canadians regard the church as one more consumer product that can meet their needs, but is mostly tangential to their lives. And yet, he found that there was no decline in the inclination of both adults and teenagers to raise the so-called "ultimate questions" concerning life and death.138


136 D.J. Hall, Thinking The Faith (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) p. 169


Wade Clark Roof reports that many baby boomers have decided that religion as it is found in churches is spiritually empty. But he says that as they mature, the quest of baby boomers is more than a quest for individual contentment. Increasingly, they are moving toward a concern for giving of self. They are acknowledging the importance of both needs and responsibilities.139

All this suggests to me that baby boomers in our congregations are fertile ground for spiritual renewal and a rediscovery of gospel concerns. However, the church needs to listen to their concerns and be prepared to meet them in their own context. The old ways that worked 25 or 50 or 100 years ago belong to a different context.

4. Assumptions Operative in this Study

My personal observations, life experience, conversations and reading, have led to the following assumptions.

Women want their lives to have meaning beyond momentary pleasure. They want to have honest, supportive, forgiving friends. They want to be honest, supportive, forgiving friends. They want to experience God active in their lives.

Affluence and the comfort it provides can isolate women from their deepest yearnings. The hyperindividualism of North American culture isolates women from one another. Many middle-class women who depend on their husbands' jobs for economic and social status have low self esteem, because they believe they should be content to live vicariously through the accomplishments of their husbands and children.

The Christian church has a distinct message and a purpose that transcends culture, and therefore must not be driven by the surrounding culture. On the other hand, it is essential for the church to find ways to respond to the people's lived realities. A two-way conversation between 90's women and the church is needed.

The church, in spite of its patriarchal history, can become a place that helps women recognize and respond to God, and a place that provides a sense of Christian community. This cannot be done by reviving the old ways that worked in the heyday of the U.C.W. New ways for women to be together must be explored.

Paying attention to where my story interfaces with the stories of women participating in this ministry project is an important part of my research methodology. In my research, I will intentionally bring my personality, attitudes and life experience into the interviewing process, and into my analysis of the data I receive.

5. Research Methodology

Paolo Freire maintains that it is important to meet people where they are, and engage in a dialogue which instructs and informs all persons of the dialogue. He says that true dialogue must be rooted in love and faith in others and hope for continuing growth. It is in this spirit of respectful dialogue, that I aspire to conduct my research.

Laurent Daloz contends that given a chance to really listen to themselves, adults can discover the knowledge that exists inside them, and that it is the role of the mentor/educator to help a person listen to themselves, and to help them map out their own path toward greater knowledge. He says that this process involves a lot of listening to a person's story. I am a firm believer in the power of story. In my research, I will encourage women to tell their stories. I will listen for the feelings and look for the patterns that lie buried in their stories.

I will gather data through an interactive process, which acknowledges my biases and assumptions, while attempting to dispassionately receive the thoughts and perspectives of the people I am interviewing. Following the research techniques developed by Glaser and Strauss, and Kirby and McKenna, I will analyze data as it is received, looking first for simple content fragments, then for developing patterns, then for emerging categories. I will try to begin to develop theories, only after these categories become saturated, i.e. after additional data no longer will provides significant new information. Throughout the process, I will monitor both my research process and the content of the research with a willingness to change or refine the process as a result of what I learn from my analysis and reflection.

6. Action in Ministry

In September, 1994, I will deliver a survey questionnaire along with a covering letter to each of the women in this age group. I will return to pick up completed surveys within a week of delivering them.

From the returned questionnaires, I will analyse the data received, looking for emerging patterns, and similarities and dissimilarities in the women's circumstances and attitudes. I will

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141 I see many similarities between the role of mentor/educator and research interviewer. Both positions provide opportunities for helping others discover the knowledge that exists within them.

142 L. Daloz, Effective Teaching and Mentoring (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1987).


144 S. Kirby and K. McKenna, Experience, Research, Social Change (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1989)
then choose individual women to interview in depth. I will be looking for women who are willing to participate in the project and who represent different family situations, economic status, work histories, levels and length of church involvement, and educational and religious backgrounds.  

I will interview the women in their homes. The initial interview conversations will last about two hours, and will be recorded on audio tape. Immediately after each interview, I will write down my personal thoughts, feelings, and impressions about the process and about what was said, both in the formal interview and in the informal remarks made before and after the interview. I will transcribe the full text of the interview before conducting a second interview.

Depending on what patterns emerge from this first set of interviews, I may need to interview some or all of the women a second time; or I may think it wise to have some or all of the women come together for a group interview.

The purpose of these interviews will be to identify the spiritual aspirations and longings of the women interviewed, and to determine what, if anything, they have in common with one another.

7. Risks and Limitations

My findings may be too scattered and diverse to point to any generalities or conclusions.

There is the possibility that some of the people in our churches will be disappointed in the results of my study.

There is the possibility I will be disappointed with the results of my study.

Even if I reach some interesting conclusions, it may be difficult to find any practical applications for these conclusions.

145 I will start with a sample of ten women, see what patterns and categories emerge, and whether ten responses are enough to saturate the emerging categories. I may find a sample of eight saturates the categories. I may need to interview more than ten women.
This study could suggest ways the church might help women in our church community reach wise and respond to God's presence and active in their lives.

This study could provide the wider church with a valuable base line for new directions and activities for women in our congregations.

This study might produce some new insights concerning the spiritual needs and desires of women, girls, women and their families.

In our local churches, this research could give rise to new and relevant programming for women participating in this study may benefit from taking time to reflect on their experience.
Appendix A.1: Questionnaire

TODAY'S WOMEN AND THE UNITED CHURCH
A Survey for S. Sheldon's Doctor of Ministry Project at the Sutton Virginia Pastoral Charge
(Confidentiality is important. Only the researcher has access to the respondents' code.
No one, not even the researcher, will know individuals' identities as data is being processed.)

Code # ___________ Year of Birth __________________________ Marital Status ________

How many years have you been affiliated with Virginia/Knox? ______

Frequency of attendance at Worship Services:
____ Three or more times a month
____ Once a month
____ Six to ten times a year
____ Once or twice a year
____ I do not attend
____ Other

When I go to church, I go with
____ My spouse
____ My school age children
____ My preschool children
____ My teenage children
____ A friend
____ A neighbour
____ Other (please specify:__________________________

The church activities I am a part of, include
____ Session
____ Stewards
____ Church Council
____ Presbytery
____ U.C.W.
____ Outreach
____ Sunday School
____ Christian Development
____ Choir
____ Bible Study
____ Ushers
____ Library
____ Other (please specify:__________________________

If you do attend worship services at our church, answer this question: I go to church because
____ I want my children to have some church experience
____ It helps me deal with my life
____ I have good friends at church
____ I feel like I'm a better person if I go to church
____ It's something I've always done
____ Other

__________________________

163
If you do not attend worship services at our church, answer this question

___ I work on Sundays
___ My children have other Sunday morning activities
___ Sundays are our only chance for family time.
___ Sunday is my time to rest
___ Sunday is the day I must do housework
___ I'm usually doing something else, such as
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
___ Other ______________________________________
   __________________________________________

I would prefer to attend worship services on
___ A different hour on Sunday morning
___ Sunday evening
___ Friday evening
___ A mid-week evening (preferably)
___ Other (please specify:)
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

Did you go to church as a child? ___ yes ___ no
___ Alone
___ With your parents
___ With your brothers and sisters
___ Other (please specify:)
   __________________________________________

What church did you go to? ______________________________________

How often did you attend?
___ Every Sunday
___ Once a month
___ A couple of times a year
___ Other
   __________________________________________

The group activity I enjoy most is
___ My sports group
   specifically
___ My service group
   specifically
___ My study group
   specifically
___ My church group
   specifically
___ My social group
   specifically
___ My support group
   specifically
___ I do not belong to any group
___ Other, specifically
   __________________________________________
I enjoy this group because

___ It is relaxing
___ It is fun
___ It's something I can do with my family
___ It's something I can do with my spouse
___ It's an opportunity to do something important
___ It makes me think new thoughts
___ It provides good friendship
___ It helps me understand what life's about
___ Other _______________________________________________________

Level of Education Completed:
___ Highest Grade Level Completed
___ Secondary School Graduate
___ Years at College
    Diploma Received ________________________________
___ Years at University
    Degree Received ________________________________
___ Years at Graduate School
    Degree Received ________________________________
___ Post Graduate Work ______________________________

Number of People living with you:  Annual Family Income:
Adults (21 or older) ________ Under $15,000 ______
Youth ages 15-20 ________ $15,000 - $24,999 ______
Youth ages 10-15 ________ $25,000 - $39,999 ______
Children ages 5-10 ________ $40,000 - $59,999 ______
Children ages 0-5 ________ $60,000 - $75,000 ______
Number of wage earners ________ Above $75,000 ______

Are there any other factors in your life situation that might be relevant to this research?
Which is true for you?

5 I agree strongly - This is really true for me
4 I agree somewhat - This could be true for me
3 I've no opinion - I've never thought about this
2 I disagree - This doesn't seem to be true
1 I disagree strongly - This is definitely not true

(Place the number that most represents your opinion next to each statement)

____ Church is a place where I know I will be accepted.
____ The church helps people know and experience God.
____ The church is full of hypocrites.
____ It's good for children to go to church.
____ The church is not relevant to my life.
____ The church's presence in our community makes it a better place to live.
____ I am happy with my life as it is right now.
____ Teenagers need the help of the church in today's complex world.
____ I experience God more outside the church than inside the church.
____ The church is a good place to find friends.
____ Sometimes I feel I should be doing more with my life.

What question is missing from this questionnaire that should be here?

If you have any questions, please call Selma Sheldon at 722-5763, or 722-3742.
This is the beginning of a letter from a minister to a congregation. The minister is also a doctoral student at the Toronto School of Theology. As part of her studies, she needs to conduct research at her place of work. She is asking the congregation to complete a questionnaire and contact her if they have any questions or comments. The questionnaire is attached to the letter, and the letter is signed by the minister.
Appendix A.3: Interview Guide

Each interview will unfold according to the story the woman chooses to tell. I cannot predict what she will consider important enough to mention. In general, I will encourage her to expand on answers she gave to questionnaire questions: Did you go to church as a child? What is the group activity you enjoy the most? Why? What is the main reason you do or do not attend church? And I will encourage her to say more about her responses to statements in the "Which is true for you?" section.

Following the interactive methodology I've outlined in the Research Methodology and Assumptions sections of this proposal, I will begin the interview by asking the woman to tell me what going to church was like for her when she was little. I will be seeking statements about her early feelings of belonging; concepts of God; experiences of prayer; important stories; and important people. If she didn't go to church when she was little, I'll ask her to tell me about her early thoughts about God, or beauty, or love, or whatever seems like it might have been a "spiritual" reality. I will ask if religion, or prayer or Bible reading were in any way a part of her family life.

When it seems like she's said what she wants to say about early experiences, I'll ask if and when her experiences of church, God, prayer etc. began to change, and encourage her to talk about times of transition: what was going on in her life, and how her experiences and ideas changed.

In this way, we'll work our way up to the present: her present thoughts/feelings about the church; where she goes for spiritual nourishment; whether and when she prays, and what prayer is for her; whether she does any kind of devotional reading; whether she has any friends with whom she talks about spiritual concerns.

If her words and manner suggest satisfaction with her lot in life, I'll encourage her to make a statement about what has given her her present sense of well being. If it seems like she feels restless and dissatisfied, I'll encourage her to talk about what's missing or disappointing.
Appendix B: Summary of Responses to Questionnaire

I started out with a list of 73 people, and contacted 69, because I was unable to find 4 of the people on the list.

10 of the people I approached were the wrong age
1 person did not want to take the questionnaire

This means I distributed 58 questionnaires to women born between 1950 and 1960. 56 have been completed and returned. Their answers are summarized in the following pages.

47 Married
4 Separated
3 Never Married
1 Widowed
1 Did not answer

Number of years affiliated with Knox/Virginia
8 20 or more years
11 10-19 years
19 4-9 years
13 1-3 years
5 less than 1 year

Frequency of attendance at Worship Services:
19 three or more times a month
10 once a month
8 Six to ten times a year
13 Once or twice a year
5 I do not attend
1 Other

I go to church with
22 my spouse
35 my school age children
11 my preschool children
10 my teenage children
1 a friend
0 a neighbour
12 other (alone, mother, mother-in-law)

I am involved in the following church activities:
1 Session
0 Stewards
0 Church Council
2 Presbytery
8 U.C.W.
2 Outreach
4 Other (3 Nursery, 1 M & P, 1 Help with Children's Choir)
24 people involved in church groups or activities
  5 involved in 3 or more groups
  12 involved in two groups
  7 involved in 1 group

I go to church because
  38 I want my children to have some church experience
  29 It helps me deal with my life
 14 I have good friends at church
 11 I feel like I'm a better person if I go to church
  7 It's something I've always done
 15 Other (To hear children sing, for comfort and reassurance, reflection, education)

I do not go to church because
  6 I work on Sundays
  7 My children have other Sunday morning activities
 10 Sundays are our only chance for family time
  7 Sunday is my time to rest
  5 Sunday is the day I must do housework
  6 I do something else  (husband's hobby, visit mother, schoolwork, marking, cottage)
  7 Other (physically unable, visit relatives, husband's shift work, baby sleeps, outdoor projects)

I prefer worship services on
  16 a different hour Sunday morning
   2 Sunday evening
   0 Saturday evening
   0 Friday evening
   5 A midweek evening
   8 Other (I like it the way it is)

55 went to church as a child!!!
  1 didn't respond to this question

As a child,
  44 went to church every Sunday
   7 went to church once a month
   5 had a different pattern of church attendance

Denominational background
  30 United
  8 Anglican
  6 Roman Catholic
  5 Presbyterian
  2 Baptist
  1 Brethren in Christ
  1 Christian Reformed
  3 Unspecified
Level of education
3 less than grade 12
20 secondary school graduate
20 some college
10 some university
3 graduate work

The group activity(ies) most enjoyed:
10 sports (hockey, baseball, figure skating, curling)
6 service (Scouting, Lions Club, P.T.A., CHATS)
6 study (book club, university & college courses)
8 church (Women's Spirituality, U.C.W., choir)
14 social (Euchre, Various Parent Groups, Friends, Colleagues)
5 support (Women's Issues, A.A., Parents without Partners)
21 belong to no group activity
10 Other (Wine guild, folk art, staff choir, cancer canvass, telecare, h.s. parents, cancer canvass, school volunteer, ratepayers assoc.)

Reasons for enjoying these groups
19 relaxing
23 fun
7 my children like it
6 done with family
6 done with spouse
14 opportunity to do something important
19 makes me think new thoughts
27 provides friendship
18 helps me understand life
5 other - I like working with girls
  - helps me open to Christ/God
  - keeps me open to God, sober, & helping others
  - fills void in my life
  - something I can do on my own

25 have 2 wage earners in the home
4 have 1½ wage earners in the home
17 have 1 wage earner in the home
10 gave no clear answer to this question

Annual Family Income
2 Under $15,000
1 $15,000 - $24,999
13 $25,000 - $39,999
20 $40,000 - $59,999
3 $60,000 - $75,000
11 Above $75,000
6 Did not answer
The Church:
- is accepting
- helps people know God
- is full of hypocrites
- is good for children
- is not relevant for me
- improves the community
- is needed by teenagers
- is where I find friends

I experience God more outside the church
I am happy with my life
I feel I should do more

Questions missing from this questionnaire:


Do you feel comfortable with all that is said and sung in church?

If you are a member of the church, why are you a member? If not, why not?

What is your attitude towards the Bible?
   a) the literal word of God
   b) a collection of stories written down by many different individuals who were searching for God and the meaning of life
   c) the ultimate truth

Do you face opposition from family members when you come to church?

What is it you like best about church?

Have you returned to church after a long period away from it? If so, why?

Would you attend church more often if possible? Do you feel comfortable in our church?

Is the church a comfort to you? Do you work outside the home? hours? days a week?

Do you think you need to go to church to love and serve God?

For what purpose do people attend church?

What does God represent to you as an individual?

Do you believe in life after death?

Is it necessary to attend church to have the faith and values of religion?

What groups would you like to see in the church?

What can the church offer you to make you feel more connected to God and one another?

What do you mean by church? the institution? or an ideology?
Have your life style and priorities changed in the last year or two?
Have these changes brought you closer or farther from the church?

Why do we need church when we have God in our lives in our own ways?

Were both parents Christians when you were growing up?
Do you pray together as a family? daily?
Do you believe God answers prayer?

Would you miss church if it was gone?

**Other factors in my life situation, relevant to this research:**

I used to be more active, but I now need to give time to my family. I need to know that I could attend without feeling guilty for not giving more time. For this reason I stay away.

These are things I'd need to discuss in person.

Job related changes prevent me from attending as often as I'd like. Husband works away, long distance, very often not at home.

Sundays are a part of my work week.

Church is very family oriented (I am separated). I was often asked to bake things when I didn't have the time or the money to buy something instead. I felt I wasn't doing enough, so I discontinued doing anything.

Recovering alcoholic; sober 3 1/2 years; content with progress made in all areas of my life; received 1 yr. medallion at Knox; none of these wonderful things could have happened without God's love, care and guidance; think the world of you and Ted

Family has broken all ties with the church; 2 sisters do not attend at all; one, like I, attends occasionally; my parents have gone from very involved & a great deal of financial support to none; husband's family still quite involved. Makes a difference on special occasions (Christmas, Easter) as church no longer enters in the celebration on my side.

I work part time at night. I'd like to be more involved, but I can not attend evening meetings.

Sometimes at church I feel "out of it"; my life and life of my children busy and rushed; church attendance not worth it if we end up angry before we go out the door; religion, but not the institution is important; I experience God on long walks, canoe rides, blue skies, etc.
My enrollment in religious studies courses has challenged me to examine scripture in a "scholarly" way which in turn has allowed me to think more liberally about what I believe as a Christian.

Husband now working shifts, which involves some Sundays, and in general less time at home; children involved in Sunday sports

I would like to take part in more church activities, but I do not have the time at this point in my life. I hope to at a later time.

Both my parents died before my children had a chance to know them. Their backgrounds were so different from what my children see in my husband's parents' situation. I sometimes think I'm outnumbered, and earlier on in parenthood suffered from loss of identity. I think church has helped me, to a certain extent, bridge the gap.

I baby-sit several children during the week and look forward to special time the weekend brings to be with my own children.

The church is a place I feel I can go for help.

I attended another nearby church for 11 years. There I taught Pioneers for 7 years and was coordinator for Pioneers for 4 years. I still teach Pioneers, so am not willing to get involved with other aspects of the church at this time. I find the church a relaxing, stress free place.
Appendix C: Sample Personal Profiles

#015 Attendance level #4 - connected 7 yrs - school age children, - 1957 (45) - Married

I go to church with my children. I go because it helps me deal with my life.

Involved in no church activities

As a child, I went to church every Sunday with my parents: Roman Catholic

activity most enjoyed: social, crafts group

Secondary School Grad, R.P.N diploma

Family income, with 2 wage earners, $40,000 - $60,000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
<th>Agree somewhat</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Disagree somewhat</th>
<th>Disagree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At church

5 I'm accepted
5 ch makes community better

ch helps people
5 know & experience God
5 I'm happy

ch full of
4 hypocrites
4 of church

ch good for
5 children
4 experience God more
4 outside church

ch not relevant
1 to my life
4 find friends

1 feel I should do more

Additional question: Do you think you need to go to church to love and serve God?

Would like a mid-week evening (mon-tues) service because I work weekends.
Attendance level #3 - connected 7 yrs. - school age children - 1955 (40) - Married

I go with my spouse and my school age children (one younger, one older),
because I want my children to have some church experience.
It helps me deal with my life. I feel comfortable and good at church.
I relax.

Involved in no church activities

I do not attend, because I work on Sundays.

As a child, I went an Anglican church every Sunday

Belong to no groups, church or otherwise

Secondary School education with correspondence courses in computer science

Family income, with 2 wage earners, $60,000 - $75,000.

Job related changes that have not allowed myself and the children to be able to attend church as often as we would like to. This is extremely frustrating but totally out of my control.
Perhaps certain circumstances in both our jobs will change somewhat to allow more free time to enjoy what we would like to - Husband works away long distance - very often not home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
<th>Agree somewhat</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Disagree somewhat</th>
<th>Disagree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At church

4 I'm accepted
ch helps people
4 know & experience God
ch full of hypocrites
4 good for children
ch not relevant to my life
5 feel I should do more

ch makes community better

4 I'm happy
4 outside church
ch place to find friends

teenagers need help of church

experience God more

Would you attend church more often if possible?

Do you feel comfortable in our church? Is the church a comfort to you?

Do you work outside the home? Hours? Days a week?
Appendix D: Interview Questions

#46, an early interview

In covering letter, I said that my research question is *What do women need to help them feel more connect to God and to one another?* You have taken the time to answer the questionnaire and have agreed to an interview. Before we do anything else, would you like to make some comment on my basic question?

What is God, for you? What does the word spiritual mean to you?

**Childhood**
Were you aware of anything you might now call a spiritual dimension to life, during your childhood?

How were you introduced to God?

What did you think about God? (helper, judge, friend ....)
  - about Jesus?
  - about the church?

Were there any particularly memorable moments in your childhood that made you think about God, or seek God's help?

**Transition times**
Personal situation - notions of spirituality

How did this affect your feelings about God? the church?

**Today**
What keeps you coming to Virginia United?

Where do you find God?

What are your hopes and dreams?
  - disappointments?

Do you have any social life?

Do you pray? read? talk with friends about spiritual matters?

When you mark an item, 3, (e.g. happiness) does it mean you're not particularly happy, or that you've never really thought about it?

Are there places you do not feel accepted?
PURPOSE: TO IDENTIFY WOMEN'S SPIRITUAL ASPIRATIONS AND LONGINGS

Intentions: I want to learn from you. I'll ask some questions about different times experiences in your life, and about your thoughts and feelings ... You can answer or not answer, as you choose.

REMEMBER TO BUILD ON THEIR ANSWERS to some extent, the interview should carry itself.

On your questionnaire, you express some frustration with your work schedule interfering with your being able to do other things. Tell me about your work, and your work schedule. What about your husband's work? You say he's away a lot.

You say church is a comfort to you, and helps you deal with your life. Can you talk to me a little about that?

You say that church is good for the community, for children for teenagers. In what ways do you see it as being good?

What do you remember about church, when you were a child?

Who is God for you?
Who first taught you about God?
   Where/how do you find God?
In what ways has your sense of God changed over the years?

How do you pray?
How did you pray when you were a child?

In what ways is Jesus important to you?
   What is your mental image of Jesus?

When, if ever, do you read the Bible?
   What do you like about the Bible?
   What do you dislike about the Bible?

Do you give your children any sort of religious training/practices?
What kind of practices?

What does it mean to you when you say someone is a close friend?
(what kinds of things do you do/talk about with a close friend?)

Do you read other devotional, self-improvement types of books?

What does the word spiritual mean to you?
Where do you go for spiritual nourishment?
The Church
How has the church been helpful to you?
How has the church disappointed?
Has the church ever hurt you?

Dream on ways that the church might be helpful to you.

What would your own personal simple statement of faith look like?
Why did you become involved with the United Church?

Transitions
What do you think of as a major turning point in your life?
Any others?

What were the times that you felt God was absent?

What's been the biggest frustration in your life over the years?

What's the biggest frustration in your life right now?

What gives you your greatest sense of contentment and well-being?

If your could offer a prayer, right now, that would grant you your idea of a perfect life, what would you ask for?

What would you most like to be able to do with your life?
- epitaph on gravestone -
### Appendix E: Faith Stages by Aspects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of Logic (Piaget)</th>
<th>Perspective Taking (Selman)</th>
<th>Form of Moral Judgment (Kohlberg)</th>
<th>Bounds of Social Awareness</th>
<th>Locus of Authority</th>
<th>Form of World Coherence</th>
<th>Symbolic Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preoperational</td>
<td>Rudimentary empathy</td>
<td>Punishment-Reward</td>
<td>Family, primal others</td>
<td>Attachment/dependence relationships. Size, power, visible symbols of authority</td>
<td>Episodic</td>
<td>Magical-Numinous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Operational</td>
<td>Simple perspective taking</td>
<td>Instrumental hedonism</td>
<td>&quot;Those like us&quot; (in familial, ethnic, racial &amp; religious terms)</td>
<td>Incumbents of authority roles, salience increased by personal relatedness</td>
<td>Narrative-Dramatic</td>
<td>One-dimensional, literal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Formal Operations</td>
<td>Mutual interpersonal</td>
<td>Interpersonal expectations &amp; concordance</td>
<td>Composite of groups in which one has interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>Consensus of valued groups &amp; in personally worthy representatives of belief-value system</td>
<td>Tacit system, felt meanings symbolically mediated, globally held</td>
<td>Symbolic multi-dimensional, evocative power inheres in symbol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Operations (Dichotomizing)</td>
<td>Mutual, with self selected group or class (societal)</td>
<td>Societal perspective, Reflective relativism or class-biased universalism</td>
<td>Ideologically compatible communities with congruence to self-chosen norms &amp; insights</td>
<td>One's own judgment as informed by a self-ratified ideological perspective. Authorities &amp; norms must be congruent with this.</td>
<td>Explicit system, conceptually mediated, clarity about boundaries and inner connections of system.</td>
<td>Symbols separated from symbolized. Translated (reduced) to ideations. Evocative power inheres in meaning conveyed by symbols.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Operations (Dialectic)</td>
<td>Mutual, with groups, classes &amp; traditions &quot;other&quot; than one's own</td>
<td>Prior to society, Principled higher law (universal &amp; critical)</td>
<td>Extends beyond class norms &amp; interests. Disciplined ideological vulnerability to &quot;truths&quot; &amp; &quot;claims&quot; of outgroups &amp; other traditions.</td>
<td>Dialectical joining of judgment experience processes with reflective claims of others and of various expressions of cumulative human wisdom.</td>
<td>Multisystemic symbolic and conceptual mediation</td>
<td>Postcritical rejoining of irreducible symbolic power &amp; ideational meaning. Evocative power inherent in the reality and beyond symbol and in the power of unconscious processes in the self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Operations (Synthetic)</td>
<td>Mutual, with the commonwealth of being</td>
<td>Loyalty to being</td>
<td>Identification with the species. Transnarcissistic love of being</td>
<td>In a personal judgment informed by the experiences and truths of previous stages, purified of egocentric striving, and linked by disciplined intuition to the principle of being.</td>
<td>Unitive actuality felt &amp; participated unity of &quot;One beyond the many&quot;</td>
<td>Evocative power of symbols actualized through unification of reality mediated by symbols and the self.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Articles


Books


**Spirituality in General**

**Articles**

Books


Theology in North American Context

Articles


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**Books**


**Research Theory**


**Faith Development and Educational Theory**


