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UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK  
Department of Continuing Education

**“It's such a struggle” : Women learning faith**

submitted by  
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*A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Continuing Education at the  
University of Warwick*

September 1998

## ABSTRACT

Whilst there is now a significant and growing body of literature exploring women's identity, achievements and processes within a learning and educational context, there is little which focuses on the particular way in which processing daily life is a significant and valid form of learning for women. This thesis is concerned to value women's learning experiences, to hear women's voices within the organisation, and to uncover their stories in the area of spirituality.

The research has involved a longitudinal ethnographic study of 8 women over 30 months. The women, aged 35 - 55 are all actively involved in the Church of England, and are drawn from a range of church backgrounds. Interviews have taken place at regular intervals over that time, and are supported by additional information gathered through observation, learning diaries and other activities.

The thesis uses a feminist epistemological framework characterised by oppression, connectedness and silence in order to explore the processes of learning faith in everyday life. The thesis argues that women's experience of faith formation is frequently a story of conflict and tension, as the women attempt to fit their experiences into the language and ideology of formal learning. In the context of a current dominant discourse of education based around economic consideration, the thesis highlights the importance of the everyday in forming identity, values and community.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This research was made possible by a post-graduate studentship awarded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC).

I would like to acknowledge the support of my supervisor, Christina Hughes, whose advice and encouragement have been invaluable. I would also like to thank my colleagues, friends and family for allowing me the space to study, think and discover. Finally, I want to thank the women in this study who gave so freely of their time, their hospitality and their stories.

## “It’s such a struggle”: women learning faith”

*"This was probably one of those many queer experiences that human beings could not speak of to each other, because though words could be formed into a casket to hold visions, and could be at the same time the power that liberated them, they seemed of very little use when one tried to use them to explain to another person what it was that they had set free. Words were queer things, Stella decided, to be at once so powerful and weak"*

Elizabeth Goudge (1950, pp43-44)  
Gentian Hill  
London Hodder and Stoughton

*"The human being has no alternative to holding beliefs other than holding other beliefs; the artist has no alternative to using colours other than using other colours. "unbeliefs", like "uncolours" do not exist; a 'beliefless' human life is as impossible to contemplate as a 'colourless' painting."*

Michael Grimmitt (1987, p90)  
Religious Education and Human Development  
London MacGrimmon Publishing Company Ltd.

## INTRODUCTION

### WOMEN'S LIVES, LEARNING AND RELIGION

"Feminism derives its strength from analysing societies, views and concepts from a woman's perspective... It is about empowering individuals to reach their full potential" (McEwan, 1997, p7)

Enabling individuals to reach their full potential is not only a feminist concern. It is also at the heart of religious belief. This thesis is about women fulfilling their potential in the area of learning faith. It considers the ways in which the language(s) of religion and education affect this process in their lives. The thesis will argue that learning faith is experienced as struggle by the women in the study as a result of the particular ideologies that underpin religion and education. I will argue that the discourse(s) of religion and education that are available to women are not deemed applicable to the particular ways in which they experience learning faith.

Discourse is the means by which ideologies are articulated, through spoken vocabulary and through metaphor, image, structures and practices (Hughes, 1995; Ransom, 1993; Rosie, 1996). However, the vocabulary and terms used in the discourse(s) of religion and education are themselves slippery and changing, particularly as the boundaries of definitions are pushed. This thesis attempts to articulate the learning that takes place in the gaps between the dominant discourse(s), and it has been a struggle at times to find the appropriate words to describe experiences which fall outside of boundaries (Stanley, 1997; Hull, 1997). Words are indeed both weak and strong.

The thesis uses a framework of incidental learning, informed by a feminist epistemology, in order to explore the ways in which women learn faith. More broadly it contributes to wider debates about lifelong learning, and in particular the place of women's spirituality within those debates. In this introduction I want to

outline the background to the research, considering the significance of religious faith as the basis for research into incidental learning in women's lives. I will then go on to indicate briefly some of the methodological considerations in the research, before outlining the direction and shape which the stories that the research participants tell have given to this thesis.

## **1.0 RELIGIOUS BELIEF**

### **1.1 The learning of values and belief**

This research has been concerned to explore the kind of learning which might have been envisaged in the original lifelong learning ideologies (Faure, 1972). In particular it is concerned with the development and learning of what might be called 'worldview', that is the value system which is held by each person and enables her to make sense of her life and her world. Religious belief is one such value system (Vrijhof, 1967; Pals, 1996). It is both universal (Grimmitt, 1987) and yet also intensely personal. The women in this study are women for whom religious belief is an integral part of their value system and lifestyle. Each of the participants is actively Christian, committed and involved in the Anglican Church.

Again in the debates concerned with the validity of learning and education, spiritual formation has often been discounted. Issues around women and faith have been researched within a theological framework (for example King, 1995; Parsons, 1997), but it is rare to find research that looks at women's Christian experience as a learning activity. The church and faith is largely ignored by mainstream educational and sociological research. One of the reasons for this might be that church is perceived as a feminine activity (King and Francis, 1996), and has therefore not been taken seriously. In addition, research in the field of faith has mainly focused on ordained ministry (for example, Aldridge 1994). Thus, Davie's (1995) work concerned with

ordinary women's spirituality in the North American protestant church is reviewed as ground-breaking. The research followed a Bible study group for a period of time, and looked at the processes and group dynamics involved in acquiring religious knowledge.

## **1.2 Spirituality: a neglected dimension**

The development of post-modern philosophies has created a space for spirituality to flourish, as the humanist and modernist concern to quantify and rationalise human phenomena gives way to a pre-occupation with the processes of experience itself (Dinges, 1996). The manifest cultural result has been a plethora of spiritual programmes and concerns, and a more overt acknowledgement that the spiritual dimension of humanity may need nurturing alongside the mental and emotional potential. Much of this growth is outside the domains of the established world religions, particularly Western Christianity, which in many ways is itself a product of a modern, rationalistic philosophy, heavily critiqued at times by radical feminists (Renzetti, 1992; Clark and Whitcomb, 1996).

Christians are often identified as the power holders, (Lorde, 1994), and Christian women are not distinguished as a group within that category. Feminist debates of difference, in focusing on issues of 'race', class, age and so forth, neglect the dimensions of spirituality. Christian women have stories of difference, oppression and silence which also needs to be heard (Christ, 1993). However, many women experience faith as liberating and empowering, and integral to their identity (Mananzan, 1994; Ortega, 1995), and there is a desire to include the spiritual dimension in a new understanding of what it means to be human (King, 1995). Religious belief and adherence remains a "potent cultural resource" (Beckford,

1989), and whilst it may be in institutional decline, it remains important to a significant minority ((Bruce, 1995).

The learning of faith and spirituality has traditionally been a male subject, developed in the monastic model of the Middle Ages (Clack, 1996; Rees, 1987), but recent developments in lay ministry and the ordination of women have meant that the church has to change (Drury, 1994). It seems an apposite time to 'tell spiritual stories' (Clack, 1996), and to apply the theories developed in other learning domains to this particular field.

## **2.0 WOMEN'S LIVES AND LEARNING**

There is now a significant and growing body of literature exploring women's identity, achievements and processes in a learning and educational context (for example Acker, 1994; Coats, 1994; Thompson, 1995; Payne, 1991; McLaren, 1985; Williams, 1997). However, there is little that focuses on the particular way in which the events of daily life form the basis of a valid form of learning for women. Whilst women have fought many battles to gain access to learning, it is access to forms of knowledge and subjects of study within the dominant formal discourse of education, for example entrance to academia or obtaining qualifications (Williams, 1997; Delamont, 1996). This thesis will argue that formal discourse(s) of education and learning are predominantly hierarchical and patriarchal. Hence, women's learning through life is under-privileged in terms of the accepted discourse of learning, and yet is a valid form of learning which particularly shapes the fundamental value systems which women hold.

Does learning only count as learning when it fits into the institutional system? This is a particularly significant question for women, as both their opportunities for, and their approach to, learning may be much more closely bound to daily lived moments.

The validity of incidental learning as acceptable learning is often contested. An important concern raised by those who question the validity of incidental learning theories is a concern with reflexivity and conscious motivation, and whether moments of 'revelation' in daily life can be defined as learning (Jarvis, 1992). Candy (1991) and Brookfield (1987) both argue that incidental learning is an undervalued, yet vital component in building a complete picture of adult learning. However, it remains an area that is often ignored in theories and policies concerned with learning societies, communities or organisations.

This thesis will argue that the dominant male ideologies and discourses of learning are such that women feel that their kind of understanding falls well outside the acceptable definitions of learning (Luttrell, 1997). Luttrell's work seeks to explore the status of women's common sense in relation to the perceived status of male intelligence acquired in formal education. This thesis draws on her work, along with other seminal studies by Gilligan (1982), Belenky (1986) and Magolda (1992) to explore the extent to which women's incidental learning is also characterised by relationship, emotion and meeting needs. Belenky, Magolda and more recently Severiens (1998) have all studied women's learning within the formal learning context, and this research adds to their studies by questioning the discourse(s) of learning itself.

### **3.0 LIFELONG LEARNING**

The questions about incidental learning in women's lives also find resonances within the broader context of lifelong learning. In recent times the concept of lifelong learning has transferred from the preserve of academics and internationalists to the foreground of political and economic language, acquiring the status of myth and soundbite along the way (Hughes and Tight, 1995). Lifelong learning is now the

officially acclaimed goal of governmental educational policies within the United Kingdom (Secretary of State, 1998).

As the 1970s unfolded various assessments of lifelong learning policies were produced, as educators tried to grasp the breadth of the vision and turn it into workable programmes, struggling with the tensions between education as essentially personal, and education as an event in institutions (Williams, 1977). Proponents of lifelong learning or education advocated a broad view of education, acknowledging the place of learning outside of the institution as equally formative (Gelpi, 1979). These debates continued into the late eighties, as the philosophical meaning of "lifelong" was discussed, and the scope of the concept to embrace both formal and informal learning was explored (Wain, 1987).

The contrast between learning and education is also important in this context.

Lifelong *education* policies seem to be more concerned with the processes and programmes which will enable people to continue in the system throughout their lives (Dave, 1986; Lynch, 1982; Schuller, 1979). The ideology of lifelong *learning* as a concept and philosophy is concerned with the power of learning to change society (Kallen, 1979). It is therefore envisaged as embracing both the temporal and political. Thus, lifelong learning should be concerned with life from birth to death, including all forms of learning, both inside and outside the formal system (Kidd, 1979). However, the tension between the ideologies and discourses of learning and education continue.

Lifelong learning is presented as concerned with all the experiences of life from which we learn. Handy (1987) suggests that the most significant learning for most people is in fact centred around times of change and crisis in their personal lives, such as marriage, redundancy or bereavement. Whilst those such as Handy might

want to define learning so broadly as to allow space for life events, the economic demands of society mean that unless learning can be translated into workplace currency it is all too often viewed as of little value. Accordingly, the ideologies of lifelong learning are now being expressed within a discourse of learning that gives greater significance to economic considerations (Fryer, 1997). Thus, the language of learning is now characterised by the language of production and economic viability, exemplified in such phrases as 'human resource development' or 'measurable outcomes' amongst others. To equate lifelong learning with consumer satisfaction and experience seems a long way removed from the ideals of those such as Freire, where education is about empowerment and liberation (McLaren and Leonard, 1993), or even the 1973 vision of 'education for all' in Britain (DES, 1973). This thesis considers the extent to which the current discourse(s) of learning reinforce the sense that women's learning and faith formation through daily life is of less worth than other types of learning and education.

In addition, the concept of lifelong learning as developed in the seventies is underpinned itself by the language and ideology of maleness, being founded on a profound belief in the power of science, and in the ultimate potential of humans to take control of their destiny. However, whilst theories of lifelong learning were borne out of the scientific humanism of the 1960s, also known as modernism, the philosophical culture of the age is now identified as "post-modern" (Hassard, 1993; Smart, 1992; Bauman, 1992). Lifelong learning is maturing in an age markedly different from the one where it was developed, and is now marked by a number of diverse discourses (Edwards, 1997). The belief in rationality and science which underpinned much of the development of the concept of lifelong learning is the aspect of the modern which has most come under attack (Usher, 1994). There is no

longer a sense that progress is an inevitable result of knowledge, or even inevitable at all (Burgess, 1996). Post-modernism intimates the possibility of a world without bounds, or at least one in which boundaries can be pulled down or re-drawn (Edwards, 1997; Dinges, 1996; Tester, 1993).

One of the consequences of post-modern thinking is that scientific positivism is intensely questioned, in whatever guise it appears, and feminist thinking has frequently been in the vanguard of such questioning (Flax, 1995). Feminist epistemologies have challenged the divisions between objective and subjective knowledge (Code, 1991). This has led to the questioning of universal categories such as 'woman', and an exploration of the way in which such categories are constructed (Grant, 1993). The assumptions that underpin dominant ideologies such as religion and education can now be questioned.

#### **4.0 STORIES OR DATA: some methodological concerns**

##### **4.1 Hearing women's stories**

The stories of eight women have formed the basis of this thesis, and the thesis is data led, with the analysis of transcripts guiding the theoretical focus. An interplay between data and theory constantly informs the analysis (Stanley and Wise, 1991). These women have told stories over thirty months which have embraced many of the key issues which dominate women's lives - family, work and health (Beechey, 1986). However, the formal discourses of learning are conspicuously absent from the majority of stories, with the exception of Hannah. At the start of the study in 1995 none of the women were engaged in any kind of formal learning, and so the study has focused intently on the significance of daily life in forming and shaping their faith development. There is a concern with the working out and integrating of their

Christian faith into daily life, and a negotiation of the events of life into the framework of their belief system.

As their stories unfolded, one feature emerged that seemed to characterise their experiences and attempts to comprehend their life and faith. This was the presence, in varying degrees, of internal tension and, from time to time, external conflict. This thesis will explore the reasons for this tension and its implications for women's learning. Whilst conflict has previously been identified as a significant issue for women of faith (Eck, 1986; Russell, 1990; Mananzan, 1994), it has largely been in the context of a commitment to corporate change rather than in personal development. Eck (1986) suggests that conflict is a cry of anguish, needing a context in which it can be processed and resolved, whilst both Russell (1990) and Mananzan (1994) suggest that struggle and spirituality are intertwined. The data explored in this thesis considers the tension and conflict as indicators of the struggle between the dominant ideologies of education and learning and the status of women's faith learning.

#### **4.2 The tensions of research**

The related concepts of tension and conflict are not only apparent in the stories told by the women. The research methodology itself is overlaid with the tensions that exist in continuing to apply feminist research methodology in a variety of areas. As has already been suggested, there are hints of conflict between feminism and Christianity itself, and there are problems arising from doing feminist research in a church context (Isherwood, 1996). The majority of feminist religious research has arisen from a theological discipline and classically theology is based on a positivist epistemology. So a tension emerges between the Christian insistence on absolute truths and right answers, and a feminist approach which attempts to validate

individual experience without judgement (Acker, 1991). On the other hand, both Christian and feminist epistemologies have a focus on reflexivity, and a concern for the relationship between the individual and the communal.

Alongside these tensions is also the awareness of the power dynamic at work in the research relationship (Scheurich, 1995), and the difficulties of negotiating the insider and outsider issue in ethnographic studies (Bell, 1993; Finch, 1993). Finch, in particular, highlights another tension in the research relationship, which is in negotiating the boundaries of the research relationship. These issues are explored further in Chapter One.

The desire to understand and vocalise the concerns of the lives of women in the church is not just an academic exercise. Research questions are borne as much out of personal need and desire as out of the desire to understand others lives (Card, 1991; West, 1996). This research takes as its primary focus what actually happens to a group of women over a period of time, and seeks to understand how these events are both experienced and integrated (Acker, 1991). It is also concerned to see the reality of everyday life as embedded in social relationships and organisational structures, and uses the talk or stories of the women to give substance to the processes that are taking place (Boden, 1994). Autobiography or story is both a methodological tool, and a way of facilitating adult learning (Brady, 1990), and the event of re-counting happenings for the researcher is in itself part of the learning process. Fonow and Cook (1991) identify that the research act can itself constitute a learning activity, but also raise the difficulties that this brings for the feminist researcher, highlighting again the concern over the nature of the research process itself.

Selecting a research method, by which I mean the techniques used to gather data, is not simply a matter of personal preference. It is also intrinsically connected to the

methodology adopted and a reflection of an epistemological standpoint (Stanley, 1990; Maynard and Purvis, 1994). The epistemological standpoint is also related to the research questions and the issues that the research seeks to address - in this case, a concern to explore the hidden dynamics of women's experiences of learning faith in life. My methodology engages with the debate about what constitutes a feminist piece of research, whether simply a choice of qualitative methods, or a more complex issue. I have identified three key themes which resonate with the themes of the thesis as a whole - a concern with women's experience, an awareness of my own role in the process and being informed by feminist theorising and practice. The unfolding relationships between myself and the women, and the impact that the data had in changing my own perceptions of the subject, all affect the research structure. What was conceived as a linear, structured process turned out to be a 'voyage of discovery' - and oceans are not known for their controllability! (Hammersley, 1984, p62).

## **5.0 CONTEXTS FOR LEARNING: an outline of the thesis**

This thesis seeks to understand the particularities of women's experiences of learning faith and why that experience appears frequently to be characterised by struggle.

**Chapter Two** begins to explore the ways in which the discourses of religion and religious education are borne out of essentially hierarchical and patriarchal ideologies. The chapter looks at how women experience church and religion, drawing attention to the powerful influence of a number of polarised opposites. These binaries invariably lead to women understanding themselves as needing to change in order to fit within the dominant aspect of the pair. Thus, for example, women's talk is contrasted with silence, revered as holy. Women then see their talk as less significant than the silence epitomised in the male monastic model. The chapter further outlines a feminist epistemological framework characterised by

oppression, relationship and naming. This framework then becomes a tool that can be used to bring further understanding as to why women might experience faith as struggle.

**Chapter Three** considers the way in which the formal discourse(s) of education have given rise to hierarchies of learning, raising the question as to what kinds of learning are deemed to be valid. The chapter encounters some of the difficulties with the language of learning, as the concepts of experiential learning and incidental learning are differentiated. The chapter goes on to discuss those characteristics that have been identified as necessary to indicate that learning is potentially possible, drawing these characteristics together into a model of incidental learning through life. However, the chapter also highlights that whilst the experience of learning faith might have all the elements which constitute learning, somehow it falls so far outside the women's perceptions of learning that it cannot be named as such.

**Chapter Four** explores the ways in which conflict and tension are experienced in the external world of employment and church, and shows how the women use this experience to either reinforce or change their value systems. The Church of England itself places a high priority on learning, and in its recent organisational analysis adds that "a concealed presupposition that the Church must be a learning community" is one of the hallmarks of the churches mission (Turnbull, 1995, p3). The report goes on to suggest that the corporate and personal learning of Christians, and a mutuality of relationship between teacher and pupil, are to be the foundations of all other Christian discipleship. However, the rhetoric of inclusive and accessible learning is not always translated into practice and programmes. Chapter Four will therefore listen to the stories of women who have not always found the church to be a learning community - or at least not within the vocabulary of learning they have been given.

There is a desire to compartmentalise the different facets of the epistemology and to create neat typologies and categories in which to fit the stories of the research respondents. However, experience of research shows that theories and data defy categories, and that there is a multi-dimensionality to the process that defies the thesis structure. Thus whilst the experiences of organisational life explored in Chapter Four resonate strongly with the epistemological concern about oppression, issues about relationship and naming also surface.

In **Chapter Five** the concern with relationships moves to the foreground, as I examine the web of personal relationships that surrounds women's lives. The chapter also considers the significance of others in enabling women to explore their own faith development. Those who have attempted to theorise the processes of women's learning place relationships and connectedness into a central position (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, 1986; Magolda, 1992). The stories heard in this chapter reveal how relationships interact with life events to foster faith formation, but perhaps not so overtly and consistently as the theories might suggest.

For the women in this study their relationships occur within the external world of work, church and society as well as in the everyday web of personal relationships, and underpinning all of these is the elusive yet definite relationship with God. The thesis explores the ways in which the women in this study experience learning in each of these domains, and in particular examines the implications of tension and conflict, considering its significance for personal learning. Whilst the tension and conflict that has characterised so much of the data is less dominant in this chapter, nevertheless the women are still struggling to validate their experiences of learning through relationship.

The most significant relationship for all the women is their relationship with God, although often one of the most debated and contested. **Chapter Six** considers the ways in which the core belief system itself is characterised by tension and doubt. How the women process and reflect on these experiences is therefore an important question. Moreover, it is here that the problem of language is most clearly focused, as the women attempt to define their faith using the language provided by a male-dominated church and theology (Wren, 1989). In addition, the respondents appear to define their development in the language of learning with which they have been provided. However, this language does not seem to fit with the processes that are taking place in their lives. The chapter returns to the central theme of the research, a concern to understand how women learn faith.

In **Chapter 7** I will consider how the women themselves view the ways in which their faith changed and developed during the course of the study. In particular, the ways in which the changes in the women's lives might be considered as learning outcomes is explored. This chapter looks at how the women understood their own lives over the course of the thirty months of the study. There have been few attempts to theorise faith development over a lifespan, the most notable being Fowler's theory of faith development (Fowler, 1981). This theory concentrates on faith as a process unfolding through linear stages across life. It does not consider the actual process of learning. Conversely, those writers who have been concerned with religious learning have approached the field of study from a content perspective rather than a concern with the process (for example Francis and Thatcher, 1990). Yet, as I shall indicate, learning faith is a process that takes place primarily through every day life. It consists of a conscious commitment to a belief system, and a deliberate thinking through of daily events in order to bring meaning from them. The outcome of this

process can be seen in a series of behavioural judgements or developments, particularly in the area of relationships. This does not mean that behaviour alters, or that judgements are markedly different. They may be, or they may be a deepening of an existing position.

**In conclusion** I will consider the extent to which the tension and struggle in women's learning of faith might be a gender issue. I will suggest that whilst the learning in the women's lives is indeed valid, it is not acknowledged as learning by the women in this study, and will suggest some alternative vocabulary that endeavours to identify more closely with women's incidental learning of faith.

## **CONCLUSION**

Letty Russell, perhaps one of the matriarchs of feminist religious scholarship, developed a model of the 'household of freedom' as an alternative to patriarchy (1990). She suggests that household is an important metaphor for women, and that it needs to be developed as a place where authority is that of wisdom born from struggle, rather than imposed by domination. This thesis attempts to listen to the stories of a group of women, and focus on their learning as one dimension in which they might begin to find a way forward into the household of freedom. In the context of a current dominant discourse of education founded on patriarchal values, this research highlights the importance of the ordinary in forming identity, values and community.

## CHAPTER 1 RESEARCH DILEMMAS

### INTRODUCTION

In essence this thesis can be described as a longitudinal study conducted over the past two-and-a-half years. Its main research questions focus on the ways in which religious faith is learned and experienced in women's lives. The study involved a group of eight women, aged between 35 and 55, each of whom is actively involved in the Anglican Church. I met with the women regularly in this time period, using an unstructured interview approach to explore their everyday concerns. I also participated in aspects of their religious lives in order to deepen my knowledge of these areas. Yet, these somewhat bald statements belie the complex questions and dilemmas that are raised during the research process. Religious belief is intensely personal and often private. As I have listened to the women talking, I have often felt that I have been involved in a very intimate process, one that is akin to listening to people talking about sexuality or other intimate subjects.

Within the research methodology literature, the subject of intimacy is usually equated with issues of sex and sexuality. Nevertheless, there are other areas that remain very personal. These may vary across cultures, as well as for individuals. One definition offered for intimacy is that it concerns topics that are still not openly talked about in our society, or which are condemned by society, for example racist views, or a sexual interest in children (Lee, 1993). Intimacy might also include subjects that are very close to the recipients' own personal identity, such as tragedy or a moment of revelation.

As suggested in the introduction to this thesis, the story of the research itself is also a story of tension and conflict. This tension is encountered both in terms of the theoretical debates around the nature of feminist research, and also in the practical

application as research is conducted with real people sharing intimate details of their lives.

In this chapter I will give an account of the research process, considering how the issues and dilemmas that arise in practise connect to some of the theoretical debates surrounding the choice of research methodology. Research methodology and methods are not themselves neat boxes into which particular studies slot. They are rather a complex interplay of theories, methods and the realities of time, place and persons (Fine and Deegan, 1996). I will begin by considering the relationship between researcher, topic and methodology, and consider the extent to which these concerns are also central to a feminist research perspective (Reinharz, 1992). I will then consider the issues involved in data collection, looking at the nature of the research relationship, particularly in a feminist ethnographic study. Finally I will consider something I will call response-ability: the researcher's own ability to respond to the material offered, as well as her responsibility for that which has been shared.

## **1.0 RESEARCH TOPIC AND METHODOLOGY: mutually dependent?**

### **1.1. Researching spirituality: a sensitive subject?**

My interest in this particular research topic grew out of several inter-connected concerns. The first, and academic, interest developed from the research I undertook for my Master's thesis. This was concerned with the issue of training opportunities for women teaching Sunday school. During my interviews with a group of women I began to wonder about their wider experiences of life as Christian women. The second strand of interest is personal: I have been involved in Christianity for many years, and my own realisation and questioning of my experience as a woman attracted me to explore the whole area of women's spirituality further. Thirdly I have been involved in developing and presenting adult education in a Christian

context for some time. Hence I am interested in the ways in which learning is understood in a church context.

Card (1991) raises the question of why we chose some research topics and approaches and not others, suggesting that the issues that we choose to work on often come from our own particular experiences and relationships, an argument also echoed by Josselson and Lieblich (1993). Hence, out of my own experiences and relationships grew my research interests about the learning of faith in women's lives. Selecting a research method may be seen as simply a technical question, or more fundamentally, an issue of philosophical approach to the whole question of research (Stanley, 1990; Merriam, 1988). The choice of a research strategy is not simply a matter of preference, but rather a reflection of an epistemological standpoint, which also remains intrinsically linked to the research questions and issues that the research seeks to address. Methods flow out of methodology and epistemology, and are not necessarily intrinsically valid, but their usefulness is rather constrained by their value to a particular research question (Henwood and Pigeon, 1993). Given that my research questions were concerned with women's lives and in particular religion in women's lives I found myself considering the extent to which personal beliefs might constitute a sensitive research area.

The definition of sensitive research given by Lee (1993) is broadly conceived as research that constitutes a threat, whether a threat to the individual being researched or a more broad societal or political threat. This very wide definition means that at the beginning of a project any given topic may or may not be conceived as sensitive, but may later appear to become more threatening and difficult (Renzetti and Lee, 1993). I have chosen to use the term 'intimate' research to focus this definition towards the more personal nature of this study. Intimate research is concerned with

topics of a personal, and perhaps emotionally charged, nature. Many of the studies concerned with intimate research are concerned with sexuality and related issues. Rarely are they related to spirituality. Exceptionally, in some areas of theological and spiritual research explicit connection is made between sexuality and spirituality (Matthews, 1990; Ellison, 1996). Thus, I want to consider the ways in which the issues raised in exploring sexuality are also found in researching spirituality. I shall begin the process of considering the implications of research into intimate areas, by looking at some of the issues raised in earlier surveys into sexuality, using a study called “Sex surveyed: 1949- 1994 (Stanley, 1995).

Stanley’s text focuses on the use of the mass sex survey in Britain, which has been used to measure changing attitudes to sexual behaviour over the past 50 years or so. In particular she concentrates on research undertaken in 1949 known as ‘little Kinsey’. This study shows clearly that a number of key ideas about research into sensitive topics were already being explored in the 1930s and 40s, ideas that are still central.

The first theme is the notion that the observer needs to be an insider, or at least a “knowing” member of the context being researched. Alongside this were ideas about research as a collaborative activity, which involved both formal and informal aspects of people’s lives. This meant that following up overheard conversations and observing behaviour could be just as important as asking direct questions. These questions relate directly to the kind of ethnographic study I have undertaken, where boundaries are blurred, as I become increasingly involved in the lives of the women in the study.

The second major theme, which resonates throughout research into sensitive and intimate topics, is the relationship between the researcher and the respondents. The

first of three implications arising from this is connected with the researcher's expectations when approaching the research participants. Those preparing to do the mass survey in 1949 anticipated inhibition and embarrassment from people when asked to talk about their attitudes to sexual matters. However, they were surprised at the level of co-operative open responses they actually obtained in both interviews and questionnaires, although some people were reluctant and unco-operative.

Secondly, there is still some indication that people have a faint uneasiness and initial embarrassment about the topic, before becoming interested in the interview and even enjoying the experience. The third implication arising from the 'little Kinsey' account is that the level of participant ease depends on the attitude of the researcher.

Whilst not necessarily named in these terms, the methodological and epistemological concerns arising from the 1949 study highlight the importance of the researcher, a concern not just pertinent to the study of sensitive topics, but also at the heart of feminist and other perspectives on research (Stanley, 1995).

These three concerns raised in 1949 are still relevant today when researchers begin to investigate areas of sensitive and personal concern. The same issues emerged in researching spirituality - some of the women remained uneasy throughout the study, unsure of the appropriateness of discussing the most important and private relationship in their lives with a stranger, albeit one with insider understanding. It was therefore important for the respondents that I was comfortable and familiar with talking about spiritual matters. In spite of a much greater openness in our society in areas such as sexuality, there is still a sense of taboo over a number of subjects, including my own area of interest, religious faith.

One of the ways in which the concerns raised in the research of intimate subjects might be answered is within a feminist framework. However, feminist research in

religion and spirituality is itself subject to particular tensions. O'Connor (1995) argues that feminist research is concerned to criticise, correct and transform 'universal' given concepts. In researching religion this involves questioning fundamental concepts, metaphors and ethics. Feminists working in the field of religious studies encounter difficulties as they try to question the basis on which religious knowledge is established, which is often based on divine authority and moral absolutes (Christ, 1993). Feminist theology, and feminist research methodologies developed in the course of feminist explorations of religious belief, challenge patriarchal worldviews. This research is within this tradition, seeking to explore the ways in which assumptions about hierarchical ways of knowing have affected women's personal spiritual growth.

Whilst an awareness of the intimate nature of the subject informed both the methodology and methods that I used in the study, of greater influence was this awareness of the feminist concern to understand women's lives.

## **1.2 Researching intimate lives: a feminist issue**

The question of exactly what constitutes feminist research is much wider than simply researching women's lives, and considerable debate continues to take place as to the nature of research enquiry that is concerned with issues of gender. One of the most fundamental questions raised is the extent to which there truly is a distinctive feminist method of inquiry (Harding, 1987; Mies, 1991), and if so what would be the key characteristics of such a method. As feminist research methodology developed it seemed that the core concern or goal of feminist research was to answer women's questions (Harding, 1987, Acker et al, 1991), and to understand the issues in women's lives within the context of their social structures. The feminist concern with valuing individual accounts is parallel with the concern in intimate research with

access and relationship, placing a high value on the research as subject rather than object. The research methods employed within a feminist framework, and related to intimate topics, will need to reflect the value placed on the individual as a person (Skeggs, 1997).

However, feminist perspectives on research have concerns that are broader than a concern with research methods. There are a number of distinctive features, which stem from the concern to understand women's lives, and to conduct research in such a way that researcher and researched are equally appreciated. These distinctives are closely related to the epistemological questions at the heart of this research, as they are concerned with how knowledge is formed in women's lives.

Given that a feminist perspective is borne out of a realisation that knowledge has been dominated exclusively by male understandings, one of the primary understandings of feminist research is that women's lives are formed in the experience of oppression (Fonow and Cook, 1991; Skeggs, 1997). The women in this research do not superficially fit the usual criteria of oppression. They are white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, Christian women - and yet they too have a story of struggle to tell. Feminist research is also concerned to focus on the actual circumstances and events of women's lives, asking questions about the issues that occupy their time, space and thought (Fonow, 1991). The methodology used in this research has focused on contact with the minutiae of women's lives, listening to accounts of events, both large and small, which have affected women's outer and inner lives.

A further distinctive of feminist research is a concern to create knowledge which can be used by women and others to make a difference (Kelly, 1994). There is currently some debate as to whether this is a realistic goal, and in particular whether social

action is a compatible goal within a post-modern, post-structuralist feminist epistemology (Morley, 1996; Francis, 1998; Kelly, 1994). However, like Francis, I feel that feminist research has to be concerned to make a difference to women's lives, perhaps by raising awareness or fostering understanding, and maybe by provoking action and different ways of working.

The tension in feminist research comes from resisting generalisations that trivialise or disempower, and yet acknowledging that there are still underlying values permeating whole sectors of society. A further tension emerges in the gap that emerges between inaccessible and arcane arguments about the nature of being (Kelly, 1994; Maynard and Purvis, 1994), and the realities of women's lives.

Feminist research is concerned with creating knowledge and understanding of women's lives, and in doing so there is a pull between two worlds - the world of women's experience, and the world of academic knowledge.

The desire to create and develop research techniques which countered the prevailing pre-occupation with objectification, and also engaged with the nature of the research relationship itself, led to the identification of certain methods as being particularly feminist (Acker et al, 1991; Maynard, 1994). This has generally led to an emphasis on qualitative methods, which generate data that allow for context and relationship to be analysed. However, qualitative methods are not automatically compatible with a feminist methodology (Stanley and Wise, 1993).

Qualitative methods in social research are concerned with building up a deeper level of understanding of human social behaviours, not just a description or analysis of patterns (Gilbert, 1993; Henwood, 1993; Richardson, 1996). This approach reflects a naturalistic philosophy, in which behaviour and experience are understood in the context in which they occur, and the complex nature of situations is taken into

account (Henwood, 1993). A further aspect of this approach is that it consciously takes into account the presence of the researcher in the process, and makes spaces for her values and judgements (Stanley and Wise, 1991), all of which resonate with feminist values.

However, the process of exploring epistemological and ontological issues, that is the philosophy underpinning the choice of methods, suggests that feminist research is more than a choice of technique (Reinharz, 1992. Morley, 1996). Feminist research is engaged with fundamental questions about what it is possible to know, and how women acquire that knowledge, before being concerned with how those question are themselves explored (Skeggs, 1997).

Reinharz would then argue that feminism is not a research method, but rather a perspective from which one conducts research. That perspective takes as its starting point the basis that women's lives are important. Hence, feminist research is more than method - it is an entirely different research focus, which will lead to questions about every aspect of the process and the outcome. Research questions may highlight the need for change, so feminist research may also engage with political concerns and actions (Morley, 1996). This itself places the feminist researcher into a place of tension, as she attempts to maintain this feminist perspective, whilst at the same time engaging with method and methodology that have been developed and validated within a male knowledge system.

The development of feminist research perspectives does not stand in isolation from other developments in research thinking, but rather stands in a familial relationship with other key developments. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) identify five key 'moments' in research understanding, suggesting that since 1990 the foremost concern has been with the validity of various post-modern approaches to research.

Feminist research also connects to interpretivist and constructivist traditions, whereby the goal is to understand the world from the point-of-view of those who occupy it. For feminists, this means identifying the ways in which women create meaning from their particular position in the social world (Schwandt, 1994).

Underlying all of these approaches is the concern to place personal experience at the heart of the research, and to value individual accounts of understanding and meaning. However, not all of these approaches are characterised by the concern to understand *women's* experiences that characterises feminist research.

More recent research strategies also desire to challenge the meta-narratives developed by positivist and enlightenment understanding to give explanations of human behaviour (Packwood, 1996). The post-modern approach to research highlights the individual's account of events, and allows for an alternative construction of micro-narratives. This has been one of the key themes in feminist research debate in recent years, as the validity of this approach is argued. Thus, one of the difficulties of post-modern approaches to research is that they negate the possibility of finding solutions, suggesting instead that the immediate experience of now is sufficiently valid of itself. This makes it very difficult to generalise about women's circumstances, and to propose strategies for change that might transform lives (Morley, 1996; Francis, 1998). A further tension for feminist researchers attempting to work within a post-modern paradigm is that of the power dynamic inherent in the research process (Scheurich, 1995; Morley, 1996). The values underpinning feminist research, and the tensions that follow, become more focused when the chosen research methods move from theory to the reality of meeting individuals and collecting data.

## **2.0 DATA COLLECTION: Interview or friendship?**

### **2.1 Selecting participants**

The initial decisions I made about who to involve in the study were based on both practical and academic criteria. I decided to recruit the research participants from within the Anglican Church, because Anglicans still represent 50% of Protestant church going in England (Brierley, 1998). By focusing on one denomination I also limited the possibility of variables in learning experiences. For example, different denominations have different strategies and methods for approaching adult education. Additionally by concentrating on the Church of England I could build up a depth of knowledge about the organisation and its practices and values, which provides invaluable background to an ethnographic study. I also chose to work only with women, as this research is concerned with women's experiences, as they stand, not in any comparative sense with the ways in which men might experience faith. Nevertheless, although the Church of England is one denomination, it embraces a wide range of theological views and practices (Bunting, 1996). Historically, the different standpoints within the church are known as types of 'churchmanship', a term that I wish to acknowledge and then replace with the phrase 'church-way'. The three main types of 'church-way' that exist in the Church of England are the Anglo-Catholic tradition, the evangelical tradition and the moderate or 'middle-of-the-road' tradition (Baker, 1996). Evangelicals are generally more focused on Biblical authority, whilst Anglo-Catholics place a greater emphasis on the importance of worship and sacraments. The moderate tradition emphasises a balance between these two, mediated by reason and tradition.

I selected the women for the study to represent each of these strands. I made no other attempt to select the women on other criteria and, through using my own

networks, was able to identify eight women in three different geographical locations who were interested in participating in the project. Three of the women came from an industrial market town in the Midlands, although during the course of the study one of these moved to the North-West. Two women came from affluent suburban Home Counties, and the remaining three from a manufacturing town in the South East. They were chosen because they were actively involved in their own local church in some capacity, although for some of them this changed during the course of the study. All of the women had been married, but one of them was widowed and childless, whilst the others had had children. The oldest respondent was in her mid-fifties, and the youngest was in her early thirties. All of except one engaged in paid work, although for two of the women this was work that allowed them to be home-based, and only the two women with adult children worked full-time.

The women were interviewed at approximately 5 month intervals, and during the 30 months of the study each of them was interviewed 6 times. The taped part of the interviews usually lasted about an hour and a half, although I often spent two or more hours overall with each respondent. The interviews were largely unstructured, beginning with a discussion of life since the last meeting. As the research progressed I sometimes focused on specific issues, for example asking each of them to talk about their image and perception of God. I also began to feedback to them some of my thinking, and sometimes the comments of other respondents.

If feminism is the research epistemology or perspective within which I am working, then the methodological approach I am using in this study is situated in the area of ethnography. As has already been suggested, the research process is not always neatly tied up and labelled. Methodologies and methods blur together, and new terminologies are created (Miller and Dingwall, 1997). Ethnography has

traditionally been characterised by intense sharing in the world of the researched, including an understanding of the language and symbol (Denzin, 1989). There is also a concern for the process itself and to explore the identity of both researched and researcher.

In my case, my identity is significant in terms of my ability to immerse myself into the research context. I am a white, middle-class single woman, aged 41, actively involved in Christian activities for a number of years, and an active participant in the Church of England. My own identity as a Christian enabled me to establish contact with the respondents, both at the level of locating them and in terms of relationship. However, the common ground that we shared also opened up the possibilities of friendship. These women were the kind of women I might meet in my own circle of acquaintance. It was easy for me to understand the religious terminology employed by the women, and to appreciate some of the metaphoric and symbolic significance of some of their comments and experiences. However, the research relationship is ambivalent. Alongside the insider similarities that allowed for access and relationship, there is also the tension of my own feminist beliefs and the ways in which my spirituality differed from theirs. Additionally, as a researcher there may sometimes be a need to maintain a distance. These are all research dilemmas that emerge during the building and maintaining of relationship.

## **2.2 Access: making relationships**

Although there are several ways of gathering data about a respondent's life, including observation, documents, photographs and diaries, I am most concerned with the process of interviewing, which is often a central component of researching individual lives. Talking to someone is an integral normal part of our lives. Yet the particular form of talk that constitutes the research interview has some peculiarities

that set it apart from everyday talk, for example the time-span might necessarily be contracted. However, when asking people to share intimate details of their lives it is also necessary to establish some of the conventions that exist for so-called normal talk. Again this raises the possibility of the nature of the research relationship, which might unfold in ways similar to an emerging friendship, or even to a counselling situation (King, 1996).

The first concern is to establish contact. Much of the literature on access, particularly with intimate or sensitive topics, is concerned with the ethics and practicalities of contacting individuals (Lee, 1993; Hornsby-Smith, 1993). In my research I was able to identify possible participants as a result of the networks I operate in through my own religious beliefs and practice. Using those networks I obtained the names of women who might be interested in taking part in the study. Without exception every one approached agreed to participate, and also stayed with the research though the whole process, approximately two-and-a-half years. Initial meetings centred around our mutual interests, and throughout the interviews there has been an implicit assumption that I am in agreement with the things they believe. However, I found that the research process impacted on my own theological and spiritual development, so that my views and values were different at times from the women.

Finch (1986, 1993) considers the implications of access in her research on professional wives, in particular the extent to which it helps that the researcher is an insider. She notes and questions the extent to which people confided in her because she is a woman, and also held the same role as her research participants. She goes on to question the ethics of “trading on that identity” as she phrases it. This has been an issue in my research - the women tell me things on the assumption that I agree with

them and hold a similar worldview. But whilst I remain an insider, there are times when I disagree with the views they express.

As Back (1993) found there is a dilemma about how the researcher responds to a participant who makes statements, with which she profoundly disagrees, or even finds offensive (Armstrong, 1993). Back concludes that it is important to maintain one's personal integrity, and express disagreement. However, I have not found that particularly easy when a person is offering a closely held religious belief or experience, perhaps out of a desire to avoid controversy. This debate has been raised in the area of sexuality, in particular around the question of whether a heterosexual can research homosexuality (Rhoades, 1997). One of the issues is the issue of language: how far can we understand someone when they use a language with which we, as researchers, are unfamiliar? The women in my study will talk easily of 'the Lord', using terminology which I am familiar with, but which an outsider might need to negotiate in order to understand. However, whilst this might make initial access easier, it may mean that the researcher presumes understanding without probing fully the respondent's statements. An outsider has to seek clarification of terms and images. This is a further aspect of the access question. Access is not just a matter of being able to make contact, but there is also a need to build a particular type of relationship.

Some of the literature seems to ignore completely the work involved in building relationships in order to create the space in which a person might talk about deeply personal and intimate subjects. Research method 'classics', such as Denzin (1989) and Miles and Huberman (1984) for example, seem only to allude to this aspect of the research task, concentrating instead on the mechanics of the procedure. Whilst some authors acknowledge that the process is not neutral, they also fail to offer real

insights into the emotional work involved in talking about intimate lives (Agar, 1980). Anthropological accounts can give a greater insight into the process, for example Back (1993), O'Brien (1993), where it becomes clear that the interview is by no means an easy dialogue. Again feminist research methodology has made a significant contribution to an understanding that the research interview process is not a one way relationship but is rather an inter-active process requiring input from both the interviewer and the interviewed (for example Finch, 1993; Shakespeare et al, 1993).

### **2.3 Trust: building the research relationship**

One of the key factors in research which involves talking about intimate and personal subjects is the establishment of trust (Lee, 1993). The researcher is going to ask a person to tell some of the most personal things in her life, and this requires her to make herself vulnerable to the researcher. As has already been suggested, one of the issues in intimate research might be the extent to which the researcher needs to be an insider in order to establish trust. But how far can you separate your research self from your functional self if you are truly an insider? (Elliott, 1991) Some would argue that you can never truly be an insider, belonging to the world being researched, or alternatively that researching in your own backyard inevitably leads to confusion, and a complex relationship between the author and subject (Hobbs and May, 1993). Yet establishing trust would seem to be an essential part of the data gathering process, and one which is not clearly spoken about in the method literature. Research participants reveal aspects of their lives that they might never talk about to their closest friends or life partners. Yet, after a short introduction they begin to tell a relative stranger all kinds of intimate, personal, even secret details, trusting that the researcher is non-judgmental.

For some this process is akin to the confessional, or the therapist, and at least one of my participants found the process therapeutic, again suggesting a blurring of relationship boundaries (King, 1996) However, others found it intrusive and strange. At the close of our final interview, after the tape had stopped recording, Val told me how at time she had wanted to ask me never to call again. She said that she had found the process unnatural, and that I made her feel as if she was “taking her clothes off in public.” The unnatural feeling came because she did most of the talking. I didn’t contradict or offer personal insights into her situation, or do any of the things she would expect from a typical friendship. This raises the question of Val’s expectations of a relationship, which were coloured by notions of friendship and reciprocity.

Gathering data through interviews is not just about successfully negotiating a series of techniques. Textbooks offer suggestions to help the novice researcher create a relaxed environment, but they appear to be largely based on good social skills (Wolcott, 1995a). A competent researcher could do all of this and still fail to allow a person to share intimate details of their life. A successful research relationship requires more than just the techniques used to establish access and contact. In the next section I am going to consider the way in which the relationship is sustained over time and the extent to which the researcher needs to be vulnerable herself.

#### **2.4 Sustaining relationships: Detachment or mutual concern**

“What is required of an ethnographer is neither full membership nor competence but the ability to give voice to that experience, and to bridge between the experiences of actors and audience, ‘authenticity’ and ‘distance’. (Hobbs and May, 1993, p xviii)

Hobbs and May sum up one strand of argument: that which would keep the relationship at a distance, and always held in tension. Yet when one is expecting

someone to talk about intimate subjects, I am not convinced that this level of detachment is either permissible or sustainable. If I have gained access to this individual because of my insider connections, then the probability is that I already share some of her experiences, values, convictions and beliefs. . Josselson and Lieblich (1993) suggest that there is indeed a relationship between the author of any particular piece of research and the research subject itself. They then go on to link this to the research process itself. Josselson and Lieblich raise the question of how much we need to know of someone else before we understand something about them. This has implications for the length and nature of interviews when researching intimate aspects of lives.

It can take a long time to build up a level of trust and to find out enough information in order to pave the way for sharing more personal details. The anthropologist or ethnographer will need to do more than just conduct a series of interviews, but will need to engage in social situations, discover background, consider the broader context and so on. For me, this has meant reading the books that one of my participants has had published, attending their churches, chatting with them at conferences, reading up about some of their other interests, just to help colour in the background to individual lives.

West (1996) also discusses this dynamic, becoming aware that in asking questions of other people, he was also wanting to understand issues in his own life. I can identify with this - listening to other's stories of spiritual experience and reflection has changed my own understanding too. I have explored different types of spirituality and sometimes the metaphors and images the respondents used impacted my thoughts about the nature of God. The researcher is bounded by the same conventions and expectations of relationships as the respondent. So I wonder how

much the researcher needs to share of her own story in order to build mutual relationship, and, if she does, this sharing of mutuality can raise difficulties.

When I listen to transcripts I can sometimes hear myself sharing my own experiences, thoughts, and responses, and I feel guilty, thinking that I am supposed to be listening to the respondent. I read Wolcott (1995b), telling me that to do better interviewing I need to talk less and listen more, to listen creatively, and to keep my questions short and to the point. I am bounded both by social conventions and academic conventions. My social awareness leads me to reciprocity, but the idea of the detached scientist is strong.

Yet if I want a person to share their vulnerable raw moments with me, then maybe I need to be raw and vulnerable myself. I know that sometimes I get round this by talking before and after the interview, off the tape, over coffee, but sometimes the relationship is developing mutually and we share together. For example Imogen was telling me how she felt in starting a new job in a large organisation, and I found myself responding conversationally by sharing my own experiences and learning from a similar time in my life. After the formal interview, Imogen told me how glad she was to know that “I’m not the only one to feel this way”. Did I transgress a boundary? How much am I collaborating, including, and how much am I being other? (Fonow, 1991) Within a feminist perspective, where I am consciously aware of my own worldview, and reflecting on the research association, then it seems appropriate that I should also be vulnerable in the relationship.

## **2.5 Sustaining relationship: emotional work**

Research involves emotional work as well as intellectual response. It is not always planned and rational, but one is inevitably drawn into relationship through the research process. As with all human relationships there are implications and

consequences. It can seem as if the research touches personal vulnerabilities, which can create a tension between the personal and the academic (Schratz and Walker, 1995; Layder, 1993). There is a sense in which the distancing of self from research is still felt to be the ‘right’ way of doing research, however much we are influenced by the literature on the place of self in the research. And when disturbed by emotion during the interview, I find myself feeling guilty for being non-academic at that moment. Two moments from my data illustrate the impact of emotion, whether from the respondent or within the researcher. The first is when the participant, Sally, suddenly begins to weep during the interview.

Sally: I think, personally, the other thing is that I’ve lost my prayer partner. They moved in March, February, and I’ve really found that very hard, because Lindsey really knew, she really knew me. And she knew, she knew that I had feet of clay. She could read when I was feeling under pressure, when I was stressed (sigh), so, that is hard. I still miss her an awful lot (voice breaks, begins to cry.) Sorry. I didn’t know there was a bubble of emotion just there about that. I think its because you miss her at the start, you miss her because of who she is, but then you miss just having somebody who does know you.

*SM: Yeah because then.. Its like when I moved to London, all the people I know are elsewhere. People don’t know your life, they don’t know where you’ve come from, you know, so you meet new people, but you have to, they haven’t known all the history of you, and who you are and what makes you up to be who you are .. and that’s hard, cos they aren’t the people who can just respond cos they know all the things that have happened and why some circumstances you react in a certain way or why somebody upset you. And it’s not easy to replace that.*

Sally: No, that’s the thing. I mean part of me hasn’t wanted to. I just cannot face going through that process all over again of self revelation if you like, I’m not a person who finds it very easy to get close to people like that.”

At the moment when the transcript indicates that Sally’s voice breaks, I turned the tape off for a while. Later, I offered a personal story in return as it were, offering my vulnerability to match Sally’s.

This fragment is particularly interesting, because Sally is a writer of popular Christian books, and has just published a kind of family diary. The entry for June 14th reads:

“The bubble of emotion simmering inside me for the last week came to the surface and burst this morning in response to a question. Someone asked me if I missed my close friend, who moved away at the end of February.

‘No, not really,’ I lied and promptly burst into tears. Denial is such a powerful thing. Missing my friend has been only one thread in a whole tangled bundle of difficulties and disappointments this month, and I hadn’t allowed myself to stop and think about it. My interrogator had pulled the right thread and found she’d unravelled the whole knotted mess. Thankfully she had time to stick around and help me tidy up my frayed emotions. Talking it all through was immensely helpful. I didn’t need advice, guidance or direction. All I really needed was someone to listen with understanding. People who can do this are a gift from God.”

As I read Sally’s account of the emotional moment in the research interview, I find myself wondering, but is this what researchers are meant to do? Or is it what friends do? Sally is also aware of the contradictions within the relationship, using the word ‘interrogator’ to describe me, suggesting a power imbalance. However, she goes on to describe the encounter using the language of friendship and gratitude. As Sally and I have come to know each other, the boundaries of the research relationship begin to blend into those of friendship.

It can be equally difficult when the respondent talks of things that trigger emotions in the researcher. On one occasion I listened with real emotion to Ruth’s harrowing account of watching her mother-in-law die.

“We were terribly well cared for by the hospital and the doctors who looked after Mum, and who looked after us. It was lovely seeing the nurses caring for her in a very special way, not in a sort of functional way. Every time they washed her, just the care they took with her face, for instance. They didn’t just wipe her face over; they did round her eyes and eyelids, and brushed her hair, and all that, all the time. If we weren’t there, there were nurses to hold her hand, and that was lovely. It was really great to see how much care people can give to somebody who they didn’t know particularly. ...

We spent a very harrowing night, Thursday night, I’s mum was fighting very hard, not wanting to close her eyes, would not relax. The staff said they had given her more drug relief and sedatives than the doctors had ever been able to give to any person before, and they did not dare give her any more. And that was probably, very humbling, we were unable, they were unable to settle her down.. Their aim is to have somebody pain free and as conscious as they can be, and they’d done everything they could to make her sleep, and they couldn’t. And I was sitting praying by her bed, and I was praying for

her to die, because I just, you know, I was saying to God, well, why can't she die now?" (Ruth)

As I listen to this kind of very personal account I feel I am increasingly being drawn into friendship. A group of students from Vermont explored this idea, (Busier et al, 1997), defining intimate relationships as those with "qualities of care and friendship as well as revelation of and respect for, personal vulnerabilities" (p165). If this broad definition is used to explore the interview relationship, then the relationship is often one of intimacy. When I am hearing Ruth's experiences of death and how she battled with God during that time, then I am experiencing and respecting personal vulnerabilities.

Busier et al (1997) go on to consider the implications of a research relationship which becomes sexually intimate, particularly considering the need for the researcher to be reflexive, and to consider especially questions of power and ethics. They suggest that the research interview needs an ethic of collaboration, which avoids imposition, and features mutual confirmation. Although Busier and her colleagues are concerned with sexual relationships, the boundaries of the research relationship can change in other ways. Sharing spiritual experiences and vulnerabilities may see the relationship change from researcher and respondent to mutual friendship.

The developing closeness of these relationships is not entirely one-sided either. As I am increasingly concerned with the events in the women's lives, so too they become involved in my life, asking questions and giving comment. One of the difficulties with the blurred nature of these relationships comes when the research time-scale ends. The researcher has a responsibility to exit the research process well. She needs to think through the implications of the final interview or meeting, and to consider the question of where the relationship will go in the future. Ethnographic

methodologies acknowledge that the research act is not a neat and tidy process, but one which can leave threads hanging, questions unanswered and lives changed. As this relationship of trust unfolds, the researcher then has to make an appropriate response to the disclosures and stories that have been shared. The relationship between researcher and researched becomes a series of transcripts, and the relationship is no longer person to person, but researcher to data. However, this does not eliminate research dilemmas, but rather opens up a new set of questions, including analysis and writing. The issue now is one that I have termed response-ability - that is, the researcher's task is now in responding to and being responsible for the data.

### **3.0 DATA ANALYSIS: responding to the data**

Although the process of collecting data might be characterised by the development of intimate trusting relationships, the subsequent activities of analysing and presenting the data also present a number of dilemmas for a feminist ethnographer. The relationship between the researcher and the researched does not become more objective, although it may seem that bias is more easily eliminated at this stage (Jayaratne, 1993; Bryman, 1988). In fact, the researcher's self is still contextually situated, although perhaps now constrained by other demands particularly those of academia. It is in the academic analysis of data that I become most aware of myself as engaged in a distinctive endeavour that is always in danger of constituting the women in the data as objects or as 'Other' (Skeggs, 1997). It is easy to lose sight of the relationship when one begins to work with words on a screen.

Farran (1990) explored this sense of losing the individual in the data. Although her concern was with a statistical analysis, the same happens with a qualitative transcript. Data analysis is still infused with my assumptions about the world, and influenced by

the decisions I make as to the meaning inherent in any bit of conversation (Burgess, 1984; Wilson, 1995). I considered various approaches to data analysis, and began with the generation of concepts, by working closely through a number of transcripts (Bryman and Burgess, 1994). However, the reality of working with the text means that a number of other processes are taking place. I transcribed all my own interviews so I was always aware of nuances of speech and of mannerisms, and could also recall the physical surroundings of each interview. I became accustomed to accent and vocabulary, to references to friends and family. All of these build into my analysis of the data, although they cannot be explicitly recorded. My mind makes sudden connections and juxtapositions - and my memory betrays me, as I recall what I think I heard rather than what is in the transcript. Discourse analysis is a methodological strategy that does engage with data in this way, analysing every nuance and detail of both textual and actual research encounters (Britzman, 1995; Potter, 1996). However, although I refer to discourse(s) frequently, I did not work within a discourse analysis framework, finding that the detailed engagement with dialogue loses sight of individuals and real lives to a greater extent than the ethnographic approach I have taken.

Dey (1993) likens the process of analysis to that of a jigsaw, classifying pieces into types, then into closer and closer detail. However, my experience would be closer to that of a box of Lego bricks - knowing there are patterns, but never being fully aware of what the end result would look like. The process of data analysis is closely related to the method and methodology employed. The more fluid and open-ended the approach to data collecting, the more kaleidoscopic the resulting data may appear (Sanger, 1996). The unstructured and wide-ranging nature of my research interviews meant that the data was also unstructured and wide-ranging, creating the need for

complex explanations and analysis. The literature seems to imply that the analytical process will be either theory to research or research to theory, but in practice it is considerably more complex and variable (Stanley and Wise, 1991; Measor and Woods, 1991).

Reflexivity is also integral to the analytic phase just as much as to the generation of research questions and to the data collection. Within a feminist research framework reflexivity is essential in helping the researcher to maintain awareness of her own beliefs and values (Stanley and Wise, 1993). Reflexivity also increases the complexity of the analysis, as it continually exposes both the data and the process to question. Because it is not a neat, linear, staged sequence, I found myself moving between analysis and interviews within the same time frame. This allowed me to feedback some of my thoughts to the women and to reflect again on meanings and frameworks, developing a more evolutionary flow (Shakespeare et al, 1993).

As a feminist researcher I tried to maintain awareness of the power structures inherent in both interviewing and analysis, and the potential for it to become paternalistic (Scheurich, 1995). The questions raised during the analysis become more sharply focused as the final task of writing commences. In attempting to remain responsible and responsive towards the data I found myself asking how do I keep the sense of a person after dissecting their offering of themselves into various categories? Intimate lives can quickly become dismembered fragments, and one of the researcher's abilities to respond is how we keep an integrity about the data during analysis and writing (West, 1996).

## **4.0 WRITING: response-ability for the data**

### **4.1 Telling spiritual stories**

As the methodology moved from theory to the practical task of writing, I found myself wondering how to write an academic thesis, whilst maintaining the realities of the women's lives in my account. One approach that attempts to face this tension, is that of narrative or story, exploring the extent to which the data is constructed and the researcher herself consciously becomes an author (Coffey, 1996a). Coffey suggests that the researcher will find a mis-match between the data as written and the "real" experience at a later date as a result of this constructive story-telling activity. She suggests that as it is impossible to eliminate one's own consciousness, the researcher should consciously acknowledge her narrative role. In writing the researcher is 'presenting' aspects of a life, not just the chronological account of events, but also an identity and a purpose, as she gives a voice to both the respondent and the researcher (Bornat, 1993; Troyna, 1994; Lal, 1996; Baker, 1998). However, Scheurich (1995) suggests that this aspect of presenting or narrating lives holds within it an inherent paternalism, as it is the researcher who has the power to give voice to the researched and to control how much she reveals of herself and the hidden text of the interview. Like Skeggs (1997) I too am aware of my position as 'privileged researcher' (p35). I am aware that in writing up this thesis I have acted out of a position of control. Skeggs concludes that as a researcher she holds a position of 'epistemic privilege', as an academic standing on the margins of a situation.

Plummer (1995) tries to expand this idea by developing a 'sociology of stories' to explain the ways stories are produced, read and their purpose, suggesting that stories are joint actions between producers and consumers. He also adds in a category of

person involved in the story process that he calls the 'coaxer': the one who persuades the individual to tell her story. In the research process the interviewer becomes the coaxer, providing the motivation and the context in which sometimes previously untold stories can be revealed. The producer of stories is the person who re-tells the story to the listener or reader (Coffey, 1996). In my situation, I become both the coaxer and also the producer of stories.

Plummer suggests that there has become a time when it is acceptable to tell and produce sexual stories, and I have wondered if now is the time to tell and produce spiritual stories. Spirituality is one of the secret facets of a person's life: sex, politics and religion used to be forbidden topics of discussion- but maybe religion is the last taboo! However, currently there is an awakening desire to listen to spiritual accounts, to hear of spiritual experiences, both good and bad, and to accept them as true rather than scoff (Storkey, 1997). A while ago there was disbelief at some of the accounts of sexuality that were offered, but increasingly they have been accepted. Perhaps the time is coming to accept spiritual stories, and the research interviewer who desires to hear and coax into being such stories has a tremendous responsibility.

One of the questions for the researcher is the extent to which she discloses herself in the telling, yet also acknowledges her responsibility for the content and quality of the research, and for protecting the welfare of the subjects (Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995). There are moral dilemmas in the research business, there are principles and prejudices involved (Visweswaran, 1994), and the researcher needs to be able to respond to these issues, to develop appropriate abilities and skills which will enable her to research intimacy in a responsible fashion. This includes being aware of the vulnerability of the participants, honouring promises made, and respecting confidentiality (King, 1996).

## 4.2 Safe-guarding spiritual secrets

There is also the question of responsibility towards putting data into print. The intimate stories that were shared confidentially in a relationship of trust is now to be exposed to public scrutiny. Often respondents offer intimate stories of themselves with caution:

“But I think I felt that some things that happen, things that had a deep effect on you, when you actually recount them to somebody else they sound ridiculous, and I think that’s what worries me a little bit” (Val)

In employing these stories, offered with trepidation, the researcher needs to remain sensitised and hold on to the sense of people talking. Others have a great concern that they will not be identified in any way, as they share a story which might be harmful or considered scandalous. Nina talked often with me about a difficult past relationship with a clergy person.

Nina: Again linking with what I told you last time, and on a more confidential basis. The [person] who I got in such a stew over, I had a long chat with him... along the lines of, it would be lovely to see you again, and I miss you, um, and he thought, he said he’d got to go from A to B a couple of weeks later, and he thought he could detour through, and meet me for lunch  
And he said could I be free on this particular day, and I said yes, so he said right we’ll do that then, and I got very excited about it, about seeing him again. And er, he stood me up! (laugh) He didn’t cancel, no. He just didn’t show! He just never contacted me again ... He didn’t actually ring and firm up the appointment, and say I will meet you at such and such a time, but he just literally never contacted me again at all, not at all. So of course, you got to the day, and I thought, Is he going to turn up out of the blue? Or isn’t he? Or what? So it was very painful. And one of my colleagues at work said to me ‘I don’t know who this man is, Nina, but basically he’s a shit.’ (Laughs) And, yeah, that was very upsetting. And I sent him a postcard. I just wrote on it: Are you a sadist? Think about it.”

Not only have I made a commitment to confidentiality, which is honoured through various mechanisms of disguise, but I have also to think about my response to this story in using it as evidence to support the arguments forwarded in this thesis. To me it can be just another example of conflict within the Church, but for Nina it was sharing a story of bitterness about a difficult and sensitive relationship. The feminist

ethnographic framework has to be able to reflect on these issues as well as concerns about theoretical and methodological integrity.

## CONCLUSION

Various research methodologies offer ways of solving dilemmas concerned with the tensions in the research relationship and process. Within the framework I have chosen there are particular strengths as well as problems.

Conducting research from a feminist perspective means that I have particular goals and concerns in mind throughout the research. I have endeavoured to maintain an awareness of the research respondents as real women, and to hear their stories of the events and thoughts that shape their lives. I have also been aware of my own perspectives in the research, starting with my own personal questions about what it means to be a woman in the Church of England. I am also aware too that the experience of participating in the research has changed all of us (Nesbitt, 1998; King, 1996). For some it has been a rare opportunity to talk about themselves, whilst for others it was painful at times. Often interviews would begin with the respondent saying something like: "I've been thinking about what you asked last time", indicating their engagement with the research.

These are some of the concerns in current debates about feminist methodology, particularly as the effectiveness of post-modern and post-structuralist approaches is questioned (Wolf, 1996). The awareness that the stories I tell in this research are only an account of a particular group of women at a particular moment in time means that the research may not be able to bring about change in social structures. The engagement of self in the process and the awareness that the process itself changes the accounts that the women give can also be problematic.

The particular subject that I have researched turned out to be a subject of perhaps surprising intimacy. The issues that have arisen are akin to those that emerge in the investigation of sexuality and related subjects. An ethnographic methodology has allowed me to become involved in lives, and to explore the religious context in particular, generating a depth of understanding which would have been difficult to gain in other methodologies. It is a privilege to be able to share in people's lives in this way, and one that is both demanding and exciting.

The issues that underlie feminist ethnographic methodologies are concerned with fundamental question as to how women make sense of their world. They are concerned with how they acquire knowledge and how they experience life in a world shaped largely by male concerns. The next chapter begins to explore these questions in the context of the learning of faith.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS KNOWING**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

There have historically been strong links between church and education, and in this chapter I am going to consider the ways in which these two contexts contribute to the ways in which women learn faith. The story that emerges from the data that I collected is a story of struggle, and this chapter begins to explore some of the reasons. Learning faith involves bringing together the values and vocabulary of two areas of cultural significance - that of religion and that of education. The influences of these areas are inter-twined with many other factors in people's lives to give individual faith stories. However, both aspects have particular resonances for women, and have been significant in understanding the ways in which women are perceived in contemporary culture.

In this chapter I will look at where and how the ideas that women have about learning are formed within the frameworks of church and religious education. I will be considering the particular discourses that are made available to women as they attempt to explain their experiences of learning faith, and considering how these contribute to the sense of struggle. This chapter is also concerned with learning and religious hierarchies and the impact these hierarchies have on women's understanding of learning faith.

The chapter will begin by discussing the meaning of 'discourse', and then go on to give an overview of these hierarchies as found in organised religion. It will then consider how religious education has been founded on the same patriarchal values. I will then consider how a feminist epistemology might further illuminate these issues, particularly focusing on oppression, relationship and naming.

## **1.0 DISCOURSE: describing or constructing?**

It is difficult to arrive at a simple definition of the term ‘discourse’, and the exact way in which it is used depends on the particular context (Gunew, 1990). In practice the exact meaning of the term ‘discourse’ is not always apparent. For example, Usher (1997) writes about the ‘discourse of adult education’ (p29), then subsequently about the influences of ‘a variety of discourses’ (p118) on the meaning of experience. It is not clear whether these ‘discourses’ refer to the language of education, or whether they imply a more complex construction of meaning within the frameworks of education. This thesis is also concerned with the discourse(s) of adult education, and this chapter is particularly concerned with the discourse(s) of formal religion and education. Given the complexity of the term ‘discourse’, I want to outline the particular way in which I am using it

Whilst in everyday or general terms ‘discourse’ is used to describe conversational talk, there are two particular levels of meaning that can be attributed to the concept when it is used in a more specialised academic context. Discourse can be understood as the language, both verbal and non-verbal, which is produced by a particular activity (Gunew, 1990). However, it can also be understood as the means by which particular activities are themselves constructed and given meaning (Weedon, 1987; Lewis, 1993; Lyon, 1994). Discourse when used in this sense suggests that outside of language there is no reality (Lyon, 1994). Language itself becomes the means of constructing identity and reality (Weedon, 1987; Duncan, 1996). Hence, discourse is more than just the means of articulating ideas and opinions. It is also the practices, structures, and the power relationships in which people find themselves (Henwood, 1998; Lewis 1993). Lewis (1993) goes on to define discourse as stories that we tell both to and of ourselves, and suggests that these stories are a means of negotiating

position relative to power and authority. Foucault used the term ‘discourse’ to include not only ideas and practices, but also the production of knowledge and the formation of behaviour (Woodward, 1997). Within this meaning discourses are true only so far as they are accepted as true, and their validity is measured by reference to other discourses and by their acceptance within a given environment.

This understanding of discourse as constructive is different from the sense in which I am using the term. Discourse includes language as the means to articulate ideas, opinions and experiences: it is the expression of worldview or ideology. It encompasses spoken or unspoken words, as well as metaphor and symbol. Symbol is a particularly significant and potentially powerful aspect of discourse, especially within the discourse(s) of religion (Rees, 1992). Discourse also embraces the structures and practices of the social setting. Within the discourse(s) of education and religion this means the institution of the church or education provider. Thus, discourse as I am using it is concerned with the expressed meaning and effect of beliefs and values within lives.

However, language itself is “neither a neutral tool or a transparent reflection of reality” (Gunew, 1990, p19). It can be understood as the means of interaction between cultural conventions, vocabulary and the recipients. So within any individual or communal life there are multiple discourses co-existing, overlapping and contradictory (Blackmore, 1997). Hence, the difficulty of describing one particular ‘discourse of adult education’. Rather, there is a need to speak of ‘discourse(s), recognising the existence of multiple connections, some of which may not yet be recognised or acknowledged

Within this chapter I am going to explore some of the overlapping discourse(s) that stem from organised religion and formal education, and consider the ways in which a

feminist analysis can bring new understanding to the ways in which these discourses can both describe situations, and at the same time circumscribe them with boundaries and limits.

## **2.0 ORGANISED RELIGION**

Religious belief has been identified as one of the cornerstones of patriarchal structures, and is heavily criticised by several radical feminist writers (Gittens, 1985, Figs, 1986; Daly, 1973; Clark and Whitcomb, 1996). Even within less radical feminist positions, religious belief is considered a minority concern, and is frequently problematised (Joy, 1996; Christ, 1993). However, it remains a core part of lifestyle and identity for many women. There have also been many attempts to consider the extent to which religious belief can be reclaimed from patriarchy, and reclaimed in ways that are acceptable and applicable to women (Graham, 1995, 1997; Jamieson, 1996; Giltner, 1985). In this next section I am going to consider the current structure of organised religion, particularly as found in British Christianity, and look at the ways in which this system fails to give space to ways of knowing as evidenced by the women in this study.

### **2.1 Church as patriarchal structure**

It is very difficult to describe a particular structural form for organised Christianity. The basic corporate unit known as ‘church’ is found in many diverse forms across time and culture, and nations have foundered and wars been fought over the form that institutional Christianity should take. However, in almost all expressions of church there is a sense of structure and order, with a defined leadership and value system operating inside some general boundaries (Elwell, 1993).

The structure of organised religion is such that there is evidence that there is a power dynamic at work, where the power source or holder is held to be superior and

desirable. Some radical post-modern feminist epistemologies would suggest that one indicator of such power dynamics is the use of polar opposites, where the first named item in the pair is the more significant, for example rich and poor, employed or unemployed (Boss, 1996; Williams, 1997). The church as the organised expression of Christianity is full of such oppositional pairings, whether obviously so like faith and doubt, or more subtly embedded in their structures, for example ordained versus lay ministry. There is also a dichotomy between the visible organised forms of religious practice, and the personal life of the individual - manifest and latent religion (Reed, 1978). In this polarity public expression of worship is clearly the place where power is located. One of the outcomes, or even evidences, that status or power is located in the public manifestations of religious belief is in the pre-occupation with the decline in influence and status of the church (Bruce, 1995; Bartles-Smith, 1993; Parsons, 1993). Attendance and activity are signs of the church's virility and potency, whereas the hidden or latent religious life goes largely ignored.

The public place of worship is also the place where men are visible and influential, with women as the subjects of male authority and structures. King and Francis (1996) imply that the structures of the church enable women to express the “underlying personality dimension of femininity” (p146), suggesting that religiosity is itself a product of a feminine gender orientation. This analysis is totally uncritical of the structure and practices that have created this framework, as it allows the patriarchal system to pass by unchallenged and ignores the fact that women's experience of belonging in church has frequently been characterised by struggle and discomfort (McEwan, 1991).

This struggle has recently been sharply focused in the Anglican and Catholic churches in debates concerned with the ordination of women (Gill, 1994; Ward and Wild, 1995; Furlong, 1991). Much of the writing around the issue of ordination clearly argues for access for women to the external power structures in the church and those women who fought desperately to be recognised were clearly aware of the conflict (Wakeman, 1996). However, the experience of oppression and conflict in the church is not the exclusive province of those women who sought ordination. It is also characteristic of many women's experience of religious organisations. The data gathered in this study will look carefully at this issue.

Another consequence of a patriarchal system is the presence of hierarchies in which there is a clear ascending way to progress. This is a clear reflection of patriarchal ways of knowing which are characterised by a search for objective, measurable truth. Forms of knowledge and practice that appear to come closest to truth become the most desirable. In spirituality this contributes to another dichotomous pair - spirit is opposed to body. This hierarchy, which dominates personal spirituality, places physical detachment, best expressed through monasticism and asceticism, as the highest form of spiritual expression (Clark and Whitcomb, 1996).

This binary has particular implications for women in the Christian faith where bodily experience is closely linked to sexuality. This is portrayed in metaphoric terms as the split between the virgin and the whore (Maitland, 1996; Murphy, 1996). This polarisation clearly labels women's bodily experiences as inferior and fosters the sense that women are the passive outsiders who struggle to find inclusion in the religious hierarchy.

In turning the feminist gaze onto organised religion attention often falls on the fundamentalist groupings, which are evident across all the world's major religions

(Kepel, 1996; Hawley, 1994). It is in fundamentalism that the extremes of patriarchal structures can be most clearly seen. Such movements operate with a clear absolute authority structure, and a range of exclusive practices that reinforce male domination (Marty and Appleby, 1992). For some women, however, fundamentalism becomes a safe place in which to exercise their feminine spirituality, the heart of which is seen to be nurturing (Balmer, 1994). Whilst fundamentalism can be dismissed as an extreme expression of organised religion, it does contain within it the same substance as is found in mainstream denominations. Fundamentalism exaggerates certain characteristics of religious belief, such as commitment, devotion, discipline and community. In magnifying these characteristics, however, the structures inherent in more traditional denominations are revealed (Kepel, 1994).

The role for women of submission to a well-structured authoritative male voice takes away the need to work through the difficulties of personal spiritual growth (Isherwood, 1993). The encouragement of nurturing roles gives an identity and a value, whilst denying access to the authority and power of the church. The Church of England is portrayed as a safe, essentially cosy and domestic institution, which provides a safe haven for its members, muddling along and avoiding conflict (Sykes, 1992).

## **2.2 Church as family: patriarchal relationships**

The patriarchal structure of the church is also reflected in the ways in which it describes its function and identity. The metaphor of family is particularly important in understanding the church, and has implications for the role of women within the structure. Metaphors indicate a way of thinking about the world, and carry with them certain behavioural and attitudinal implications (Alvesson, 1993; Morgan, 1986)

"In organisations, as in the patriarchal family, fortitude, courage, and heroism, flavoured by narcissistic self-admiration, are often valued qualities, as is the

determination and sense of duty that a father expects from his son” (Morgan, 1986, p212)

The particular understanding of family that dominates in Western culture carries with it expectation and values for the ways in which structures are established (Gittens, 1985; Anderson, 1986; Goldthorpe, 1987; Humphries, 1993). Morgan has identified some of the relational characteristics that will flow from a patriarchal understanding of family. He notes that duty and determination are essentially male requirements, implying that the significant roles in the family are male. Within the church notion of family this applies as well - men are given roles related to their tasks within the organisation, whereas women are defined in terms of their relationships to men, for example, the vicar's wife. The patriarchal family structure where authority is male and paternal and women have responsibility for children and home is reflected in churches today.

The family metaphor also carries with it implications about power, and where power lies. Within a patriarchal family power is clearly with the males, especially the father, and again this is reflected in church structures. Decision making bodies have been pre-dominantly male, and even today in the Church of England the higher levels of leadership (that is, Bishops) remain exclusively male. Critics of the patriarchal family model see it as constraining creativity, initiative, and oppressing individuals for the sake of re-creating the established order and giving society economic and social stability (Abbott and Wallace, 1992). This argument is heard in the Church in the guise of tradition and scriptural authority used to justify maintaining the status quo, even though this structure leaves certain people oppressed and excluded (Holloway, 1997).

In spite of this patriarchal understanding, relationship is still seen as a key dimension in organisational church life, with a sense of solidarity and commitment

characterising the local church grouping (Fichter, 1967). However, the particular expression of relationship found in Anglican Church life is characterised by a hierarchical structure which has traditionally given responsibility to male leadership for making relationships happen (Neill, 1958, Jenkins, 1975; Sykes, 1992). Whilst feminist theologians agree that Christianity should foster equal, open, non-discriminatory relationships, (Isherwood, 1993), in practice relationships fall short of the desired partnership, falling instead into the hierarchies outlined earlier.

If we are to accept the research evidence of Gilligan (1982), Belenky (1986) and Magolda (1992) that women prefer relational approaches to learning, then understanding the significance of collaboration would seem to encourage the development of pedagogies that are more appropriate for women. Group discussions and other strategies that allow the learner to dictate the curriculum content and method have been developed and encouraged, particularly in areas such as women's studies (Welch, 1994; Hughes, 1995). However, the small group dynamic can also be patriarchal in structure and effect, encouraging women to be passive and silenced.

The pressure to conform to the implicit norms of a small groups may mean that women are unable to voice criticisms and independent thought (Hess, 1996).

In church contexts this is particularly important where the small group, whilst appearing to offer relational opportunities, can be a very effective way of silencing women's voices. Within a Christian small group setting, the implicit norms to which Hess refers are not just concerned with conforming to expectations of women's behaviours. They are also concerned with strengthening their faith to be more effective within the existing religious structures (Rapoport, 1998).

There is a positive quality of relationship that exists in faith communities. For many women the experience of religion is a source of strength, whilst at the same time also

being a source of stress. Writing from a black womanist theologian's perspective, Oduyoye (1994, pp361-362) notes that it is in the formal "English" religious practices that women are marginalised.

"People of the church who are ordinarily in daily converse with one another are the carriers of religion... It is the popular beliefs and practices passed on from mothers to their children that build up a person's spirituality."

The Christian faith itself has an emphasis on the ability to make and sustain loving relationships. Any inadequacy in this can be understood as failure. Again one of the questions raised in this research is the extent to which organised religion is a source of stress, whereas the strengths are drawn from everyday experience and support networks. The chapter on relationships and identity will consider these issues.

### **2.3 Voices in the church**

A significant part of women's struggle within the church is concerned with the extent to which they have a voice, as much of the language they have had to be borrowed rather than necessarily being part of their own experience. Feminist theologians debate extensively the ways in which women are able to know and name God. Thus, many attempts are made to develop new expressions of worship and communication (for example, Ward and Morley, 1995). These are often vehemently opposed, as the language of faith is a powerful and emotive issue (Wren, 1989; Furlong, 1991).

Politically, feminists have been concerned that women should have 'voice', that is to name their experiences, to be heard, and thereby be counted. In this way, women's experiences, knowledges and achievements could, if only minimally, be added to those of men. As bell hooks expressed it: "...there was born in me the craving to speak, to have a voice, and not just any voice, but one that could be identified as belonging to me." (bell hooks, 1989). There is still a need for women in different

situations to discover their voice, and to be heard as they tell for themselves their own particular stories, whether that be black women, lesbians or Anglican women in England.

However, the experiences and knowledges that women wish to voice are diverse.

Finding a universal voice for women's experience has become problematic, and attention to this diversity has been raised by black and lesbian feminists in particular (Lorde, 1994, hooks, 1989). Experience is formed by the interface between circumstances and identity. Both identity and circumstance differ radically for women as their experiences are shaped in different contexts. Female experiences and knowledges are shaped not just by gender, but by economics, education, class, geography, race, religion, and perhaps other factors as well (Adams, 1994; Walby, 1997). Circumstances also vary considerably for women, including such things as employment, marital status, obligations, housing and environment. The desire to speak out women's experience, which has been central in much feminist thinking, has more recently been seen as problematic in itself (Skeggs, 1997). It no longer seems possible to speak for a group of women as a whole.

One of the outcomes of this awareness of difference has been the development of special interest groups, which focus around a particular issue or experience. Such groups attempt to voice the experiences of women in particular contexts. In the church this meant that women clustered together around the issue of ordination and leadership. However, even these groups often left the experience of 'ordinary' women unheard. Women who do not aspire to leadership or authority then begin to feel excluded.

There is also a sense in which feminism itself falls victim to a hierarchical framework for organising experience, where oppression has become the measure of

success (Adams, 1994). Those women who are privileged by virtue of skin, race, education or class then find that their experience of being woman is less significant, yet they are still part of a gendered social world in which their potential is often limited. This study looks at one such group of women, whose lives might be defined as privileged as white, middle-class, educated, Christian women, yet whose experiences need to be heard, and who do not readily have access to the language with which to describe those experiences (Wren, 1989; Furlong, 1991).

Feminists in the field of Christian theology and religious studies fall broadly into two categories. There are those who believe that the patriarchal and androcentric forms of Christianity are integral to its very nature, and would therefore define themselves as post-Christian (Daly, 1973; Hampson, 1986). These women are often drawn to other expressions of religious belief, such as goddess worship and paganism, finding no place within orthodox Christian theology (King, 1993; Matthews, 1990). Other Christian feminists recognise that Christianity is very significant for many women, and is potentially empowering (Mananzan, 1994; Lau, 1995). Expressions of organised religion such as 'women-church' have flourished, particularly amongst women of colour, and whilst not exclusively female, attempt to re-model Christianity in ways which allow women to flourish (Hunt, 1996).

One of the key strands in recovering Christianity for women is in the area of language and naming with attempts to explore unused and new metaphors and models for God and for faith communities (McFague, 1987). However, it is not just in the language available to name God that women are limited. The experience of living out faith within the organisation of the church itself can be difficult and painful, but leaves women with little acceptable religious language to describe these feelings and ideas. In Chapter 6, which discusses values and beliefs, this difficulty

will be explored more fully, but throughout the data there will emerge a pattern of conflict and tension as women seek to find their own voice within organised Christian faith.

### **3.0 RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OR LEARNING FAITH?**

In the context of learning faith, women not only have to contend with the meanings derived from the discourse(s) of religion, but also with the discourse(s) of formal education. For women, organised religion offers a secure but submissive position, in which I argue that they come to understand that their ways of working out their beliefs are not quite as good as those offered by the male hierarchical structures. The subsequent polarisation of the extremes of the hierarchy is expressed in a number of stereotypes and contradictions. Silence versus gossip is one example. Behind all of these oppositional pairings is the fundamental dualism between male and female. The essence of this dualism, and hence all those that stem from it, is that power resides in the male (Davies, 1989). This hierarchy of superior versus inferior is maintained through its manifold expressions, including those found in religion and education.

The beliefs and values of the Christian faith have been a powerful influence in Western culture for hundreds of years, permeating government, arts and education (Jenkins, 1975). These values have also permeated the area of education, with early models of schools and universities strongly influenced by church structures and theological curriculum. Much has been written about women's experience of education, and there are many implications to be drawn from the understanding that for women, and others, education is an experience of oppression (Freire, 1972; Thompson, 1983; Faith, 1988; Purvis, 1991).

For most people their familiarity with the terminology of education develops from childhood experiences of school, perhaps reinforced by a range of adult education experiences. These experiences are often characterised by someone telling them what to do, giving them definitive answers and controlling the learning situation (Shor, 1993), suggesting that knowledge holders are power holders.

This hierarchical notion of education is combined with the patriarchal structures of religion to create models of religious education.

### **3.1 Religious education : the transmission of values**

Historically religious education has been intrinsically connected to the purposes of salvation. It has therefore been concerned with the transmission of truth, thus reinforcing the notion that education is about supplying right answers (Ulich, 1968; Holley, 1978, Chesters, 1990). This motivation towards indoctrination encouraged churches to campaign for education for all, and much early literacy and numeracy work was done with the intent of facilitating access to the Bible. Indeed, for many Victorian middle-class women, offering education to those deemed in need was often a major expression of personal religious belief, as illustrated in both social history and fiction (Lewis, 1986; Dyhouse, 1981; Yonge, 1856/1988).

The links between education and Christian faith are not just concerned with the historical accident of motivation for teaching springing from evangelistic zeal. There is also a strong imperative within the tenets of the Christian faith to teach and pass on the beliefs to others, both in the Old Testament, and specifically in Christ's final words to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 18v19).

In addition, there are in fact significant links between adult education and the church, both historically and conceptually. The early development of adult education had strong links to the philanthropic concerns of certain sectors and individuals within

the churches (Harrison, 1961). More broadly the development of accessible education was significantly influenced by Robert Raikes and the Sunday School movement in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a movement which offered education to both adults and children who would not otherwise become literate (Ferguson, 1981). A key characteristic of the Wesleyan movement was the organisation of ‘classes’, in which men and women could study their new Christian faith and learn rudimentary literacy and numeracy (Southey, 1902 edition).

These attempts to universalise education ran counter to the idea that education might be a privilege. From the earliest times education has been an exclusive sphere, with opportunities for a broad education limited to those who had time and money, and who were deemed worthy (Faure, 1972). Education became the stronghold of the male middle-classes (Usher and Edwards, 1994). Religion was an integral part of this exclusivity as the study of theology became the preserve of male colleges and institutions, an idea reinforced by a male priesthood. The priest became the arbiter of all theological questions, and his position as knowledge-holder is stressed when he ascends the pulpit to proclaim this knowledge to those beneath him. In spite of moves in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the altruism of the 1870 Education Act which guaranteed schooling for all, many subsequent and contemporary development continue to foster an elitist and privileged educational framework, with particular implications for women (McGivney, 1990).

In recent times, the Church of England has attempted to move away from this ideology with a new emphasis on lay ministry (Etchells, 1995). However, accessing the training and education required for any kind of ministry remains difficult for women in the church. The practical barriers which women face in participating in education generally have been grouped into two main areas: those that are related to

practical and domestic difficulties and those related to information and guidance (McGivney, 1993, 1994; von Prümmer, 1994). The practical and domestic problems are particularly focused around time, money and responsibility. These practical problems are also found in the church context, with poor childcare excluding women from even the basic learning provided through sermons on Sunday mornings. Women wanting to participate in the learning life of the church face the same hurdles which act as gatekeeping mechanisms elsewhere - time, transport and cost (Millar, 1997).

The practical barriers are not the only ways in which women are excluded from learning (McClaren, 1985). There are also the constraints which arise as a result of years of childhood schooling and societal conditioning, leaving women feeling unworthy and unsuitable for education (Sharpe, 1976; Walkerdine, 1990).

Walkerdine in particular notes the deeply embedded power dynamic which leaves even the most competent and confident women apprehensive and child-like when faced with authority. This can leave women "literally shaking with fear" when they arrive to take their place in a learning programme (Hobby, 1989, p15), feeling socially inadequate and intellectually inferior (Pye, 1991). Again, women in the church have the same sense of inadequacy when faced with learning events, often exacerbated by a sense of being spiritually inferior (Millar, 1994, 1997).

As a result of the strong imperative within religious education to communicate truth, it can also be understood as a corrective process. The framework of patriarchy or paternalism means that knowledge and authority lie with the father-figures. Father-figures not only have access to superior knowledge but also have the right to exercise discipline to ensure correct behaviour (Russell, 1990; Elwell, 1993). Within childhood religious education this is expressed as a concern with moral behaviour

presented within a religious framework in which Christianity is privileged (Jackson, 1997.)

In the church context this corrective element is still present within the curriculum. Sunday school programmes are not only designed to communicate Christian truth, but also to inculcate Christian morality and attitudes. Adult Christian education programmes retain similar elements, with courses, books and materials offered to help people practise their Christian faith correctly. Many of these books and resources are targetted to particular groups in the church such as leaders, single people, young people or women.

In the general adult education curriculum, the role of women can be circumscribed by the provision of a curriculum dominated by domestic and pastoral subject (Blundell, 1992; Thompson, 1983a). This emerges in a church context as the provision of opportunities for women to explore subjects which belong to their sphere of spirituality - prayer, counselling, children's work and so on (Neuger, 1996). All of this reinforces the idea that women's rightful place is in the domestic sphere. Thus the hierarchy of religion is reinforced in education, and women's concerns are placed lower down the hierarchy. Also they are seen in terms of the binaries mentioned previously, for example teaching adults is of higher status than organising a creche, or leading a Bible Study is more significant than hosting a coffee morning. Both the hierarchy and the binaries serve to act as parameters for women's social and spiritual roles, circumscribing their involvement.

Supporting this notion of the religious education curriculum as corrective, there is also a sense in which religious education acts as control over lives. The emphasis on conveying truth means that the relationship between teacher and learner is hierarchical. Kathryn Morgan (1996) notes that in all the metaphors used to explore

relationships based on equity and inter-dependence, such as sister, friend, partner, teacher does not feature. Traditional formal education is based on the notion that a person with knowledge has the power and authority to offer (or withhold) that knowledge to one who is need of it in some way (Weiler, 1996). The relationship between teacher and pupil is then experienced as oppressive and, until recently, the role of teacher in the church has been exclusively male, thus reinforcing the power dynamic.

Religious education is experienced as hierarchical, with higher levels of knowledge such as theology seen as privileged and male. This hierarchy also creates a discourse of education that is corrective and controlling. This particular way of understanding education, whether religious or general, has been seen as an appropriate pedagogy for children rather than adults (Knowles, 1984; Tuckett, 1990). In contrast, adult education can be conceived of as distinguished by certain characteristics such as volunteerism, non-institutionalised, independence and self-motivation (Waldron and Moore, 1991). When adult religious education is considered it then seems appropriate to examine alternative ways of understanding how faith is fostered in human lives.

### **3.2 Adults learning faith: an alternative hierarchy**

Adults who approach religious belief carry with them the discourses of religious education from church and school experiences. The understandings acquired from these two dominant hierarchies are already present as adults approach the learning of faith, and are also present within theories put forward to explain adult faith development.

The most widely-known and used theory on faith development is that proposed by James Fowler (1981). Fowler attempts to draw a very wide definition of faith,

drawing on the spiritual experiences of those with nominal religious beliefs, as well as those for whom spirituality is an integral part of life. The theory that Fowler evolved is strongly influenced by developmental and educational psychology, particularly the theories of Piaget (Webster, 1992). Fowler constructs a typology of faith development in six stages, beginning with pre-faith and progressing to “universalising faith”. He clearly understands these stages as hierarchical and progressive, suggesting that few people will ever attain his final level.

Fowler’s theory is underpinned by the discourse(s) of religious education, which are themselves hierarchical. Although he attempts to widen the definition of faith, he returns to a model of faith which depends on an improving or progressive understanding of truth. When this model is used to formulate learning strategies within the church, the result reflects the sense of privilege and correction suggested earlier. Certain courses are deemed to be suitable for certain individuals, and by dint of advertising and selection individuals come to understand that they are not yet eligible for some kinds of teaching. Within Fowler’s theory the role of education is to help the individual realise the full potential of faith at each stage and to keep reworking faith to keep pace with other social and psychological changes in her life (Miller, 1985). This allows for remedial input into a person’s life if their faith is deemed either immature or precocious. Again, this reflects the notion that religious education is concerned with correction and control, with discovering the right or best way of being Christian.

However, it is suggested that women may learn and experience faith in a different way from the hierarchies outlined by Fowler. The hierarchy is fundamentally based on self-realisation as the desirable goal. If we accept Gilligan’s (1982) premise that women’s development is governed by connection rather than separation, then the

goal itself is not valid for women. A more recent variation of the development theory has been proposed by Elizabeth Puttick (1997b). She has used Maslow's theory of motivation ('hierarchy of needs') to explain the diversity of human religions. The apex of the typology that Puttick develops is related to self-actualisation, thus suggesting that the ultimate motivation for religious belonging is personal development. At the lower end of the hierarchy Puttick links the basic human need for security to strong authoritarian religious movements. Religions that meet this level of need will be "conservative, patriarchal, even misogynistic" (p139). Whilst Puttick is not attempting to put forward a model for religious education, her typology again reflects the basic hierarchical and patriarchal understanding of development. As with Fowler's theory the consequence of such theories for women is that they invariably position themselves as lower down in the order of ascendancy, thus belittling their experiences of spirituality.

#### **4.0 FEMINIST FRAMEWORKS**

The ideas then that underpin religious education are seen to be hierarchical and patriarchal. I have already begun to suggest that the dominance of these discourses may not always be positive for women learning faith in the church. Feminist epistemology can be used as a lens or tool to bring further understanding as to why women might experience learning faith as struggle, and may also begin to give direction towards alternative ways of understanding learning faith.

Feminist epistemological theories or frameworks can be seen as perspectives for understanding the core question as to why and how women are sub-ordinated to men in a variety of situations (Acker, 1994). As feminist thinking has developed, so too have a range of different theories that attempt answer these questions, not just in terms of social structures, but understanding how women come to have particular

understandings and knowledges . This question is of core importance, as knowledge plays a key role in the perpetuation of oppressive hierarchies, and likewise knowledge will be key to changing patriarchal expressions of power (Kennedy et al, 1993; O'Connor, 1995).

Although feminist epistemology itself is still a debated and developing area (Abbott and Wallace, 1997; Johnson, 1994), I have drawn on three key areas to form a tripartite epistemology, characterised by oppression, relationship and naming. These three aspects act as lenses through which the hierarchies of religious education can be viewed and explored. Each aspect can also be seen as intrinsically connected to the polar opposites which pervade much of the thinking of the women in this study.

#### **4.1 Oppression: power over or power to**

Perhaps the central element of a feminist epistemology is the appreciation that women's lives are lived out of the experience of both personal and organisational oppression. Within feminist thought oppression is closely linked to the notion of power. The use and abuse of power has formed one of the central platforms for developing arguments about oppression in women's lives (Greer, 1970; Millett, 1970; McBride, 1996). This theme has been developed and explored in myriad ways, and is experienced both as a societal or collective oppression (Millet, 1970) and also as a personal restriction (Greer, 1970). Almost 30 years after those like Millet and Greer began to explore the dynamic of power in both personal relationships between men and women and in institutional structures, these debates are re-emerging in new forms. Greer (Guardian, 25<sup>th</sup> February, 1998) is currently exploring what this kind of oppression means now for women who she suggests have lost the power to say no to the desires of a partner, whereas in the late 60s they had no right to say yes to their own desires.

Other concerns are emerging as feminists attempt to assess the agenda for the millennium, debating the level of change, and the nature of feminism itself. In 1985 Dale Spender wrote that there is a major difference between the manifestations of patriarchy and its root causes, and suggested that as men feel threatened they will change the rules, and sexism will appear in another guise. Whilst many outward changes have been made to the symptoms of patriarchy, for example in employment legislation and family expectations, the root causes of abuse of power still remain firmly entrenched (Figs, 1994).

The abuse of power which leads to oppression can be expressed in terms of ‘power over’, which in turn leads to a hierarchy of power leaving those at the bottom as powerless (McBride, 1996). It is this kind of ‘power over’ which is seen in the ideology of religious education, which is concerned to transmit beliefs for the purpose of correction and control. Indeed, post-Christian feminists see the concept of ‘power over’ as integral to Christian belief, making it impossible for them to remain within the institution. For feminists power needs to be understood in terms of ‘power to’, that is the power to change, to make choices and to make decisions. It is this that motivates Christian feminists who remain within the church as they attempt to bring about changes in structure and practice.

One of the rationales given for the importance of developing women’s ways of knowing is the understanding that knowledge is power (Abbott and Wallace, 1997). The statement “knowledge is power”, albeit a truism, is a well-used slogan, used to justify a variety of strategies from political oppression to organisational competitiveness (Wikstrom, 1994). Moreover, it carries within it the assumption that power is a desirable commodity. In the form ‘power over’ power is not necessarily desirable to those feminists who are attempting to understand knowledge and power

from the perspectives of women's experiences of oppression. (Tuana and Tong, 1994; Maynard, 1994). Feminism needs a relationship to knowledge that does not just give personal fulfilment, but which also validates women's lived experience and challenges ideas which oppress women as a group (Thompson, 1997). There is a relationship between discourse(s), power and knowledge (Weedon, 1987). If knowledge and power are both constructed from experience, then knowledge itself becomes the power to construct. Understanding how women's religious knowledge is affected by the discourses of education and learning will contribute to a move from being oppressed by power 'over' towards the freedom of power 'to' realise their full potential.

#### **4.2 Relationships: connection or separation?**

The idea of sisterhood, perhaps more widely found in explorations of relationships and networks, is also considered significant in understanding women's ways of knowing. There is a clear sense that women's knowledge is both discovered and affirmed in relational contexts as they talk together, talk which is often derided as gossip or folk lore (Code, 1991; Porter, 1991). The idea that relationship is central to women's lives and experience was foundational in the early feminist movements (Spender, 1985). It has been developed further particularly by Gilligan (1982, 1995), in her seminal study examining how women resolve moral dilemmas. Gilligan concluded that many women operate out of an ethic of care, rather than an ethos of competition. Whilst this idea has been criticised, partly because it appears to reinforce gender stereotypes, it has also been developed further in a number of other studies of women's cognitive thought (Magolda, 1992, Bellous, 1995).

One of the particular problems with theories such as Gilligan's is that they have been developed from a Freudian psychological foundation in which the primary issue is

about maternal attachment versus separation (Gilligan, 1995). Within this framework autonomy and individuation are presented as the desirable goals. This means, for example, that whilst Magolda identifies that women's learning may be encouraged within relational settings, she still portrays autonomous learning as preferable. A focus on autonomy also clearly resonates with Western pre-occupations with individualism (Burgess, 1996; Evans, 1994).

This particular emphasis has also infiltrated church life, where an emphasis is placed on personal spiritual revelation and understanding (Percy, 1996). It becomes vital that an individual can identify and sustain her own autonomous relationship with God. This experience is considered of greater value than participation in the worshipping community, as time spent with God is of higher value than time spent with people. Again, this has particular implications for those women who develop their spirituality in the sharing of stories and through a network of relationships. Concerns about relationship, and explorations of relational ways of knowing, learning and teaching are then perceived as especially relevant to women. They are placed into their own category, where women's ways of knowing can be fostered and a feminist discourse and language can be forged. This happens both within mainstream educational institutions and also in religious contexts where women's issues are set apart and often problematised in special working groups and sub-committees. Much of the development and exploration of how life experience can be heard in the classroom has been undertaken in the area of women's studies (Griffin, 1994). Pedagogical concerns such as the power relationship between teacher and student, or the extent to which a feminist teacher is a role model, are debated in the context of women's studies (Houston, 1996; Jackson, 1997).

However, once the discussion is removed from the domain of women's studies, then for the most part women continue to be defined as 'other' in educational, academic and religious contexts. The core of formal education, including religious education, for women is about feeling wrong. Learning is all too often about fitting personal experience into male models of knowledge. Morgan (1996) uses the metaphor of 'bearded mothers' to explore the sense in which feminist teachers in any subject area have to adopt male models of rationality and cognition, yet at the same time are expected to offer an ethic of care and support towards their students. Providing education in the church entails the same paradox. Women clergy are expected to work from a pastoral ethic and yet offer teaching based on patriarchal models of religious education outlined earlier. However, because the oppression of women is so deeply embedded within church beliefs and structures, I will argue that women name this experience in the language of guilt, doubt and tension.

#### **4.3 Language: silence or naming?**

The third key strand of feminist epistemology that I have identified is a concern with naming and describing women's experience, a strand which goes back to the first attempt by Betty Friedan in the 1960s to allow women to describe their lives in their own words (Spender, 1985). This strand links right through to the more radical approach of Mary Daly in her endeavours to find a new language altogether for women to describe their experiences. Daly questioned the way in which the meanings with which we live are themselves the product of distortions that are accepted as unproblematic (Daly, 1978). These questions have fed in to the debates about the relationship between reality and language, whether language creates reality or describes it (Ransom, 1993).

Within the organised structures of education it is not easy for women to articulate their experiences in formal educational language. The things of which women want to speak are themselves marginalised and seen as insignificant. In addition, the quest for women to find their own voice to describe and name their own experiences can be hi-jacked to serve other educational purposes. Thus the ways in which women utilise experience and tell stories is found to be valuable (Boud and Miller, 1996), and is then possessed by others as a useful teaching technique, programmed into an otherwise male-dominated curriculum.

Women need to find their own ways of being heard, which may include silence. However, the pervasive language of paternalism all too easily purports to speak on their behalf into the gap, or to encourage explanation and justification where none is needed. A constant pre-occupation with explaining difference - often expressed in a discourse of listening - can prevent women from developing their own identities (Lorde, 1994). Within the church this means that women are being invited to explain the ways in which women's ways of doing and being priest are different yet effective within the male structures. Robins (1996) recounts a number of occasions in which newly appointed priests have had to deal with male colleagues who, intentionally or not, limit their role and stereotype their behaviour. This task diverts women from developing their own discourses of faith, and requires them to reinterpret their experiences into male terms.

The difficulties for women in finding a language of their own does not stand in isolation from the concern with relationship and the experience of oppression. The 'power over' women acts to keep them silent about the particular experiences of relationship that are valuable to them. Conversely, there is a sense in which women need the power to name their experiences, and to value their connectedness. Without

such language women are limited to describing their lives in the language of hierarchy and autonomy. It is in attempting to bridge this gap between the discourse(s) of formal religious education and the experiences of their lives that faith may be found to be a struggle in the lives of the women in this study.

## **CONCLUSION**

As has already been suggested, this thesis is a story of tension and conflict, and in this chapter I have begun to explore some of the underlying tensions for women which will frame the specific tensions experienced in learning faith. Within the broad context of a culture pre-occupied with controlling learning, women's knowledge and ways of knowing are still being subjected to control.

The learning of faith that is offered in the church stems from a patriarchal framework, characterised by a power dynamic in which the knowledge holder is able to require submission from the learner. This results in a hierarchical understanding of knowledge, which in turn leads to a series of binaries. Underpinning both the hierarchies and the binaries is the assumption that power belongs to the male.

There are two particular concerns in my mind as I explore these issues. One is the space that seems to emerge between academic feminism and women's everyday knowledge (Gottfried, 1998). As feminism has become established as an academic interest and a political force, then it has the potential to become disconnected from the voices of ordinary women, purporting to speak for them the thoughts they do not have or even wish to have. The extent to which the thoughts and experiences of women echo feminist thinking will be considered more fully in the chapters discussing the data I have collected.

The second concern is the extent to which feminist epistemology is referenced in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is, thus still positing women's ways of

knowing in relation to men's ways of knowing. The danger then is that women are limited to knowing in certain ways, and excluded from others, whereas an understanding of how women know should allow for significant variety and freedom within the overall framework.

Patriarchal Christianity has in turn influenced models of adult education and learning, and neither model is fully supportive of the ways of knowing evidenced in this study. If women's ways of knowing are to be established for themselves and not just in relation to patriarchal frameworks, then it is vital that these kind of issues are explored. The patriarchal analysis of women's values will limit that to the idea of relationships and hence back to caring, mothering and homemaking. Relationships may be one of the core aspects of women's epistemology, yet analysis of their significance needs to be extended to fundamental belief systems such as faith in order to give women a voice into areas which remain defined by men.

The interplay between relationships, faith and contexts is explored throughout the research, considering the extent to which religious knowledge is learned within a feminist epistemological framework, characterised by naming, oppression and connectedness. Debates about theoretical epistemological positions can seem somewhat removed from women's everyday experience, and yet they inform the ways in which feminists attempt to counter women's oppression and silencing. At the heart of feminist ideas is the premise that *all* human experience is valid and must be included in understanding and developing knowledge (Spender, 1985). Patriarchal knowledge is partial and imposed, and an exploration of women's ways of knowing is an essential part of the quest to understand why women are suppressed, and how they can step outside of that framework.

In the next chapter I will consider the extent to which various informal and incidental learning strategies are able to integrate with feminist epistemological concerns. In particular I will look at how the hierarchical discourse of formal education is manifested in a hierarchy of learning strategies.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **WHAT COUNTS AS LEARNING?**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter I explored the ways in which both religion and education contribute to the processes through which the women in this study understand learning faith. I have also explored the extent to which these contexts are themselves the product of a patriarchal and hierarchical value system. I now want to focus on the learning process itself, considering the ways in which the activities in which women engage either do or do not count as learning. As education has moved out from formal institutions, a complex array of terms has been developed to describe the variety of learning situations. The basic division is between formal and informal learning, and then a further sub-division between incidental and experiential learning. However, these boundaries are not always clearly delineated, particularly as learning is placed into different contexts.

The boundaries of acceptable adult learning are indicated by certain characteristics (Edwards, 1997). Whilst the definitions between the different types of adult learning become blurred, I will suggest that two key factors remain as boundary markers.

These are motivation and reflection, characteristics that occur and recur across a number of different aspects of adult learning. Is the kind of motivation and reflection that the women in this study employ in learning faith within the boundaries, or not?

Stanley (1997) explores the idea of borderlands as contested areas, spaces in which difference is acknowledged and explored. The boundary markers are contested and negotiated. Thus, the meaning of motivation and reflection as the boundaries of acceptable learning becomes contested as the boundaries of adult learning are questioned.

In this chapter I will show how the pre-dominance of the discourse of formal education gives rise to a hierarchically ordered informal system. Within this hierarchy it is difficult to find a place for the learning of faith evidenced in the lives of the women in this study. I will then use a three-stage model of learning to consider that whilst the experience of learning evidenced by the women of this study may be at the borders of acceptable learning, it is nevertheless a valid form of learning.

## **1.0 FROM EDUCATION TO LEARNING**

In the previous chapter I discussed the extent to which the discourse(s) of formal education and religion are hierarchical and patriarchal. However, throughout the field of adult education there has been a shift of focus towards the idea of adult learning, rather than adult education (Tuckett, 1990; Thomas, 1991; Craig, 1994). Whilst the terms education and learning are frequently confused or conflated, the use of 'learning' is often an indication of an attempt to reflect a concern for the learner, rather than a concern with the provider of education. Thus 'learner-centred learning' becomes the preferred approach as curricula and programmes are developed (Board of Education, 1996). Whereas religious education is concerned with changing beliefs, a move towards a learner-centred approach is more concerned with the personal growth and fulfilment (Francis et al, 1996). However, replacing the word 'education' with 'learning' does not mean that the underlying problems of privilege, correction and control are removed. The ideologies of learning stem from the ideologies of education and whilst the process may appear to be inverted to put emphasis on the individual, the underlying values remain the same. Learning is also a discourse characterised by control and hierarchy, still framed by notions of improvement and progress.

## **1.1 Learning: a problematic concept**

Learning itself may well be an essentially positivist concept, particularly as it is conflated with education within the rhetoric of policy. Learning is now characterised by the need to quantify and enumerate its activities, pre-occupied with creating a typology of activity and standards against which to measure performance. Learning in the everyday does not fit easily into these kinds of concepts. Incidental, accidental learning become almost subversive activities, not able to be identified as real learning at all, particularly for the women in this study. This problem is central to this research, and is one which the data will explore more fully, considering the extent to which women's lived experience is validated as learning, and the extent to which this kind of daily "wholelife" learning is experienced as problematic and inadequate.

The women in this study, with occasional exceptions, are not consciously involved in learning activities, yet nevertheless over the thirty months of the study, changes clearly take place both in knowledge and in understanding. There is clearly a sense in which spiritual reflection is an integral part of their experiences and thoughts, and results in faith itself becoming part of their learning stories. However, the extent to which these changes fit within existing learning theories and epistemologies is problematic in a number of ways,

Perhaps the first of these problematic areas is found within the aspect of a feminist epistemology identified earlier as the need to identify or name the problem. The corollary of the need for a voice is that women are often locked into a kind of silence, with no language to name their experiences (Wren, 1989; Belenky, 1986; Lorde, 1994). The language of learning has been developed within the organisational and institutional frameworks and systems to the extent that language

to describe learning that happens outside of these parameters does not even exist.

The kind of learning that takes place in the every day experiences and thoughts of the women in this study does not warrant being described by the formal language of learning. Even trying to describe these processes becomes difficult - they are elusive, slipping outside the boundaries which have been created by the conventional constructs of education and learning.

## **1.2 The essentials of learning**

Much of the debate about the place of experience and its connection with learning has developed in the context of the division between formal and informal learning. Throughout the various theories and models of learning there is an inherent sense that certain kinds of experience will count towards development, whilst others are to be dismissed (Boud and Griffin, 1987). The result is a kind of two (or more) tiered view of learning in which wisdom or common sense is pitched against knowledge, a concept explored at length by Luttrell (1997). Luttrell explored how a group of women saw their experiences of mothering as common-sense, dismissing this kind of knowledge as insignificant compared with the kind of knowledge gained through schooling.

Whilst theories are developed around the notion of incidental learning, which is supposed to include this kind of everyday life experience, it is in fact a much debated area. There remains a whole gamut of learning which might best be called 'accidental learning', which is largely ignored, and which constitutes much of what might be described as common sense, experience or wisdom. The debates about the eligibility of certain kinds of experience to qualify as learning have centred around questions of exactly what processes or elements need to be present in any particular event. It seems that for learning to have taken place there are certain key elements

that need to be present. This chapter considers what these elements might be, and how they occur in the lives of women.

## **2.0 ACCEPTABLE LEARNING: questioning validity**

The various learning strategies and theories which have arisen to explain learning outside of formal provision might be likened to a set of Russian dolls. Within this metaphor each approach can stand alone, and yet is also an integral part of a whole. The whole might seem to be the broad category of informal learning, but as will be seen, these strategies are themselves defined in relation to formal learning theories, which might be seen as the 'doll' itself. Certain characteristics provide the similarities between the theories of formal and informal learning, and these are the characteristics that are often used as the criteria for establishing the validity of any so-called learning experience.

### **2.1 Formal and informal learning**

The division between formal and informal educational provision is implicit in the 1973 Department of Education paper on the future of adult education (DES, 1973). Whilst the paper idealistically subscribes to the notion that educational value is to be 'measured in quality of life for the individual' rather than by material or learning criteria, it clearly concentrates on formal provision within institutions. This is still reflected in the 1998 papers on education (Secretary of State, 1998), affirming the hierarchical notions discussed in the previous chapter. Education is primarily perceived as a means of socialisation and of training people to perform the tasks necessary for a thriving economic society (Abercrombie, 1988), and both formal and informal learning are measured in terms of the contribution made to these ends. The division between formal, informal and non-formal learning has been defined in various ways. Groombridge(1983) suggests that formal learning takes place within

the state system, whilst non-formal is that provided for by other agencies. Informal is all other learning, whether deliberate or unplanned. This definition is clearly based around the activity of education, focusing on the practice and the context. However, the theoretical framework, which might inform the practice, could be formal or hierarchical whatever the educational setting. Sargant (1988,1992) suggests that informal learning is an umbrella term used to cover any learning which does not take place in a formal educational institution, and strongly challenges the idea that learning can only take place within institutions. The term non-formal is not so widely used, although the concept is used to describe certain kinds of educational provision in development situations (Fordham, 1983; Tight, 1996).

However, as well as the formality or otherwise of the learning context, informal education is also identified by distinctive practices. Informal education is also a set of ideas and activities that attempt to pay particular attention and utilise the texture of everyday life (Jeffs, 1990). In an attempt to bridge the formal and informal dichotomy, Thomas (1991), developed a theory of learning domains. He suggests that there are two aspects to informal learning. Firstly, there is the social domain, where every day needs are identified, and secondly a learning domain where these everyday needs are met. The 'learning domain' would include a wide range of input and influence including media, conversation and activity. Thomas also identifies an education domain where these processes are formalised. However, whilst this approach attempts to link together life and learning and education in a more unitary way, it does not address the problem that formal learning is still presented as the desirable goal, and also the motivating factor. Both formal and informal learning require a clear motivation towards involvement, and in areas of incidental learning it is the question of motivation, which becomes debatable.

## 2.2 Incidental and informal

The distinction between formal and informal learning has largely been drawn in terms of location and style, rather than any pedagogical differences in the way in which the process of learning has been approached. Once the idea of informal learning, that is learning outside of a formal educational context, is accepted, it then becomes possible to look at some of the constituent elements of both informal and incidental learning. Incidental learning is used to describe the wide range of learning that takes place in lives, usually outside of the boundaries of any organised programmes, environment or curriculum.

There has been considerable debate about the relationship between education and the effective learning that takes place in peoples' lives (Stuart, 1995). From early infancy individuals are exposed to "a range of educational encounters, ranging from conscious, systematic instruction to repetitive, moment-by-moment influences at the margins of awareness." (Leichter, 1974, p2) Whilst Leichter was reflecting on the role of family on personal learning, Tough (1976) turned his attention to the whole concept of learning as personal growth, covering a very broad spectrum of goals. He undertook research that considered how many "learning projects" individuals engage with in a year, casting the definition very wide to include such things as self-help manuals and TV show. His very broad definition has never significantly influenced policy initiatives, and the area of learning through such self-initiated projects remains contested.

Although the idea of learning from living is welcomed, and is used to inform the current rhetoric of lifelong learning, the actual value of the learning in people's lives has been contested for some time.

"We learn from living. Learning experiences occur in the course of everyday work and living... However, this learning is sporadic and unsystematic. It is casual, incidental, somewhat inefficient, ad hoc and uncertain."  
(Deakin, in Boshier, 1980, p15)

Deakin's statement sums up much of the contention around the idea of incidental or unconscious learning, and whether it really merits the definition learning at all. By its very nature incidental learning lacks the clear cut motivation to participate which characterises access to and participation in formal educational programmes (McGivney, 1990). Without a clear intent to learn it would seem that activities such as watching television, or gleaning knowledge from a magazine, are not acceptable forms of learning. They fall outside the boundaries of adult education and learning. However, this kind of incidental learning may well be closest to the events taking place in individual lives.

Other research into adult education considered the differences between adult and child learning, and Knowles (1984) formulated his controversial theory of andragogy. He based the concept of a specific theory of adult learning on certain key factors that could only apply to adult motivation, particularly the place of experience and the orientation of the adult towards life or task. Whilst his critics accepted that there is indeed a need to connect life and learning for adults, and a clear place for self- direction, it was argued that Knowles had put forward a set of assumptions about adults rather than a theory (Brookfield, 1986). The emphasis on self-direction assumed that adults wanted to take responsibility for their own curriculum and content , thus stressing the importance of motivation as an essential element in adult learning (Taylor, 1987).

Further debate has taken place around the question of whether the presence of an external person is necessary for something to constitute learning. Whilst Rogers

(1986) acknowledged a great variety in the way that adults learn, he strongly suggested that the presence of a teacher was critical in establishing whether an activity constituted learning or not. He argued that whilst such a thing as self-directed learning did exist, it also involved the participation of a teacher, albeit concealed (Rogers, 1986). This would suggest that within person-centred learning the presence of books, TV, videos and other materials might constitute the equivalent of a teacher or external presence (Moore, 1983).

### **2.3 Incidental learning and autonomous learning**

The presence of conscious motivation has been identified as one of the criteria for judging whether a particular educational strategy constitutes learning or not. Those who advocate learning for its own sake, and define it as broadly as possible, would argue that motivation is not always clear-cut, albeit always present (Moore, 1983). It does not always stem from the desire for a clear end product such as a job or a qualification, but might also stem from enjoyment or personal need (Boswell, 1994). It might come from extrinsic factors such as employer demands, or develop intrinsically out of personal desires and needs ( McGivney, 1993; Percy, 1988). However, the acceptance of self-directed learning is still presented in terms of its contribution towards individual fulfilment and societal contribution (Candy, 1991). The idea of learning for its own sake has somehow disappeared in the midst of a pre-occupation with economic success for the nation as a whole (Usher, 1997).

Garrison (1997) puts forward a model for self-directed learning based around the interaction between control, responsibility and motivation. His model is a useful one for exploring the domain of religious learning, although it assumes a conscious decision and an external facilitator, albeit hidden. He suggests that motivation is usually based on a cognitive goal, whereas in the learning of faith the goal may not

be entirely cognitive (that is knowledge based), but also affective or spiritual to a greater or lesser extent. However he does stress the importance of intrinsic motivation, born out of authentic interest, and a desire to construct personal meaning and shared understanding. Whilst the learning of faith rarely has a clearly defined starting point aimed at a measurable end goal, individuals are engaging in a form of continuous learning. It is a process of formation, which allows every aspect of life to contribute to the shaping.

The concept of self-managed learning or self-development focuses on the idea of learner autonomy, and the need to consider fully the experiences of the learner developed in a wide variety of circumstances (Rolfe, 1993; Cunningham, 1994). In organisational terms this has become linked to the idea of harnessing the energy, or releasing the potential, contained within individuals as a result of their life (Pedler et al, 1990). However within organisations it quickly becomes linked again to performance, skill and motivation towards improvement (Patrick, 1992).

Programmes for fostering self-development are then developed within organisations in an effort to help individuals to diagnose their own needs and formulate plans to change (Megginson and Whitaker, 1996). The institutional church is not immune to this trend, and also makes attempts to harness individual learning in pursuit of its own success (Turnbull, 1996; Gonin, 1996; Davey, 1996). In many ways this seems to move the whole question of motivation and self directed learning away from the individual and back to the provider. As soon as self-led incidental learning is harnessed by an institution or organisation it moves into another dimension, aligning itself again with all the hierarchies of formal education (Tight, 1996).

In many ways the debate about the validity of incidental and self-directed learning resonates with the problems facing the acceptance of feminist epistemologies,

particularly those that are experientially based. Educational discourses that focus on formal learning as acceptable have significant power to affect individual perceptions of learning. Additionally, formal school education socialises people into accepted ways of learning, and to the realistic acceptance that outcomes count. Learning which takes place outside of the institution is less valued, yet it would seem that this kind of learning is more likely to be that experienced by women. The relationship between these two factors is interesting. In the same way that caring and nurturing work is undervalued because it is women's work, then it may be that incidental learning is undervalued because it is women's learning (Baldock 1991; Fox, 1995). This resonates with the idea that common sense is less valuable than academic learning, and where entering formal education of any type results in feelings of inadequacy (McLaren, 1985). The problem of presenting women's whole-life learning as acceptable is essentially a feminist problem.

### **3.0 A MODEL FOR LEARNING**

Having considered various types of informal learning, and shown how they relate to a hierarchical understanding of learning in which formal education is the apex, I now want to consider more closely the ways in which learning itself has been understood. The development of a sustainable model for learning has been significant in the process of evaluating various behaviours to ascertain their validity as learning. I want to look at the core components of one such learning model, and then suggest an alternative of my own.

#### **3.1 The learning cycle**

Perhaps the most well known and widely accepted model for adult learning is 'Kolb and Fry's learning cycle'. This model has its roots in the work of Dewey (1916), Lewin and Piaget (Wadsworth, 1996), all of which attempt to acknowledge the place

of the learner's own experience as it relates to the learning process (Kolb, 1984a).

Whilst Dewey understood learning as a dialectic process, which entailed the integration of knowledge, judgement and action, Piaget understood it in terms of a cycle of interaction between environment and individual resulting in some kind of personal cognitive development. Lewin also emphasised the importance of the process of learning as a series of reflections and observations on a concrete experience. It is from these ideas that Kolb developed the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984b).

One of the key activities in the cycle is the phase known as 'reflection', a word and concept which have recently become much more widely used across both learning and research literature (for example Fonow and Cook, 1991; Shakespeare et al, 1993; Bright, 1996). The significance of reflection grew out of the interest in the role of experience within the learning process, and the extent to which education needed to take into account life outside of a learning institution. Reflection, together with motivation, are perhaps the two essential components which need to be present if an activity is to be deemed learning. Together they could be termed 'conscious reflection', a term which used to describe the core activity which needs to be happening within the existing parameters, language and concepts of learning, if learning is to be judged acceptable (Argyris and Schon, 1978).

Sutherland (1997) suggests that Kolb's model is best utilised for short-term experiential learning methods, which are built into programmes, but goes on to, suggest that there is also a place for a "long-term conception of experiential learning" (p86). He suggests that this entails taking into account life experience such as parenting, bereavement, job experiences and so on. He suggests, along with other theorists such as Mezirow (1997 and Mulligan (1992), that adults are not really able

to utilise these experiences unless they have developed the skills of reflection that Kolb identified as the critical element in the learning cycle.

Whilst the learning cycle was developed explicitly for understanding adult learning, others have focused on the place of experience in childhood schooling. The seminal influence in this area is Piaget (1970), whose work on stages of development and educational processes has influenced education for both children and adults.

Building on this work constructivists suggest that the child constructs her own version of reality based on her own unique experiences of life (Sutherland, 1997). As Sutherland points out if this is true for children, how much more is it likely to apply to adults who have had many more years of testing out their assumptions about life? However, an inevitable tension emerges as people discover that a gap emerges between their experience and the things that they are being taught in formal settings. Reflection is again noted as the key which will enable adults to make sense of their life experience, a notion which has been developed more fully by Mezirow (1990) in his transformation theory. Mezirow strongly emphasises self-reflection, and the responsibility of the individual in the learning process, where the educator's role becomes that of facilitator rather than teacher.

All of these approaches to theorising the place of experience in learning focus on institutional and academic learning. There is a clear indication that academic learning is posited as the norm, and the validity of experience is measured in how far it can be utilised to meet the aims of formal learning (Stuart and Thomson, 1995).

"There are many experiences that adults gain in their jobs and leisure pursuits that lead, in a similar way to strongly established learning. This can be built upon in later normal academic studies. " (Sutherland, 1997, p87)

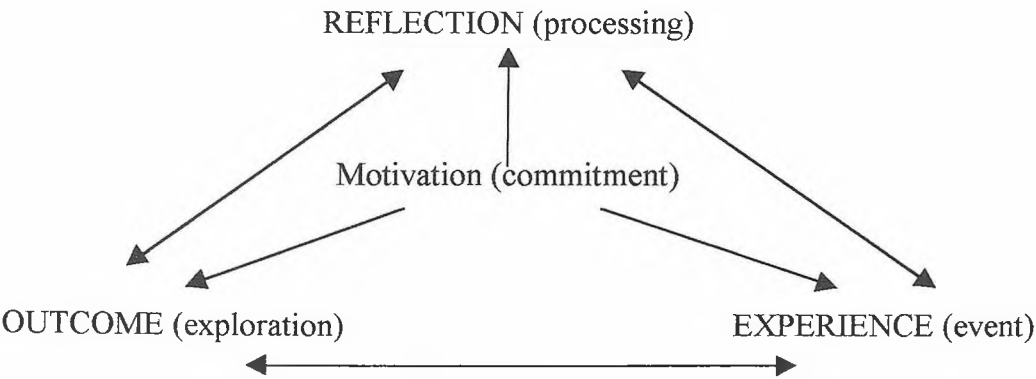
As a consequence of defining the institutional as the norm, the skill of reflection clearly becomes privileged, with Mezirow, for example, suggesting that the ability to

reflect and utilise life experience to transform thinking is one that can only be used by 'mature adults'. This reinforces the hierarchies of knowledge already discussed, and suggests that certain types of thinking and certain types of experience are more significant for learning than others. Because of the emphasis on academic as norm, and the fact that academic knowledge structures are themselves patriarchal in construct, then the types of experience which begin to be less valid include women's life stories. This kind of learning, which is taking place at the edges of formal education and learning, requires different models utilising different terminologies.

**3.2 An alternative model**

Kolb's learning cycle, as well as the variations that have been developed, all tend to complicate the learning process, which in turn tends to remove it from the realms of everyday experience. Hutton (1989) identifies a much simpler framework in which to explore the place of experience in learning, suggesting that the framework is about a process by which people make judgements or decisions. Using this framework as a basis, and taking into account the importance of conscious reflection, I have developed the following three pronged model. The model is not intended to be linear or cyclical, but rather connected and inter-dependant. However, due to the limits of the two-dimensional written form, it is illustrated here in the form of a triangle:

Figure 1



This model places motivation at the heart of three different learning processes - reflection, experience, and outcomes - each of which is integral to the whole learning activity. They are not linear or phased, but rather interplay between each other in a dynamic and holistic process. The terms that are generated within the discourse(s) of formal education are shown along with alternative terms that I am suggesting are more applicable to the learning of faith as experienced by the women in this study. Thus motivation becomes commitment, reflection becomes processing, and the outcome is exploration. The experience itself might be known as the event. The extent to which the three core processes of reflection, experience and outcomes can be positively applied to women's wholelife learning needs to be considered. However, before looking at these individually, I want to consider the way in which theorising incidental learning contributes to hierarchies of knowing, and forms part of the formal discourse(s) of education.

### **3.3 Formal learning: the standard**

Whilst various theories attempt to take into account life experience, and develop the tool of reflection in order to help people make sense of their lives, they still posit the process and the outcome into an essentially formal learning framework. The inevitable consequence of this is a widening gap between life events and experiences that counts. This ultimately reinforces the notion that there is indeed a "right way of knowing". This dichotomy occurs in the workplace, where the experiences women gained in the home are perceived as less valuable than more formal knowledge acquisition (Leonard and Malina, 1994). Even when women work in areas associated with family and home, such as childcare, the skills acquired in the domestic arena are often deemed in need of reinforcing by formal learning. This gap is also apparent in the more intangible areas such as morality and value systems.

Merriam and Heuer (1996) explore in some detail the relationship between meaning-making and adult learning and development. They identify meaning-making as the process whereby adults attempt to find meaning or purpose in life, cognitively, experientially and affectively. They note the central role that reflection plays in this process, but go on to define the process of reflection in such a way that it once again becomes privileged. Drawing on Mezirow's (1994) transformation theory, Merriam and Heuer clearly link reflection with development: "development involves an adult's increased capacity to reflect on experiences, make meaning of them and then act upon them." (Merriam and Heuer, 1996, p247) Again this inherently implies some kind of status for the ability to reflect, suggesting that it belongs to a kind of 'higher-order' or more mature person.

My research suggests that in everyday, commonplace moments of life women are reflecting on meaning-making, and that the activity of reflection is not a privileged one, but rather integral to women's daily lives. Merriam and Heuer go on to propose a model of meaning-making and adult learning which allows space for reflection on experience. However, they draw a distinction between learning and development. Merriam and Heuer suggest that learning takes place if a person is able to make sense out of any given life experience. It is in the times when experience does not make sense that opportunities for development occur, (a process not dissimilar to cognitive dissonance). They suggest that space has to be created where contradictions can be reflected upon, and where the meaning system can be changed (Kroger, 1993). Ward and Wild (1995) identify this as liminality, or chaos, and suggest that it is inherent in all change processes, including the everyday. This also resonates with the notion that the learning of faith evidenced by the women in this study is something taking place at the boundaries of adult education. Again, underpinning these approaches is

the sense that there is a right or best way, and that the individual who wishes to develop or learn most effectively needs to find this right way. The research data will bear this out, as the women continually measure their own experiences and reflections against those of the perceived norm, and find them wanting.

#### **4.0 REFLECTION: A BEGINNING NOT AN END**

Reflection has become increasingly important as a concept in adult education, and increasingly efforts are made to theorise its place within the adult education process (Burnard, 1991). However, these attempts contribute to the sense that reflection for learning purposes is somewhat different from the kind of thinking in which people engage throughout their waking day (Lucas, 1996). If 'reflection' can be qualified and quantified, then its presence or absence can be noted, and then enhanced as necessary. Those that do not engage in 'reflection' are then deemed to be less adequate learners, although individuals may use a vocabulary of reflection frequently as the data in this study will show.

##### **4.1 Noticing**

The idea of noticing is one that has been explored by Mason (1993) who developed the concept through his teaching of mathematics. Mason draws a distinction between recognising and remarking as one of the differences between simply looking at a problem, or looking through it. He observes a cycle of activity, in which an individual relates a current situation to past experience and future possibilities, before checking it against the experiences of others, and then making a decision. One of the key activities that Mason observes takes place in the process of noticing is the relating of events to other people. Mason goes on to systematise this process into four stages which he suggests constitute disciplined noticing: systematic reflection, the recognition of choices, preparing and noticing and finally, validating with other

people. The language of everyday life is littered with the metaphors of noticing, seeing and observation, often closely linked to comprehension, so that Mason's concept of 'noticing' as a key element in the learning process fits into the frameworks of experiential and incidental learning.

This notion of noticing may in fact be very significant in validating the kind of everyday learning that is occurring in women's lives, although Mason has begun to privilege the process by linking it to mathematics, and creating a strategy for fostering noticing. This removes it from the everyday, and takes it into the realms of something special, which needs to be taught if it is to be effectively used.

Nevertheless, there is a point at which individuals observe the events of their lives, whether consciously or not, and begin a process of reflection. The extent to which this is an integral part of faith practices will be explored in the chapter on believing.

## **4.2 Internal processes**

In an attempt to create a holistic view of how reflection takes place for an individual, Mulligan (1992) identified a series of internal processors, all of which are significant in helping the individual make sense of the world. This framework encompasses memory, thought, emotion, sensation, intuition and imagination as keys to a learning process which will take account of past and future, rational and affective response, and social and personal satisfaction. Potentially this framework can be applied to everyday learning equally with formalised institutionalised learning, as the core activities can be identified in common sense as well as in formalised knowledge. However, Mulligan identifies a seventh component that focuses the process towards formal learning.

Mulligan suggests that the most important aspect of experiential learning is the presence of will, which motivates, organises and orders all other processes that might

be involved in learning. Reflection must be a deliberate, intentional activity if it is to be a valid part of learning - and once again the everyday reflections in which people engage are deemed less useful. Everyday pondering and thinking is not necessarily deliberate or intentionally focused towards understanding or knowledge, although that may be the consequence.

Alongside these psychological aspects of self, the process of reflection in learning is also influenced by personality, worldview and learning type (Henry, 1992). Henry explores the roles that the unconscious plays in creative thinking, and attempts to reproduce that into a learning model which might enable individuals to develop creative thinking. In her observations of the process of creative brainstorming she identifies that the process itself inherently contains reflective activity.

"The real learning seems not so much the ideas that are produced but rather some kind of wisdom that comes from reflecting on an issue in a procedure which subtly forces them to re-evaluate possibilities and prejudices... For example, through the process of reflection, imagination and evaluation students become clearer about what they want and what they are willing to do to get it."  
(Henry, 1992, p191)

Whilst Henry has clearly observed these actions in a formal learning situation, as with Mason and Mulligan's observations, they could equally well apply to the everyday reflection that the women in this research undertake as part of their daily faith practices.

A focus on informal approaches to learning clearly requires an understanding of the extent to which the individual can take responsibility for their own learning, and inherent in that is the ability to reflect on life experience (Megginson, 1996; Marsick, 1990; Boud and Walker, 1993). Thus, it becomes the individual's responsibility and task to make meaningful connections (Lovell, 1980). However, this individual responsibility is also formalised as an ability that can be taught. Structured

programmes are developed that show individuals how to diagnose and meet their own needs, suggesting that reflection is a desirable yet specialised task (Megginson and Whitaker, 1996). In the workplace this ability to reflect is seen as a way to enhance organisational learning and hence increase effectiveness (Watkins and Marsick, 1992). Marsick and Watkins also place strategic importance on the ability to engage in critical reflection, suggesting that workplace training can nurture the individual's ability to reflect on everyday experience and work context. The emphasis is on reflection as a critical factor in opening up quantifiable learning opportunities (Bright, 1996; Lucas, 1996; Boud et al, 1996).

However, learning faith takes place in the heart of everyday life experience. Mason, Mulligan, Marsick, Kolb and others ultimately place their theories back into a formalised context, leaving extensive everyday experience outside of the boundaries of acceptable learning. Yet learning is an integral part of beliefs and values.

Experiences impact on lives, and bring about change.

"For someone to be changed by something they must in some deeper sense be touched by it. They must feel the relevance of this new point of view to their own experience, beliefs and concerns." (Claxton, 1984, px)

Claxton's statement does not appear to limit learning to that which is formulated within a formal context, but opens up the possibility of a truly holistic definition of learning.

#### **4.3 The place of faith**

This process of change, of being touched by something at a deep level, is something which it becomes apparent is part of the experience of the women in this study.

Models which describe reflective practice as a process of enquiry and self-enquiry (Bright, 1986; Weiser, 1987), and which foster notions of contemplation are readily applied to the processes of faith formation in daily life. Robson (1987) looks at

different models for developing spirituality, including the idea of action-reflection, where people are urged to reflect theologically on what we do, and then adjust their practices accordingly. However, this too is seen as a very conscious process, starting with noticing and then moving on to telling story, before drawing connections, in a model reminiscent of Mason's concept of deliberate noticing.

The telling of stories is extremely important in this kind of reflective learning, as stories engage both intellectually and affectively, and can also act as a counter to staged, linear thinking (O'Donaghue, 1996). Mason also notes the process of re-telling as significant in the learning process, whilst feminist pedagogies note the importance of allowing women space to use their own expert knowledge as a learning resource (Bignell, 1996). Strategies for encouraging childhood learning in a school context also realise the importance of the story (Egan, 1984; O'Donaghue, 1996). Again these processes surface in the lives of the women in this study.

The notion of deliberate reflection as the defining concept for learning is not only privileged as a skill which needs to be developed, but it can also be very individualistic. Thus, once again disconnecting from women's lives which are shaped by a network of relationships and responsibilities (Brah, 1989; Hughes and Kennedy, 1985). In the area of faith development, the individualistic model is closely related to a hierarchical model in which the experience of faith becomes highly private and personal (Rees, 1987). This reveals again the tension between women's experiences and need to work through things together and the demands of the learning models which suggest that there is a 'better' or 'right' way of learning.

In the next section I will explore a second feature of the learning model, that of the experience or event itself. There is a suggestion that some experiences are more worthy of reflecting upon than others, and that the development of experiential

learning theories represents a formalisation, and appropriation, of daily life into the essentially patriarchal system of education.

## **5.0 THE EXPERIENCE ITSELF**

### **5.1 Experiential learning or learning from experience?**

Experiential learning is both a formal, institutional concept as exemplified in various processes of accreditation ( DEET, Australia, 1992; Fraser, 1995; Stuart, 1995), and also an incidental process as individuals learn from their own lives (Usher et al, 1997). Saddington (1992) overviews the place of experience in several key learning traditions, noting that it is central to the ideologies of progressive and radical learning, where knowledge is inseparable from life experience. However, for the purposes of learning, some experiences are considered to have more learning potential than others. The ideas around utilising life experience for learning purport to be particularly helpful for groups that are traditionally excluded from learning (Boud and Miller, 1996). However, because the experiences which count are themselves qualified, new barriers are erected (Fraser, 1995).

Experiences that might contain learning potential can occur in a variety of contexts, but consideration of these experiences will show that potentially a discriminatory hierarchy of experience is formed. The hierarchy of experiences begins with those gained in the context of paid employment. Of secondary importance are experiences gained in the pursuit of leisure or voluntary work, whilst the impact of family and relationships is rarely acknowledging in terms of learning values.

This hierarchy of experience is reinforced by suggesting that although there is a kind of learning which takes place in the ordinary processes of everyday living, it does not entail the kind of reflective processes which would allow individuals to be transformed (Weil and McGill, 1989; Jarvis, 1994). Whilst arguing that learning

must be grounded in social contexts (Jarvis, 1987), Jarvis also argues for a type of non-learning, or pre-conscious learning, seemingly inferior to the learning taking place within recognisable contexts. It would seem then that whilst the context is important, some contexts are perhaps more important than others in the learning process, suggesting that they add value or quality to the learning that takes place (Candy, 1991).

## **5.2 Employment counts**

Given the current pre-occupation with employment as the desirable outcome of learning, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the contexts in which experience might count as learning is the workplace (Heppner, 1994).

"In organisational life everyday experience is the most fundamental influence on people's learning. " (Harrison, 1992, p156)

Initially Harrison (1992) would seem to be making a case for a very inclusive approach to individual life within organisational learning. It may seem that she is including the kind of discussion that takes place in coffee breaks, where information is shared, and new insights gained to common problems, however, Harrison goes on to qualify the notion of experience:

"This experience consists not simply of the work people do, but also the way that they interact with others in the organisation; and the behaviour, attitudes and values of those others. It consists, therefore, of people's entire work environment." (p156)

Experience has clearly been placed in a work context. Harrison does not really consider the most fundamental influence to be everyday experience, but rather everyday *work* experiences. This has significant implications for women, such as those in my study, where a great deal of what shapes their values and identity, a great deal of their significant experience takes place outside of the work organisation, yet nevertheless is brought into it.

Whilst there are now more women than ever before in the paid workforce, they are predominantly in low-paid, part-time, flexible jobs, and the provision of training which is directly related to improved performance and enhanced status potentially excludes women (Wickham, 1986; Sheridan, 1992; Payne, 1991). An emphasis on performance criteria and outcomes puts pressure on women who are still defined in terms of their contribution to the home and family, and adds to the sense that their core identity may itself be worthless (Edwards, 1993).

This preoccupation with performance might be perceived as fundamentally patriarchal, arising out of a positivistic epistemology in which pursuit of the best is the goal (Burgess, 1996). This results in hierarchies that emerge across all spheres of society, including training and education, and women's experience of hierarchies is invariably oppressive. The church is not immune to this pre-occupation with the benefits of training, and whilst the outcomes may not be economic success, they are concerned with getting more people to be efficiently involved in the activities of the church. For women who are trying to explore and develop their faith on different terms, belonging to the church may then be experienced as struggle, even conflict, as will be seen in later discussion.

Various studies on women in the workplace identify that for many women the experiences of life outside the organisation are crucial to their lives. Yet often there is no place for them to speak of this kind of learning into the formalised work situation (Itzin, 1995; Wilson, 1995; Hearn and Parkin, 1995). It is only validated as learning to the extent that it translates into usable skills or knowledge (Brah, 1989). The kind of experience that might 'count' is that which directly enhances work-based skill and hence productivity (Sutherland, 1997).

### 5.3 Voluntary work: a good second best?

Outside of the preferred option of paid employment, there are two particular contexts within the hierarchy of experiences in which women might gain the kind of experience that counts as learning. The division between formal knowledge and life experience is seen clearly in the area of voluntary activities, an area which affects women in particular (Gallagher, 1977). Women gain skills and confidence through their domestic activity, and in many cases, through their involvement in voluntary work outside the home. The two are often linked, as women are attracted or recruited into volunteer activities which are compatible with their domestic lives, whether for practical reasons such as time and money, or for psychological ones such as confidence and self-esteem. One of the areas in which women become involved voluntarily is the provision of childcare, and as they are implicitly assumed to have child-care skills, the work receives little formal training and recognition. Baldock and Ungerson (1991) argue that this is because of the downgrading of feminised skill such as care giving, which is embedded into the dichotomy between formal and informal, whether care or education.

The experiences gained in voluntary work may well be recognised as valid for learning, except that most people do not enter voluntary work with the intention of gaining qualifications (Percy, 1988; Sargant 1988; Gold 1971). Indeed for many women the idea of gaining recognised skills through their volunteer work is decidedly strange (Poland, 1990; Millar, 1994). Various attempts have been made to help women identify the knowledge that they have already acquired, and from that lead them towards the acquisition of formal skills and qualifications. An example of this might be in the work of the Pre-school Playgroups Association training schemes (Statham, 1990). The Playgroup movement developed approaches to learning that

began to break down the formal and informal dichotomy. No distinction was made between leaders and 'mothers' and there was no sense of progression. Rather, there was an emphasis on extension of skill, and in the early stages no formal qualifications were offered (Crowe, 1983, Brophy et al, 1992).

However, participating in voluntary activities can pave the way for both informal and formal learning, and become the much-desired stepping stone back into paid employment (Hogg, 1986, Brophy et al, 1992). The experience gained from voluntary work can be validated as learning if the outcome is evidenced in either paid employment or formal education (Daniels, 1988; Woodman, 1991). The skills and understanding gained through the processes of belonging and participating can be translated into recognised formal outcomes through recognised training programmes offered by the organisation (Percy, 1988). The experiences gained through voluntary work can be an acceptable basis for learning, and appear to challenge the boundary between formal and informal education.

#### **5.4 Family and people: a poor third?**

Whilst the experiences of voluntary activity may be considered as valid basis for learning, the experience of family life is perhaps more problematic, although it is acknowledged as an influential arena for development (Leichter, 1974). Although this understanding is embedded in a pre-1960's notion that the woman's domestic activity is designed to support the husband and enhance child development (Apter, 1993), the emphasis on the role of family as educator is still very prevalent (Leach, 1994, Miles, 1994). Although the emerging ideal of the good mother during the 1950s and 1960s was accompanied by the idea of the woman as the 'new craft worker of today', these skills continued to be valued solely within the domestic environment (Humphries, 1993; Harman, 1980). Attempts have been made to give

value to the experience of management and responsibility gained in the home (Allan and Crow, 1989), but because domestic work is unpaid it has less value in society (Lewenhak, 1988; Tilly, 1987).

Edwards (1993) found a clear tension between the experience of domestic roles and responsibilities, and the demands of formal education. She identified family life as invisible experience, which counted for little in the formal academic world. In addition, most women do not see their mothering experiences in terms of learning, although they may well acknowledge a level of wisdom or common sense. Thus, more conscious efforts have been made to recognise this invisible experience and to help women identify the skills that they have gained from unpaid work, both volunteer and domestic.

"Management skills such as prioritising tasks, delegation, time-management, multi-tasking, planning etcetara are important in many occupations undertaken by women, both paid and unpaid. These skills are often perceived as 'natural attributes' by employers and women alike, and are not acknowledged or recognised." (p10, DEET, Australia 1992)

However, all of these attempts are designed to help women name their experiences using the language of the formal educational world, which is in turn influenced by the language of the paid work world. Attempts to identify the learning that has taken place in the domestic environment are couched in terms of transferable skills or the development of pride, self-sufficiency and confidence (Bauer and Elsey, 1992; Dekker, 1994). Often the curriculum of adult education is then a reinforcement of traditional roles and skills, using the experience of home and family as the basis for development into other caring and supportive roles (Blundell, 1992; McGivney, 1993).

It is not only the activities of domesticity that constitute women's lives, but the experience of relationships themselves is a key component of women's lives and

identity. Relationships may be significant at any time in the learning process, particularly as a factor in encouraging participation. Babchuk (1995) suggested that personal influence is a critical component in decisions to participate in and continue with formal learning programmes, but relationships may also be significant in fostering incidental learning on a daily basis.

Brookfield (1987) raises questions about the actual learning that takes place within relationships, suggesting that the impact of intimate and significant personal relationships is a source of personal learning. However, the significance of relationships in incidental reflective learning has not been explored. Whilst organisational and training literature have formalised this aspect of learning with an interest in roles such as mentoring or coaching, the impact of personal non-formal relationships is less clear.

However, the experiences of loving, separation, loss, conflict and nurture are aspects of relationship generally ignored in terms of personal learning. Reflection on relationship issues such as divorce, bereavement and rape is more likely to occur in the counselling environment rather than the educational domain. But perhaps counselling is a type of learning? Or a potential learning experience? Models of counselling also depend upon the individual exploring and reflecting on her own experiences, and then being able to integrate them into her daily life, thus behaving differently in situations (Chaplin, 1988). Again the kind of pedagogy which is utilised in counselling situations may well be one that is particularly effective for learning from relationship. However, it is not generally considered a legitimate form of formal learning. The experiential knowledge that counts is not the same as life experience, but rather those knowledges that will fit into the formal system.

Both the positive and negative experiences of relationships are left outside the bounded field of learning, perhaps opening up the possibility of another as yet unnamed territory of learning yet to be identified (Edwards, 1997).

Experiential learning has been developed into a formal learning concept. Experiential learning depends upon certain types of experience, which are deemed to count as learning. It would seem that many life experiences are not the kind of experiences from which acceptable learning can be drawn. Volunteer work, domestic activity and relationships struggle to re-define themselves in terms that will allow them to qualify as experiential learning. The learning that makes up values, and particularly spiritual or moral values, also falls well outside of these boundaries. Yet changes happen in lives as a result of life events, yet these changes cannot be expressed within the accepted discourses of learning. The pre-occupation with employment as the ultimate goal has widened the gap between experience that counts as learning and experience that builds up life, wisdom and common sense. This thesis works towards finding a vocabulary that will allow everyday experiences to become part of the currency of acceptable learning.

Having considered the way in which reflection has become a privileged activity within the learning process, and then evaluated the validity of various life experiences as learning, I want now to consider a third aspect. The final element of a learning experience is the positive outcome - changed behaviour or viewpoint (Jarvis, 1994). It is in this final stage that an experience can be legitimised and valued as learning.

## **6.0 THE RESULTING CHANGE: LEGITIMISATION**

Adult Education itself has claimed to be built on the recognition of past experience, and central to many practitioner text books is the tenet that whatever educational

methods are employed, recognition should be given to the student's practical experience (for example Rogers, 1986; Craig, 1994; ). Attempts to formalise this prior or experiential learning have been made in a variety of ways, notably the AP(E)L system (Fraser, 1995). Within Saddington's (1992) analysis of how experience fits into major learning traditions, attempts to categorise and quantify life experience would be seen as part of a growing tendency towards technological education. Whilst it may seem to be a favourable approach for those who would otherwise be excluded from education, in reality it is a way of making people who are outside the conventional system "fit". Knowledge constructed and acquired outside the normative hierarchical system known as formal education simply cannot be recognised as knowledge (Fraser, 1995; Stuart, 1995). This is particularly pertinent for women whose life experience and knowledge has been acquired in environments already judged as less important by society, or who are trying to learn something outside of formalised structures.

Luttrell (1997) explores the ways in which a group of mothers perceive a difference between common sense and intelligence, a distinction that the women clearly draw. Common sense recognises and validates the knowledge that grows out of life experience, whereas intelligence is clearly linked to the recognition endowed by the institutional educational system. She also notes that this differential is clearly gender coded, with men being identified as intelligent, women as having common sense. It becomes easy to discount the validity of life experiences as learning. The formal system does not recognise the kind of 'intangible' subjects that are being learnt, reinforcing the idea that common sense understanding is of less value. As Stuart (1995) argues it simply throws up the questions about privileged knowledge, and

hierarchies of learning, and also acts in ways which maintain the current inequalities in society.

### **6.1 Experience, economics and employment**

"It is true that we need a learning society for the sake of the country's continued economic strength. But we also need to provide an environment in which every member of society can achieve his or her potential as an individual citizen" (Boswell, p6, 1994)

"As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community." (Blunkett, 1998, quoted by Stubbs, 1998)

These two statements, made four years apart and from differing viewpoints, attempt to articulate the central importance of learning throughout life. Both attempt to place value on other than economic criteria, but only demonstrate that citizenship and economic contribution are inextricably linked (Analysis, Radio 4, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1998).

The ideal of non-institutional education is to improve access, both physically and psychologically, and to allow adults to find ways of learning more appropriate to their circumstances. However, these aims are compromised in relation to the political and economic goals of employment and citizenship. These approaches to adult learning are defined in relation to the foundational model of formal, institutionalised knowledge, and are always required to justify themselves against those criteria.

Experiences only count if they contribute to economic and societal success.

The rhetoric of adult education clearly enshrines the ideal of success being measured in terms of quality of life rather than material criteria (DES, 1973). The values placed on education by global development agencies such as UNESCO, Oxfam and others reflects a fundamental concern that education should be about the whole of life, not just employment success. However, in the last few years education has become increasingly linked to economic prosperity, and it has become important to measure

the extent to which a nation is achieving educational goals (Tuijnman, 1992).

Increasingly learning outcomes need to be measurable and recognisable by external authorities, rather than agreed upon by individuals or groups on their own terms (Challis, 1998). This move towards the economic significance of learning perhaps reflects a shift in the balance between education for its' own sake, and education as a process for selecting and training people to meet the needs of an industrial nation (Abercrombie, 1988).

There is a focus on finding ways of helping individuals to meet national targets for training, whether by offering more opportunities or by helping individuals to translate their life experiences into recognised awards (McGivney, 1994). Various attempts have been made to accredit women's life experience. For example, NVQs in caring and voluntary work attempt to measure skills gained in areas outside of paid employment, usually with the purpose of enabling the individual to enter paid employment.

Whilst there is a recognition that outcomes can be both cognitive and affective, there is a greater emphasis on the more easily measurable cognitive outcomes of learning (Waldron, 1991). This pre-occupation with measured outcomes compound the difficulties which women already encounter with the eligibility of their particular experience to enter the learning process. Even the area of spiritual development, with which this research is particularly concerned, is not immune to this process. A number of Diocese have attempted to translate spiritual experience into a series of measurable outcomes, and progress can be graded on a check sheet with tick-boxes, for example, the Portfolio Programme of the Oxford Diocese (1996).

The thrust in all of these initiatives and developments is always towards growth and change, measurable either in recognised qualifications or in securing paid

employment. Learning that does not result in measurably different behaviour is not deemed to be appropriate learning in the current educational and economic climate (Jarvis, 1997; Mezirow, 1997). However, this does give a number of difficulties for the women in this study learning faith, which appears to fall outside of the various boundaries that have been drawn around the learning process.

## **CONCLUSION**

I began by suggesting that it is very difficult to describe the kind of learning that is going on in the everyday, perhaps even more difficult when that learning is in the area of spirituality and values. The language of learning is essentially formal, positivist and patriarchal and women's experiences are often not included within formal or informal learning theories. I proposed an alternative model for learning, in which motivation, reflection, experience and outcomes are seen as integrally related to one another. I have also begun to suggest that an alternative vocabulary may be helpful in understanding the ways in which the women in this study learn faith. This model provides a framework for the kind of learning that may be taking place through everyday life, yet which does not find a place within the boundaries of conventional learning theories.

Although the concept of experience is not unproblematic for feminists, it is still significant in the formation of feminist epistemology. However, within the discourses of education, experiential learning has been claimed by the institutions and organisations of our society. Instead of being a vehicle through which women's learning can be explored and their potential unfolded, it becomes instead another standard to which they have to conform. It functions from the same hierarchies as the formal system analysed previously. The women in this study also found their experiences of spirituality difficult to name as acceptable kinds of knowledge,

Everyday experience has to be translated into acceptable terms, or otherwise treated as inadequate.

Accidental or incidental learning are also contested concepts, even oxymoronic, as learning implies conscious motivation, or at the very least conscious and intentional reflection on life experience. For much of the learning that takes place in women's lives, and in this research particularly in the area of faith formation, these elements appear to be absent. However, it could be argued that they are in fact present, but the language available does not seem appropriate to describe them within spiritual contexts.

The conventional theories of learning such as Kolb and Fry's learning cycle or theories of experiential learning do not always fit with women's lived experiences in this study. The data will attempt to explore the extent to which learning through life is truly a learning experience, yet one without a name. In the following chapters the dominant discourses of learning will be questioned, and the need for alternative ways of understanding incidental or everyday learning explored. Describing, discussing and analysing the significance of religious faith in women's lives involves the development of some new terminology, and it may well be that this terminology will give a greater significance to the learning which is taking place throughout the experiences of ordinary and everyday living.

The sense of struggle and conflict which is inherent throughout the data may well be the result of trying to fit life experiences into the pre-existing constructs offered by the discourse of institutional learning. The next chapter will begin to explore these questions in the context of the participants relationship with the organisation itself.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **STORIES OF BELONGING: organisational conflict as learning**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The previous chapters have developed a framework in which to explore the ways in which women learn religious faith, and in particular to explore the reasons why their stories seem to be overlaid with tones of tension and conflict. This chapter will consider how this is experienced within the context of belonging to organisations. For most women their organisational space has only recently widened again to include the workplace and a variety of other community contexts after a period in which the private world of home and family became woman's special preserve (Holdsworth, 1988). Whilst the women in this study are engaged in a variety of contexts, including family, workplace and other activities, Church membership is also central to their lives. For Christians, joining, belonging and participating in the church are not just optional extras, but are integral to the expression and the development of belief (McKenzie, 1988). Actively engaging in a corporate or communal external expression of faith is a core activity for individuals across all theological and ideological manifestations of Christianity (Elwell, 1993). Belonging to the church is perceived as an intrinsic part of the individual's development, providing a place to celebrate and develop a deeper bond with God, in a corporate setting (Percy, 1996).

In this study it would appear that organisational participation is sometimes a mixed experience, with both positive and negative implications. The chapter will begin by looking at the processes of belonging and developing within organisations, and the extent to which similar patterns also occur in the church. It will then go on to consider the tensions for women as they attempt to fit their roles and activities into the frameworks provided by the church. Finally it will consider how this tension is

experienced as learning, applying the model developed in chapter Three to show how reflecting on experiences leads to various outcomes for their personal faith.

## **1.0 ORGANISATIONAL LIFE: an uncomfortable place for women?**

There is now a substantial literature, which considers the relationship between gender and organisational life, although much of this literature assumes that organisation is synonymous with workplace (Itzin and Newman, 1995; Wilson, 1995; Coleman, 1991). There is an interplay between experiences of workplace organisations, and those of other types of organisation (Handy, 1988), and these experiences lead in turn to various expectations which influence the individual. The existence of these pre-existing ideas about organisations is evidenced through a range of explicit or implicit, perceived or actual, demands and expectations placed upon women. Many of the demands placed upon women in organisations mean that belonging to an organisation is not always a comfortable place for them. Whilst the structures and forms purport to be neutral, the pre-occupation with performance, success and similar goals mean that in reality organisational life has a specifically gendered dimension (French, 1995; Nicolson, 1996; Savage and Witz, 1992; Parkin and Maddock, 1995).

### **1.1 Joining the organisation**

Dawson (1992) gives a framework for analysing organisations in order to interpret their performance. She suggests six key factors which provide a framework for understanding the nature of the particular body being investigated. These factors are people, including attitudes, motivation and performance; interest groups, objectives and strategy; technology; opportunity and constraint in the environment; co-ordination and control; and the culture. However I would suggest that the first five are in fact the carriers and reflectors of the sixth - the culture and values of the organisation (Deal, 1982). Percy (1996) also proposes, as does Handy (1988), that particularly with faith-

based or cause-based organisations, the structures and mechanisms are the vehicles that carry the organisation's foundational ideologies. These foundational ideologies may themselves be in tension with the dominant cultural and social milieu, informed by economic and political constraints (Morgan, 1990).

The event of joining an organisation will entail a process of inculcating the culture and values, whether through the implicit messages of the structures and practices, or more overt organisational rules (Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991; Frost, 1991; Dale, 1994).

Mills suggests that organisations are not only about efficiency, order and stability, but also identity, conflict and change. Understanding the place of rules within the organisation is a key part in becoming an effective member, so that initially joining an organisation is like playing a game with only a small knowledge of the procedures.

The practices and structures of the organisation are gradually understood, and begin to define individual responses, and to impose some of the demands and expectations of organisational behaviour.

The church as a local organisation also communicates certain values through its procedures, activities and structures (Roberts, 1989; Davey, 1996). A church may clearly give members a sense of superiority as part of a primary insider group, and there is usually some kind of initiation ceremony, which marks the transition from outsider to insider (Fichter, 1967). For example, after a period of relative anonymous attendance a potential member might be invited to attend a short course of meetings, culminating in some kind of welcome or membership ceremony. Within the Church of England this might be confirmation, or if a person is already confirmed, it can be marked by joining the electoral roll or other formal act of joining (Seddon, 1996).

For women there are particular limits or rules on effective belonging, many of which condition their roles and behaviours. In many organisations women have experienced

difficulties as they try to establish their own identity. Some have had the experience of having to adopt male-type behaviours, yet others find it hard to be taken seriously (Rees, 1992; Green and Cassell, 1996). The situation is no different within the church. The organisational framework implicitly communicates certain messages to women, and these are that the church is happiest with women in sub-ordinate, submissive roles, largely concerned with pastoral, familial and overtly spiritual activities (Storkey, 1995; Furlong, 1991; Jamieson, 1996).

However, initial involvement does not always show up these tensions, but rather the Church can appear as a safe place to join and be accepted. All of the women gave accounts of their initial acceptance of Christian faith, and for some of them this was experienced particularly within a church context. Imogen, who is now an ordained priest, grew up in a Jewish family, and after some youthful involvement with the Church of England, drifted away from it through marriage and career. However, after her first husband's death she was drawn again towards the church:

"And it wasn't until 19xx when my husband died, and by that time we were living in a village, and I then, because of the death, had to make contact with the local parish church. And the vicar and a group of people in that congregation were so good, and so loving and caring, and there was a good housegroup and so on. I was just drawn into a community, which meant so much to me, in which I just flowered. And everything began to come together and about 4 months after I'd actually joined that church, I was confirmed, and you know that was it basically". (Imogen)

Initial joining is often the point at which the overt culture of the organisation is communicated and understood, and the values are encountered and approved. At this point there may be little indication of conflict to come, or if there is, it is easily put on one side. Val, currently a churchwarden in a suburban evangelical church, expressed some initial misgivings when she first began to go to church, using the language of conflict even at this stage. She describes the decision to go as 'an unsettling niggles', as it seemed to be outside of the lifestyle that she and her husband had established. They

found initial contact ‘a little bit overpowering’. However, she and her husband continued to go and quickly became actively involved. It is after the individual is embedded within the organisation, that the gaps begin to emerge between initial expectations and a reality which is unfolding.

## **1.2 Learning within the organisation**

Strategies and programmes for employees or member training and development are of critical importance to many organisations, with a focus on progression and promotion for the individual, and performance and competitiveness for the organisation (Smith, 1992). Organisational learning programmes are centred around meeting the needs of the organisation, and training is aimed at developing skills, knowledge and expertise to fulfil corporate objectives (Patrick, 1992; Dale, 1994). This purpose might well be packaged in a variety of slogans and "movements" which have appeared in recent years. Thus Reid and Barrington (1997) name four such slogans in particular as ‘continuous development’, ‘learning organisation’, ‘lifelong learning’, and ‘learning pays’. But although the focus of each of these strategies may seem to be the individual’s development, it is usually in the context of international competitiveness and survival (Harrison, 1988, 1992; Gerber, 1998).

Goldstein (1989) considers training as instrumental for successful entry into an organisation, and for enjoying the satisfactions of work. As in many other books focused on training, he also goes on to give a prescriptive approach to creating successful training. The integration of corporate vision and culture is then the responsibility of management and leadership, and training becomes an imposed pre-requisite of functional organisational life (Brown and Sommerland, 1996). There is little, if any place in this technological approach for individual experience, except for

the purpose of assessing entry level, and then monitoring outcomes (Saddington, 1992; Craig, 1994).

However, whilst women are now actively engaged in employment, paid work is typically seen as secondary to their work within the household and family. This is reflected both in the type of work and the remuneration that women are likely to receive (Dex, 1988; Ollenburger and Moore, 1992). In 1997 women were still most likely to be found in part-time, flexible work, earning an average of 80% of the male equivalent pay (Church, 1997). Whilst women are increasingly anticipating a place in the paid workforce, they remain in positions of subservience and in support roles which echo the domestic framework. Women are still defined in terms of a male norm, and are therefore seen as deficient against such a norm. There are also the stereotyping roles and social conditioning which can handicap women in organisational culture (Burke and McKeen, 1994). Apter, (1993) suggests that, through economic and psychological factors, women are seen as programmed to perform in certain roles. If they want to establish themselves in the workplace, there is a need for women to be understood as choosing independently of these stereotypes.

The Church of England may have different organisational goals, but it is increasingly subject to market pressures and a need to offer training to both its paid employees and other participants (Turnbull, 1996). Courses are offered which allow people to enhance the skills needed to manage the organisation - participants in my study have attended Church Warden training, school governor training, buildings management, administration courses - as well as the weekly local input which comes through a mixture of sermons, worship and small group activity. However, these courses often remain the privilege of a confident few, who are able to participate on the terms presented (White, 1987)

Whilst there is a great diversity in the training and development programmes and processes offered through the Church of England, they are increasingly reflective of the wider emphasis on performance and outcomes (Pettifer, 1996). This emphasis has less room for personal story and experience, which may make learning within the organisation less accessible to women (von Prümmer, 1994), for whom sharing accounts of their lives can be an integral part of learning.

For women in a church environment these expectations of performance are framed by the patriarchal epistemology within which the church operates, as outlined in Chapter Two. The organisation is vitally important to the women in this study, and yet tension and conflict seem to arise in a number of different ways. Some of this tension arises from the roles that the women in the research are undertaking, others from the activities of the organisation.

### **1.3 Telling organisational stories**

The model of learning I have adopted suggests that women use the events of their everyday lives as a way of responding to the issues in their lives, but not necessarily consciously. The process of commitment and reflection on experience is important for women's whole-life learning, allowing them to turn over a range of issues, including skill development, personal values and identity. The current emphasis on technological training, which is driven by the need to see outcomes and improvement does not leave much space to hear the slow, reflective stories of daily lives. This is equally true in church.

Davie (1995) undertook a longitudinal study with women participants in a Protestant Bible study group in Philadelphia, USA, in which she interviewed each of the participants about their spiritual life history. In spite of active involvement in a group, the women still felt they lacked space to talk about their spirituality. This sense of

isolation within the church community is expressed in my research by Val, who in spite of being totally involved in the life of the church feels she is unable to articulate her real self there.

“SM: Do you feel that you’re able to be yourself in church,.. like you said, it’s been quite a struggle though these few months, and how real were you able to be about that in church?

Val: Probably not. I meant, I think, I think I should be able to be me, but my own defence mechanisms come into play.”

She then goes on to describe the only space which is really ‘hers’, which is being alone at home. This seems to encapsulate the heart of the feminist epistemology outlined earlier. Val experiences the church as a place of struggle, and yet has no language with which to identify this as problematic. The result is a kind of tension in her life, and that of several of the other women, which may result in external conflict or self-doubt and tension. It is in processing these experiences that the women develop their faith, albeit unconsciously.

The idea of personal story or talk as a process of defining and negotiating boundaries, and the consequent conflict, is a way of understanding individual learning which allows an importance to be given to personal experience. Self-development is also seen as another key in the evolution of a learning organisation, and Pedler et al(1990) uses a very broad definition of learning in this context:

"Learning is the word we give to that ultimately mysterious process whereby we make sense of ourselves in our situations" (Pedler et al, 1990, p4)

This definition would allow space for women’s everyday talk to be part of the sense-making process. However, a pre-occupation with measurable outcomes and for training to be set in the context of organisational success co-exists powerfully alongside this clear motivation towards personal learning (Gibbs, 1994; Thompson and McHugh, 1990; Warner, 1994). Much of this might be seen as a reflection of the

gendered nature of organisational structure, where the relational and personal are seen as inferior (French, 1995; Hearn, 1995). Attempts to allow space for personal story as part of the incidental processes of learning, and to create an open emotional climate, are usually isolated and experimental (Sims et al, 1993; Megginson, 1996).

## **2.0 ROLE TENSION IN CHURCH**

### **2.1 Conflicting interests**

We have already seen that the church as an organisation is not exempt from the influences of a wider society. Organisations are both influenced by and influencers of the broader contexts in which they function; they co-exist in a delicate balance (Boden, 1994). This is particularly true for the roles of women, which have been extrapolated from family and community into organisational life. Debate still continues about the extent and variety of factors that contribute towards the construction of gender behaviour in our society (Beechey, 1986; Llewelyn, 1990). However, there is some agreement that gender is not just a result of nature, but is rather a culmination of a number of key activities and communications that create and reinforce expectations of certain types of behaviours.

Throughout the 70s and 80s seminal research from those such as Sue Sharpe (1976) and Ann Oakley (1985, also Figes, 1986) drew attention to educational and economic factors in defining women's roles. In spite of a global restructuring of these, there are still clearly defined role boundaries for women, which spill over from the domestic sphere into a range of other activities. Whilst women are increasingly expected to participate in the workforce, it is often easier for them to find success in jobs which reflect their domestic roles and skills, such as caring, teaching small children, and a variety of support functions (Rees, 1992).

Philanthropic voluntary work has been perceived as a safe and suitable place for women within a patriarchal framework, a concept with well-established roots in the Victorian era (Ross, 1992; Dyhouse, 1981; Parker, 1988). This fosters the perception that women are 'natural' carers, whether in relation to their families, or the wider community. There is a progression from unpaid caring work to low-paid caring work which women are assumed to be both equipped and motivated to undertake for little reward (Queresh, 1991; Fox, 1995; Baldock and Ungerson, 1991). Baldock and Ungerson draw out the false dichotomy that exists between formal and informal care, and also the business of care and the provision of care. When care-giving work is seen as an extension of feminine identity, there is an emotional pull of guilt, something that will be echoed in the women involved in the church. Much of the discussion around women's knowledge of organisational contexts is centred around the dynamic of resistance and oppression, and a need for women to reflect on their own stories in order to position themselves differently within these structures (Nicolson, 1996). This is a pertinent question for women in church organisational structures as well, and the extent to which women experience resistance and oppression is also related to their ability to voice their own concerns.

## **2.2 Woman in church and society**

Women in the church are influenced by the values held in the broader culture. Some of the tension in the stories told by research participants arises from the role expectations of wider society, which are reinforced and strengthened within a religious context (Rapoport, 1998). In Chapter Three I identified a number of binary opposites in both church and society that are influential in the way in which women understand themselves. Women's role in the church has often been polarised into the idea of virgin as opposed to whore (Clack, 1996; Graham, 1995), suggesting that women

need to be pure and above reproach. A more recent variation of this theme has placed ‘mother as angel’ against ‘working mother as wicked’ (Puttick, 1997a). The significance of these images is reflected in the stories the women tell during the interviews.

Hannah, aged 44, has been widowed for a number of years. When I first met her she was in paid employment in the Health Service, and also worked part-time as an unpaid administrator for her church. Throughout the time of the study she remained convinced about the rightness of male leadership and the male-ness of God. In our first meeting she talked about her understanding of what it means to be a woman in the church:

“I’m a typical female really. I’m not one of those women that like to think that women can do everything that men can do and that. I’m quite happy with my lot as a woman. I’m quite happy for men to be men. Not that I’d like anybody walking over me or treating me badly, but I’m quite - I prefer men in leadership roles. Cos I think that’s what God intended, for me to be a woman, and all that encompasses - not for me to be somebody’s doormat or to be some brainless idiot that stays at home and keeps house, . But he’s made me to be a woman, and all that encompasses, and I’m quite happy with that - my lot as a woman” (Hannah)

However, in spite of Hannah’s strong views about the relative roles of men and women, a level of tension is already apparent, particularly in her vehement denial that she should be a ‘doormat’ or a ‘brainless idiot’. Hannah believes that her understanding of what it means to be a woman in the church is directly from God, and yet her experience of the organisation is one in which only men exercise authority (McEwan, 1991).

For many women these roles are not perceived as problematic (Baxter and Western, 1998), and, in the conservative evangelical wing of the church where Hannah belongs, feminism itself has extremely negative connotations (Balmer, 1994; Brown, 1994).

Feminism belongs to the realm of working women and neglectful mothers. Val, who attends the same church as Hannah also has very conventional views on her role and responsibilities as a woman. Val is married, with two young teenage daughters, and apart from her extensive church responsibilities, considers her primary duty to be at home for her family.

“ But, if my daughter was off ill, I’m not scratching around to looking for someone to look after her so that I can go into work. I’m here no problem, um, so I think that’s the difference. I’m here when they come in from school; I’m here in the holidays. Now they don’t actually need me in that I don’t have to look after then, I mean they need me to ferry them around, the just want me here, so they can, they can, if they want to talk to me, I’m there. And they do talk to me. And I think, they don’t want me to go to work, the say, oh Mum, Louise has to go to her Nan every night, she doesn’t see her Mum until half past six or whatever, and the children like it, and I think its right.” Val

In this story Val clearly defines the role with which she is comfortable, and these limits enable her to make decisions about the amount of voluntary activity it is appropriate to undertake in the church. There is also some defensiveness about the position she is taking. This suggests that she has to justify her position as she is being undermined by other discourses about the role of women. In these discourses women at home are placed as passive, redundant, even failures. Val adheres to the discourse in which mothers are angels, and in which Christian mothers don’t work outside the home (Borrowdale, 1989).

### **2.3 Women in church and workplace**

Tension is not only generated around domestic roles, but as women engage in paid employment so a potential conflict between home-making and work can arise (Coyle and Skinner, 1988). The tension is exacerbated by the expectations placed by the Church on a Christian’s role in the workplace.

When we first met Sally was negotiating her way through the difficulties of paid work as a teacher in a local secondary school. Sally found herself caught in the tension

between her paid-work and her voluntary work in the church, both involving children, and the expectations of the church community. She is attempting to combine multiple roles, and offers a creative alternative to the metaphor of women as jugglers.

"I'm working six hours a week. I've just.. here's a metaphor for you .. I've just written an article about life and what it's been like for the last six months. It's like a stuffed salad sandwich. It's got lots of nice tastes and textures, but every time you bite into it you get a mayonnaise splodge down your front! It's just too full, you know, it's just too full. and for me, teaching has been the gherkin. I don't like gherkins. It's been the thing that's set my teeth on edge. It's only been six hours a week but it's really been hard. And that was the other big uncertainty of the year.. do I carry on teaching or do I not? Is this a reasonable way that the Lord wants me to earn money because I believe it is reasonable for all of us to be able to maintain ourselves, women included, I don't hold to the fact that Christian mothers shouldn't work, or anything like that. I don't have any problem about working, but it seemed to be a kind of job that just took so much out of me. Some jobs affect you worse than others and I really felt that this job just drains me. I seem to be permanently tired. I have to be permanently angry whenever I'm in there .. I teach 12 year olds, and some of them have been very difficult kids. And all of this has been quite difficult to hold in balance, cos here's me on the one hand at church thinking, oh, yeah, I'm going to go with the kids work and stuff, and I'm loathing every minute in the classroom. There are some days I come back and I just think I hate it with every fibre of my being. But I don't feel passionate about spelling or punctuation. Give me something to teach that I feel passionate about and I really, I want to communicate it .. "

Sally identifies several pressures as she talks through the dilemmas facing her between paid work and church. She clearly separates herself from the pressure to conform to role expectation in terms of family, yet is pressured by the church in the area of caring. The notion that women should be able to undertake caring jobs, to do well with children in areas such as teaching is a pressure both inside and outside the church (Queresh, 1990; Borrowdale, 1989). The conversation continued, as I asked Sally about resolving this tension:

*SM: What are you going to do about that?*

That was the big uncertainty. Should I teach, should I not, There was the quite heavy angle of you're a Christian, you're a teacher, get out there and influence, you know, you've got this qualification, you trained three years for it, you know, you should go and influence. And I did feel under pressure from

a few people to do that, but I resolved in the end that I would not seek work for September. " (Sally)

Zoe has recently started paid work again after a gap of 13 or so years, and the inherent tension between her primary role of home-maker and mother, and her new role as employee is revealed in this story about how she is sorting out the domestic arrangements.

"If he'd gone to a different school then it would have been much harder work for me to get organised. It would have meant probably I'd have to concentrate more on the children rather than my job, whereas now I know that they are quite capable of getting themselves up and off to school, plus I'm supposed to have Friday's off. So last Friday morning, which was my first Friday off, I had a cup of tea in bed, and I said, well, you can all get yourselves up, P. as well, and get your packed lunch done, and then I'll come down when you've all finished. It worked! They did it.. They'll do it if they have to. So if I do it while I'm up and about, but on the day that I'm not they can so it's all sorted then. And then the boys will come home and get the drying up done if I'm not back. Cos I haven't had time to do the breakfast pots!" Zoe

Although Zoe does not explicitly relate this story to church, the values of the church are integral to her understanding. As yet, there is no real conflict, as she is comfortable with the limits that have been placed. She reflects a conventional position that the norm for a mother is to care for her husband, children and home as a priority. Zoe's story involved re-thinking the relationship between home and workplace, and reconciling her new role with her ideas about the role of wife and mother.

Whilst some of the women in the study are content to accept the stereotypes of women's roles, for others the pressure to conform to expectations is difficult to negotiate. Church then becomes a place of acceptance for some women, as they agree and conform to the image of women that is offered. For others it becomes a place of struggle and oppression as they become aware of alternative discourses, and begin to resist the roles they have been offered (Lybeck, 1995).

## 2.4 Women in the church

As stated earlier, much of the discussion about women in the Church of England has centred around the debate on the ordination of women to the priesthood (Wakeman, 1996). This mirrors the debates in non-religious organisations about women in management or women's access to authority in certain occupations (Aldridge, 1987; Evetts, 1994; Davidson, 1994; Green, 1996). Imogen has been in the forefront of this debate, having been ordained to the priesthood in 1994. She trained as a lawyer before she became a priest, and carries some of those values with her into the church context.

"I've always been in a context where men are dominant. You see, I trained as a lawyer, ... I was the only woman articled clerk in the whole of D. I was actually not invited to the Law Society dinner one year, simply because I was a woman, until my boss threw a strop, and I was the only woman in the middle of about 350 men, which I loved. So I've always worked in a male context, and that has been a struggle from time to time. When I was still working in the law, I was running a branch office of my firm, and some partners didn't like that because I was a woman; and then battles again."  
(Imogen)

This story resonates with other accounts of women's experiences in the workforce (Green, 1996; Ollenburger, 1992; Martin, 1992), and whilst Imogen is clearly sure of her own position as a woman, she uses the language of conflict to describe the situations.

In subsequent interviews Imogen continues to explain how she feels about the roles which women are being asked to take on in the church.

"Situations like funerals. Comments are made about how appreciated women are, simply because of the pastoral care, and I think the main thing that is appreciated, and it's not to say that men can't do a wonderful job at a funeral - but women are far better able to deal with the tears and the hurt, and able to cry with the families. Men don't do that. Men have to be strong. Men mustn't breakdown - they've got something to uphold in every church, you see, and men must be strong and reliable. That's what's expected of them, isn't it? Well, actually no. I've talked to families and they've said, we really appreciate

you crying with us, and we can see that you're affected when taking the service and so on." (Imogen)

The boundaries Imogen draws as a church leader are similarly influenced by society's expectations as Zoë or Val in their delineating of the domestic role. Imogen clearly splits gender activity into stereotypes, echoing the polarities discussed earlier. Whilst the women are content with the roles that they have been offered, the potential for tension remains latent. However, a number of activities from the data which give rise not just to tension, but to more specific organisational conflicts.

### **3.0 WOMEN'S WORK IN CHURCH**

#### **3.1 Evangelism**

Although women are drawn into a wide range of activities in and around church membership, the three particular areas that emerge in the data as generating conflict are evangelism, children's work and public worship. Louise, who is aged 44, married with three children and working part-time as a teacher, finds many of the demands of the Christian faith difficult, often expressing disappointment at her own performance as a Christian. On one occasion she talked about her current attitude to evangelism, and how it has been shaped by her initial experiences of the Church.

"I mean if it comes up in conversation I will say I've been to church.. I remember in Bradford there was - seeing this chap reminded us - we were very much evangelical, straight from the Baptist church. Right, we we're going to evangelise Bradford, and split into teams of three. And we were all given certain streets, knock on that door, and talk to them about Jesus, and I did it with another lady, with total fear and trembling. Set aside Sunday afternoon to go to this road that we didn't know, and knock on this door. And what effect does it have? Very little. So I sort of backed away from forcing it down people's throats. People don't want to be interrupted on a Sunday. You're like J.W.s [Jehovah's Witnesses] then, that's the sort of reputation they have. So I tend to take a bit of a softer, bit of a cop-out as well, but it's a more subtle line." (Louise)

The guilt that Louise feels about her lack of enthusiasm for what she thinks has been presented as her duty is seen in the phrase 'bit of a cop-out'. Nina, one of the older women in the study, is much more aware of a gendered dimension to church life, and has often experienced this as outward conflict. One of her jobs in the church is to visit families who are wanting to have a child baptised, and on one occasion I arrived to talk with her just after she had been to meet one such family.

"And that's why I find it very difficult to start talking about Baptism policy, when you have to live in the right street to be baptised in this church, so that's not the message I want to give. The men get hung up on that kind of thing, but to me that's secondary. It's important because you've got to have some kind of organisation, but you deal with the person first." (Nina)

Whilst Louise is experiencing tension as a kind of personal guilt, Nina has seen the conflict as a difference between men and women, and their approaches to organisation. Both of them clearly feel a level of tension about belonging to the church, and the demands it makes of them.

### **3.2 Children's work**

With the exception of the two older women, Nina and Imogen, all the women had been involved in children and youth work at some time, often experiencing it as a pressure. Involvement in young people's work entails the kind of commitment and responsibilities that are found in paid employment, and often leads to similar tensions. During the course of the study Sally became involved in a major review of the children's work in her church, and at the beginning of one of our meetings she talked about her frustrations with the process and the attitudes.

"Since September I've been running the Net [the children's club in her church]. I've run that every Sunday, and every Sunday that I've not been running the net, I'm leading the family services. ... I got very cheesed off with church, because basically we need more people to help us in the Net and we couldn't get anybody. And I loathe phoning people and asking them if they would do things. And I find it really hard to do that anyway, and its, although I tell

myself it's not a personal rejection when they say no, um, when you've rung 25 people and they've all said no, it feels that way, you know. And when you're slogging your guts out to keep something running, I just find it really hard not to be resentful of the fact that they can't give up one Sunday a month because Granny might come and stay or something. And I think, I haven't got a life. I can't go and visit my mother, because I'm on every Sunday, do you know what I mean?" (Sally)

Sally took on responsibility for the children's work in her church after she conducted a major review of the work. In an interview about twelve months previously Sally had expressed her doubts about whether she should take on this responsibility, and in the story above all her tensions are focused around the demands that this work makes on her and her lifestyle. Both organisational and gender literature is often surprisingly light on the subject of conflict when it is so clearly a part of the process of belonging and being in an organisation. Kolb and Bartunek (1992), argue that conflict is embedded in daily interactions, and is a dynamic dispute concerning the meanings, procedures, processes and relationships which make up organisational life. Whilst most of the stories I have already re-counted are personal accounts of a tension surfacing between individual expectations and organisational reality, there were some accounts of occasions when these tension had become external conflicts.

### **3.3 Worship**

Val was involved in a very lengthy conflict when her church decided to review the structure of one of the Sunday services and made some decisions that were unpopular.

Val's role in the church structure identifies her with the decision-making authorities.

"I mean it was about a month after things happened, the congregation were up in arms anyway. They hadn't really grasped the vision at all, what was happening, they didn't see anything wrong with the worship and what they were doing.... [the music group] were supposed to be looking at their attitude and how they approached the whole thing themselves, with a fundamental review of who they were and what they were supposed to be doing." (Val)

For Val the conflict arose because the group's performance did not match her ideals, which in this case are conflated with what the Church, even what God, sees as right. Val felt strongly that the music group should be more dedicated and God-centred, rather than concentrating on their musical abilities. Throughout this particular interview Val uses the language of conflict frequently, returning again and again to the theme of the music group and the worship service.

"Because actually all that's going to happen is that it's going to come up again and again and again, until there's a huge blow up - this is really what happened in the music group. It should have been dealt with a long time ago. People should never have been allowed to join the music group. I mean we expressed concerns about certain people joining the music group, and they were sort of dealt with, very nicely and gently. But it was all allowed to go ahead." (Val)

For Val the conflict is between her idea of what is right, and the response of the music group and the wider congregation, who in her own words, need to "knuckle under". In this instance Val clearly aligns herself with those with power, which may disguise or ameliorate the extent of her own powerlessness. Other women in the study are much more aware of the power dynamic, and of their own inability to impact situations, as in Nina's response to an inter-clergy conflict of which she became aware.

"And there is so much trouble on both sides now, that I don't think that it can be sorted out.. but the feeling you're left with is do I really want to worship in a church where all of this is going on. And a lot of the congregation isn't really aware of it, but I'm close enough to be aware of it, but not to be able to do anything constructive. And it's very painful." (Nina)

As those women who have been particularly aware of external conflict rehearse the situation through the stories they tell, it becomes clear that the process of acknowledging the tension and conflict which are under the surface can be painful. However, it is in the process of thinking and talking about the situation that ideas change and develop - learning takes place. In the next section I want to apply the

learning model proposed in Chapter Three to these experiences of organisational conflict and begin to explore the ways in which tension is related to the discourse of learning.

#### **4.0 STORIES OF BELONGING AS STORIES OF LEARNING**

Having considered some of the ways in which the demands made by the organisation and by wider societal conventions give rise to various levels of tension and conflict, I now want to consider how the women process these experiences. Their definitions, or values, of organisational life may come under threat, or as various circumstances unfold, opportunities may arise to explore their understanding . Sometimes the exploration is experienced as change, precipitated by crisis, whilst for others it may be an unfolding process. The model of learning proposed earlier suggested that for learning to take place there are three elements required in relation to a specific experience - motivation, reflection and outcome. These terms have been developed within a formalised discourse of learning, and I now want to consider how the women in this research are engaged in a learning process, but express these elements in different ways

##### **4.1 Motivation**

None of the women engaged in any kind of organisational activity with the express motivation of learning about their faith. One or two of them expressed interest in attending some kind of course. Val had been pursuing a correspondence course leading to a certificate in Biblical Studies, and for her the pursuit of more formal learning was marked by tension, as she found herself put on the defensive about her own faith:

"It's all very cerebral. I think it's always good to look at things from a more down-to earth point-of-view. I didn't like it after Christmas, and I actually wrote a letter which I never posted to the College. I thought... as Christians we are supposed to build one another up, and I felt that we were battling to sustain our faith through this course, that it actually felt like I had to defend my faith to the course..." (Val)

Whilst none of the language of either extrinsic or intrinsic motivation are present in Val's comments, it is clear that something persuades her to engage and persevere with this particular distance learning course. I would like to suggest that the vocabulary of motivation is replaced in the area of incidental learning by the language of commitment. Val talks about sustaining her faith, and defending her faith. It is the commitment to a belief system and to the organisation that provides the motivation for persevering in learning about her Christian faith.

Several of the women express their need to belong to the church, even sharing the difficulties of leaving. Louise had entered a phase of being less involved, and talked about how she envisaged moving out of this phase into a more active commitment again:

" Yes. I can see it coming back again. Yes , as my own kids get older and so on, perhaps less dependant, as my job is more settled, not so new and everything, and you have more time, I might get back into something... I mean, I don't feel comfortable just riding along.. I mean I do at the moment, I've done the time if you like, I've done 5 years, and so I can do a couple of years of just sitting, letting it come to me, rather than giving out.. But I wouldn't feel too comfortable if it went on too long, because I feel that's how you get to know the fellowship too. The more you give, the more you get back, the more you're drawn in, you're there for what needs to be done, so you get to know the people, you get to know whose around if you like. So I would envisage joining another fellowship"

In a similar way to Louise both Nina and Sally expressed a sense of remaining committed even through difficulties. When we first met Nina had just been through a difficult process of rejection for full-time ministry in the Church of England, Initially this deeply affected both her personal faith and her commitment to the organisation.

During the course of the study she eventually left her local Anglican church, and after a period of time in a Roman Catholic church, found a new place to belong. Nina talks about why a particular kind of church has an attraction for her, and in spite of all her doubts and struggles, her underlying commitment remains strong.

“No, I don’t think I could actually leave. If I left the Church of England I think I’d be a Roman Catholic ... I actually like the sacramental side of things, and I actually like traditional liturgy and I suppose that’s just because I’ve got a feeling for words and that sort of thing. And I like tradition and I like all that, umm, not that you’re in a church for what you like really, but you know. (Well, that’s part of it) It reaches bits of me that other things can’t reach, which is what worship should do really. But I find it difficult that I don’t think the church can accept the sort of woman that I am really, and I don’t want to change and be any different. I think if I’d been a man I’d probably have been alright. But I never have sort of fitted very well into sort of ordinary female roles really, so.. ” (Nina)

Growing out of this sense of commitment to their faith system, and to a corporate expression of that faith, the women are then able to reflect on their experiences of belonging, and to begin a process of learning from life. This sense of commitment is central to the model of learning I am proposing, and the language of commitment is a significant alternative to the language of motivation.

#### **4.2 Reflection**

“When people learn continuously from their experience, they frame and re-frame the situations they encounter and use their judgement to name what they see next” (Watkins and Marsick, 1992, p298)

In listening to women’s experiences of belonging to the Church of England, consideration needs to be given to the ways that they are framing and reframing events in order to make decisions about the way they continue to live out their faith in all its contexts. This reflective process is central to Watkins and Marsick’s theory of incidental learning in the workplace (1992, 1993). Reflection on experience is both evidence that learning is taking place, and an activity which can be stimulated to enhance learning.

The women in this study are also engaged in a type of organisational context, and in giving accounts of the various situations they too are engaging in a reflective process. Sally talks through some of her thoughts and feelings arising out of a conflict situation.

"Perhaps that's because I'm cheesed off with adults. We've had a few very difficult on-going pastoral situations as well, which have kind of made you feel, oh, blow you lot. I just want to get on with my Christian life and I'm just hungry to work with people who are enthusiastic and keen and teachable, on whose lives you can have a real impact." (Sally)

Sally has been observing a conflict in the church that resonates with a tension in herself. In Marsick and Watkin's (1990) terminology Sally is drawing on the frameworks of understanding already unfolding in her life, and using them to help her interpret the situation. Whilst Sally does not use the language of reflection, she has evidently thought about her response, for example the phrase "kind of made you feel" is indicative that some kind of reflection has occurred.

As has already been mentioned, the ordination of women to the priesthood has led people to reflect on what this might mean for them as individuals. As examples of reflecting on life events, two of the women tell stories which offer different perspectives on this experience.

Imogen is now ordained, but is still involved in thinking about the implications both for her personally and for the church as a whole. Imogen also brings all of her experiences as a successful professional to her understanding of priesthood. As she talks about the issue, she exhibits some impatience with the reflective process, denying its place in her life, and yet also showing clearly that she has thought about the issue and formulated a response.

"We sometimes have women priests meetings, and it irritates me that we are still being called women priests. We're priests. Full stop... There's one sense in which I don't reflect on it too much because I just want to get on with the job, and part of me says a priest is a priest. You don't start thinking, well, this is a women, this is a man, therefore... if you do that you

start channelling people, and saying well, that's appropriate. It's one more gender discrimination. Men have got gifts that women have, and vice versa, and yet I do sometimes find it valuable to think - what is happening here as a priest *because* I'm a woman? But I don't often think about it, and it's partly because I'm a firm believer in equality and I **refuse** to be a victim." (Imogen)

Imogen is impatient with some of the values she finds within the Church of England, both for herself and on behalf of other women. She is still finding the limits drawn in places where she is uncomfortable, finding the presence of powerful stereotypes difficult to avoid (Furlong, 1991; Robins, 1996), although at the same time she is comfortable with those stereotypes. She has a primarily binary view of sex roles, which has been reinforced by her organisational experiences both inside and outside the church. The tension, or doubt, comes when, consciously or not, she encounters a different way of understanding. Alternatively the struggle arises when she discovers that her behaviour steps outside of the boundaries of acceptable womanly Christian behaviour.

Zoë has a different experience. When her priest left, the new incumbent was a woman, so Zoë began to ask questions of herself, and find answers.

"It hasn't bothered me at all, no. I think some people wouldn't come back because of the reason that she's a lady, not just because of the fact that L... he was wonderful. I don't know if it's because she's a female, I don't think she's as outgoing or forthright as perhaps L. was, but I think that's just her. I don't think it's because she's a woman, it's just her character. Because she's not married, so she hasn't got that sort of understanding of marriage problems or anything like that, but then I don't know, do you need that? Or do you just go by what the Bible says, do you need to have been there? I mean she's had a lot of heartache I think, in her life, which gives her understanding.." (Zoe)

As she talks about the experience of adjusting to the new situation, Zoë is still engaged in reflection, a process of deliberating both after and during the events (Lucas, 1996). Her approach is clearly less confrontational than Imogen's, yet her limits have been passed, as she absorbs the new perspective of a single woman as priest, and places it

into the framework of her life. Again, the boundaries of her understanding of gender roles are being challenged. This is a good example of what Watkins (1992) defined as learning - the reframing of experience.

### **4.3 Outcomes**

The final part of the learning process is the evidence of some kind of outcome, and it is the type of outcome which often validates a particular experience as learning (Challis, 1998). Within my suggested model of learning, reflection on tension and conflict could lead towards some kind of resolution. However, this outcome could either be to expand, re-defining the territory, or to defend and maintain the existing ground. Jarvis (1994) in considering this kind of incidental learning, uses the categories 'non-learning' and 'reflective learning' to describe responses to a life situation. These categories represent a range of possible outcomes, which I suggest can be considered as learning outcomes. It is important to bear in mind that none of these phases are deliberate or planned, but are rather the retrospective analysis of accounts, stories, as given (Mason, 1993).

The categories 'learning' and 'non-learning' might be expressed differently within the resolution of tension in the Church of England. One outcome could be to maintain a defensive position, in which after consideration, the status quo is maintained, which I have called 'going deeper'. Alternatively, an individual may decide to adjust and reframe her prior understanding to embrace a new position, an outcome I have called 'stepping out'.

#### **4.3a Going deeper**

There are many reasons why someone might want to defend the culture and values of their organisation - out of loyalty, out of conviction, out of fear (Ryan, 1992).

Belonging to the organisation can also be an intrinsic part of personal identity,

especially in a religious context, so that to attack the values and practices becomes not just an attack on the organisation, but a feeling of attacking the foundational belief system itself (Ward and Wild, 1995).

In considering the level of commitment that the women have to Christianity, both individually and corporately, some fragments of Louise's story have been shared.

Louise showed a high level of initial commitment to the Church but over the years has struggled with the demands that it makes on her time and her relationships.

"It's a foundation. I couldn't just no, give up church and not go at all, even though I complain about where I am. I need to have something... I mean it's a community that's slightly more caring than the general community, in a way. There are genuine Christians, and it's one you can give into as well, that does rather wear you out at times, and you draw back, and then you get to a point.." (Louise)

Louise is clear that in spite of difficulties in the church she chooses to stay, although she has made changes to the way in which she interacts with church, as her children have become involved with other interests. Recently she moved house, which gave the reason for leaving one situation and joining another. Louise sees leaving as one of the available strategies for dealing with difficult situations as she gives this account of her brother-in-law's experience of church life.

" And hopefully that we don't have to help run! Yeah, I know it's unfair, isn't it? But I think you go through phases. Xs brother in Sheffield used to virtually run a church, a very small church, and he used to get worn out. And he had a full time job to do as well. And rather than be able to take a back seat where you are, you have to move, because people don't accept that you can take a back seat, you're still on call... They've gone into a very big fellowship in Sheffield now, where they just enjoy being fed. And then they can start to go back." (Louise)

Louise's understanding of what it means to be part of the church has not shifted significantly - it is still foundational to her expression of faith. However, in reflecting on someone else's experience, and comparing it with her own, her strategy for

responding to the dilemmas she was experiencing was firstly to withdraw, and then to leave and find a new place.

Louise's learning energy goes towards maintaining the situation, and in Jarvis's analysis this would be categorised as non-learning based on rejection.

"Some people have an experience, think about it but reject the possibility of learning from it." (Jarvis, 1994, p37).

Louise's position might be seen as non-learning. She is cautious about committing herself, and has used the memory of other experiences to confirm her reservations. . She is still sure that she needs to stay within the Church, although this decision could be reviewed at some future point (Davie, 1994).

Zoë also adopts a maintenance strategy when faced with a new situation. She is being asked to take on more responsibility within the church, to become a member of one of the main committees responsible for church life, and in light of her commitment and Christian experience this would be a logical step for her. However, past experience, recounted in a story about her childhood, leads her purposefully to choose not to participate. She prefers to remain in her existing framework, aware that further involvement may bring conflict.

" They've asked me to go on the D.C.C. for a couple of years now, and I've thought, no. Whether in a few more years I might... There's a PCC too. I'm not on any of those. My father was very involved with it, and I couldn't cope with it because of how he used to come home [angry, upset and stressed]. And I'm too naïve and too vulnerable to be, to be, er, not to be upset by it. To me Christianity, Christian people try and be nice, but then that's not human is it? Humans have all sorts of different natures to them, and different sides to them. Maybe in a few more years as I build up confidence in the job that I've got, then I'll be able to cope with that." (Zoe)

In Western organisational culture it is quite difficult to make a positive decision to maintain an existing position . The myth which says progress is always upward and onward, and is always good is both persuasive and pervasive (Burgess, 1996), and

even the concept of development implies the existence of a condition needing improvement (Esteva in Sachs, 1992). Jarvis also criticises non-learning and non-reflective learning as simply reproducing the existing system, thus revealing his pre-supposition that learning equates with progress. However, Pedler (1990) suggests that learning is simply the process by which we harmonise ourselves in our own circumstances. By making choices to stay within the framework with which they are comfortable, and using their experiences to strengthen and confirm their values, these women may be closer to the kind of learning envisaged by Pedler.

#### **4.3b Stepping out**

During the course of the research Nina also left her existing church, but for very different reasons. Her reflections were marked by a growing awareness of the gap between herself as a woman, and the church's ability to accept her, particularly in the role of full-time priest. There had also been an on-going conflict in the parish, which caused Nina to question the integrity of the church leadership. One outcome of her reflection was a clear commitment to integration:

"But actually I still think I'm called to the priesthood. The church isn't going to recognise it, so I shall just go on doing my job at the college [her place of employment] as best as I can, you know, as sort of priestly role." (Nina)

Nina is beginning to redefine the organisational lines, reflecting on her experience, and widening the scope of the priestly role to include the workplace. The learning outcome for Nina has eventually led to a change of understanding. Over the two-and-a-half years of the study Nina began to accept that she can express herself as priest in ways other than full-time ministry. There were many painful moments over this time, and some significant events re-counted during the research, which were often confidential disclosures.

The decision to change might be identified with Jarvis category of ‘reflective learning’, in which reflection leads to some kind of changed behaviour. There are a number of other situations emerging during the study in which reflection leads to either changed or entrenched behaviours. However, organisational life in the church is entwined with relationships and beliefs, and these strands will be picked up in subsequent chapters.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have begun to consider how the women in this study experience the key characteristics of learning within the context of belonging to the church. I have suggested that the church frequently emerges as a place of overt tension and struggle. I suggest that this experience is rooted in hierarchical and polarised understanding. These polarities are found in the discourses of learning and in the social roles that the women occupy within the church and community. Several of the women are happy with these accepted norms, until something occurs which makes them uncomfortable – hence the tension and struggle.

I have begun to explore the possibility that the learning taking place in these women’s lives is invisible and unheard rather than non-existent. The formal characteristics of learning such as motivation and reflection do not superficially appear to be present. However, the presence of religious and organisational commitment is a possible way of speaking about motivation. Reflection is also an activity with which the women are familiar, albeit described in very different ways. In the following chapters these possibilities will be considered further. Women’s stories of belonging are stories of tension, which have a significant impact on faith formation. In the next chapter I will consider the extent to which women’s incidental learning is fostered within relationships, both supportive and critical.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **LEARNING TOGETHER - the significance of significant others**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The idea of relationships, or interconnectedness, as both defining and enabling women to function effectively, is one of the core characteristics of a feminist epistemology. It has been explored across a wide range of areas, including religious faith. However, it is not always clear that this emphasis on connection is always liberating, or whether in itself it becomes oppressive, and limits women into certain patterns of relating. This emphasis on relating and caring as an appropriate pattern of being is particularly strong within the church. In the efforts to understand and include women in church life, one of the benefits has been perceived as a recovery of emphasis on people rather than structures (Furlong, 1991; Hampson, 1986).

Churches are filled with programmes and activities which allow for women to be together - the survey I undertook as a preliminary basis for this research showed that only children's work was more prevalent than women's groups such as Mothers' Union or Young Wives groups (Millar, unpublished). Children's work itself is predominantly organised by women, along with a wide range of other voluntary activities - lunch clubs, pastoral care, prayer groups. This reinforces the notion that women are inherently equipped for these tasks, and also that their time is readily available (Bernard, 1987; MacDonald, 1993). The emphasis on relatedness as a peculiarly female quality may not be liberating but may in fact bring its own kind of limits and pressures, as women find themselves conforming to stereotypes.

An integral part of women's incidental learning in this study is the presence of people, either continuously or intermittently. In this chapter I am going to consider the place of relationship in women's learning of faith. I will begin by examining a

range of relationships that exist in women's lives, outlining the ideals that have been given, as well as the actual existence of these relationships. I will then go on to outline a typology of relationships which envelop women's lives and which act as reinforcers to the learning of faith in their lives.

## **1.0 RELATIONSHIPS - a goal and a reality**

Whilst the initial investigation into women's ways of knowing attempted to liberate women from the pressure of conforming to male ways of knowing and being, the emphasis on the importance of relationships can quickly become a pressure in itself (Lorde, 1994). The extent and quality of relationships across a wide spectrum of activities becomes a goal to aspire to as well as a reality in women's lives. Beginning with the family group, I want to consider the nature of the ideal that is being given to women in the area of relationship, and hear some of the stories from the women in the study in relation to that ideal. Alongside family relationships, I will also consider the network of extended relationships, before looking at the particular emphasis on relationality in the Christian faith. I will then consider the place of relationships in learning, particularly for the women in this study in their learning of faith.

### **1.1 Family and kinship groups**

“All major religions revere the family as the basic social unit and the natural framework in which children and adults receive the material, emotional and moral support they need for their well-being and development.” (O'Connell, 1995, p87)

A study of the network of relationships that surround any individual begins with the core grouping of family, which as O'Connell indicates, is a generally universal social unit, albeit taking many different forms across cultures and centuries (Clapp, 1991; Reuther, 1996). Within the patriarchal family structures which have become the defining norm in Western culture, the place of the woman as both the revered centre and the oppressed servant has been the subject of considerable research and debate in

recent years. Lewis (1986) identifies the Victorian reification of biological reasons for women's cultural and sociological differences as a factor in the continuing pressure for the ideal woman to choose marriage and motherhood rather than work. This was an ideal to aspire to for the majority of women, rather than a daily reality, as working class women struggled to be economic providers without any political or community voice. It became the responsibility of women to create a good domestic environment, often at significant personal cost (Finch, 1983). The primary concern was then to create a place of harmonious relationships (Musgrove, 1966), and the primary relationships in her own life was those of the immediate family, and alongside this grew the associated myths and mystery of motherhood. Motherhood is then a core identity for many women, reinforced by a wide range of literature, information and images which suggest that it should hold a central place in a woman's self (Urwin, 1985). Urwin goes on to show how this emphasis on the child-centred mother means that the needs and the identity of the woman are totally discounted. A 'good mother', in the late 1990s, is probably a working mother yet under pressure still from the old ideals of the 1950s where the ideal was to be happy at home baking and playing with the children (Holdsworth, 1988; Beechey, 1986). The "good mother", influenced by Bowlby's theories of maternal deprivation, stayed at home and concentrated her emotional and physical energies on the family network, with children and husbands in competition for her skills and attention (Phillips, 1987; Nicolson, 1993). The family became synonymous with the home and needed a wife and mother to authenticate its existence. Once established in this way the family becomes a private place, with access limited to family members and occasional privileged others (Allan and Crow, 1989). The relationships available to women

became defined in reference to this central family group, and the role of mother.

(Gittens, 1985)

For some time now this particular construction of family has been exposed to the glare of feminist analysis. This suggests that the idealisation of the women's role in the home is a significant factor in the inequalities endemic in society, whether in employment, recognition, authority, income or voice (Renzetti, 1992; Beechey, 1986). The family has been, and is, perceived as the ideal moral basis for the creation of a moral society, and in creating social and economic stability (Abbot and Wallace, 1992). Alongside the increasing changes to the constitution of family, there has been a continuing idolisation of the perfect family life (Miles, 1994)

The pressure on women to fulfil the role of perfect wife, mother and homemaker has not abated. Recent concerns about youth behaviour and attainment tend to place responsibility firmly within the home and implicitly with the mother (Leach, 1994; Miles, 1994; Panorama, 1997). There is a new emphasis on teaching parents to support and prepare their children for society (Guardian, July 19<sup>th</sup> 1998), and a renewed sense of the family itself as a learning arena (Leichter, 1974; Harman, 1980; Topping, 1992).

This means that women have diverted their energies to securing the welfare of their families above their own leisure and development (Lewis, 1986; Green et al, 1990).

This assumption that identity is found through mothering and family is so deeply embedded in our culture that it is extremely difficult for women to step aside from it.

This may explain some of the reluctance of women to embrace more radical feminists ideas which suggested that women did not need men, and that marriage and family should be abolished (Abbott and Wallace, 1992). It is also one of the reasons why singleness can be experienced as failure or inadequacy (Gordon, 1994). In the

previous chapter Val and Zoe in particular articulated their sense that creating home was their primary and God-given function, and the tension between this expectation and personal desire was noted.

Motherhood is not the only familial role that a woman holds. She will also be daughter, and could be sister, daughter-in-law, grandmother, aunt, niece and godchild. Nevertheless, there is significantly less literature that explores the nature of extended family relationships, other than in terms of the current expression (or lack of) of the role of mother. Finch and Mason (1993) suggest that giving and receiving support in families is expected and commonplace, by both men and women.

However, it would seem that women's actions are interpreted differently, and seen as an inherent part of their womanly nature, whereas for men family support is seen as a sacrificial act.

Ruth, whose youngest child started school at the beginning of the research, spent some time thinking about her future direction. She holds a doctorate in chemistry and has previously worked in scientific research. However, she also feels a responsibility towards her community and society and so was considering taking on a volunteer role such as counselling. All of this changed when her husband's father died suddenly, leaving his already sick mother in need of care.

“He [her husband] was in negotiations for a new job and then suddenly on July 9th his father died, completely unexpectedly, um, which has, you know, lots of things really. His mum's got cancer and was being looked after by his dad so, um... He tried to reorganise things and work out what to do with his mum, she's coming, she's been staying with us quite a lot of the time probably more than half the time since dad died and um, she's coming again on Sunday for a fortnight and I suspect this will be the last time she will go home after that.

*SM: and is that, how is that going to work for you?*

Well, um, it'll be okay, there are difficult things about it, um, mainly the fact that she is terminally ill, and, you know, she'll be here, this will be her home.” (Ruth)

Ruth's ideas and thoughts about future work were laid aside as she took on the new

and demanding role of carer. The effect of this event was to be significant for Ruth, and this new role and relationship had an impact on her Christian faith, which will be explored more fully in the next chapter. It illustrates Finch's (1993) point that for women caring and nurturing is seen as an inevitable response to crisis, and also suggests the presence of something other than care as a discipline, but rather care as mediated through love (Fox, 1995).

The role of mother and home-maker has been used to suggest that women have inherent nurturing qualities. These qualities will be seen not just in the ability to nurture children, but also in the provision of food and hospitality. The adult female becomes a "key kitchen person", being able to shop well and wisely as another key indicator of success (Park, 1991). These norms are defined in a variety of ways, through leaflets, adverts, magazines, (Urwin, 1985) and are portrayed in such a way as to disguise the limiting nature of these roles in terms of nurture, care and dependence. At the very point at which power is being exercised over women's lives and relationships, the language of caring is used to affirm the feelings of dependency, and to confirm the family relationships as central (Russell, 1990). Tensions emerge for women as their lives struggle to meet up with these ideals.

## **1.2 Friendship and other relationships**

The relationships that women form outside of the family are frequently characterised by the presence of a care dimension, which might be explicit or implicit.

Traditionally, the explicit care dimension has led to a strong female presence in particular occupational fields, such as nursing, teaching, serving and child-centred activities (Wickham, 1986; Epstein, 1970). Epstein's observations of almost thirty years ago, which supposed biological attributes towards caring tasks lead women towards female occupations, are still being explored. Assumptions are still made that

women embody the caring skills needed for certain types of occupation and activity, so that the 'craft of caring', whether formalised in a paid job, a volunteer activity, or an informal role in the workplace, is still feminised (Baldock and Ungerson, 1991).

Workplace relationships may still involve some kind of mutual care and support, with women being called upon to provide the 'tea and sympathy elements' in any work or personal crises, (Wilson, 1995) - whether through a formal situation or a friendly chat in the pub. Women are familiar with the idea of offering 'help', and this can be positively utilised in a variety of non-recognised counselling and support situations.

The presence of intimacy, secrecy and struggle is key to the development of girls' friendships, and are also characteristics of mature friendships, as women offer support and care to one another (Hey, 1997; Griffiths, 1995). Friendship is also an important dimension in women's lives, covering a range of relationships that contribute positively to women's psychological well being (O'Connor, 1992; Duck, 1983; Yager, 1998).

O' Neill(1990) identifies the importance for women of telling and re-telling the events and emotions of their lives, as they engage in a process of establishing identity, and building trust. In the previous chapter I suggested that the telling of anecdotes and stories is one of the ways in which women engage in the reflective processes considered key to effective learning. These same processes are formalised in feminist counselling literature, as a rhythmic inter-connected model, in which the woman moves from trust through reflection towards acceptance and different behaviour (Chaplin, 1988)

Some of these processes are taking place in the course of everyday relationships, whether in the family, workplace or the wider network known as 'friends and

acquaintances'. Whilst there are ideals for women in terms of family and friendship which are communicated in a variety of ways in society, for women in the church relationship has an even greater significance.

## **2.0 RELATIONSHIPS IN CONTEXT**

### **2.1 In the church**

In the church context the focus on relationship is enhanced by a theological emphasis on its centrality, both in terms of relationship with the Other (i.e. God), and with co-dwellers in the world. It is an integral part of normal Christian faith to be successfully engaged in a range of relationships, and indeed successful relating confirms spirituality.

“For this is the message you have heard from the beginning; that we should love one another.... Whoever does not love abides in death... let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action.” (1 John 3 verses 11,14,18 NRSV)

This emphasis on relationality finds expression both in personal relationships and in community living. Christian friendship is to be extended beyond personal preference and needs to a wider household of faith and then to the whole of society (Clark, 1989). In the previous chapter I focused on belonging to the community of faith in an organisational sense, and membership of the community may provide a range of relationships (Scherer, 1972). But the nature of relationship for Christians is more than simply choosing a group of friends - the very success of the Church is determined by the ‘fruits of love’ (Hebblethwaite, 1993). Even as the church turns its attention to issues such as Human Resource Management, the assumption is that the Church is more person-centred than any commercial organisation, and implicitly should be successful in developing people (Pettifer, 1996). However, particularly in post-modern Western white culture, there is an inherent tension between the communal dimension and the cultural norm of individuality.

There are a plethora of popular Christian books encouraging Christians to create and sustain quality relationships across their lives, much of it couched in the language of pastoral care. Pastoral care is the language of formalised Christian relationships, where the Gospel is applied to human life as well as human need (Thornton, 1984; Fischer, 1989). As already noted, women are often involved in this area of the church's ministry as a natural extension of their preference for relationship (Billman, 1996). However, successful pastoral care does not readily equate with successful learning, although good relationships are an acknowledged sign of Christian maturity. Education in the church has been seen primarily in terms of formal education, where an up-front person has the power to impart knowledge (Ellis, 1990). The teacher is important in legitimising faith, giving credibility to that which can be nurtured in a web of support relationships through family and friends (Nesbitt, 1998). The role of relationship in learning faith is seen as fostering individual piety rather than developing group identity (Stahl, 1997; Davie, 1995), again reflecting a tension between the corporate dimension and individuality (Billman, 1996).

## **2.2 Relationships in learning**

When the concept of relationships in learning is raised it is invariably the pre-cursor to a discussion on teacher and students, whether is the traditional sense of teacher as knowledge holder, or in exploring more collaborative ways of working (Lyle, 1994; Clulow, 1995). The relationship of teacher to taught is a significant dimension in the discourses of formal learning, sometimes used as a determining factor in deciding the validity of a given experience as learning. Less attention is given to the role of relationships themselves in fostering learning, although Brookfield (1987) raised questions about the nature of learning within intimate relationships, suggesting that this kind of learning is used to reinforce assumptions and redefine personal identity.

Others would suggest that for women in particular the network of relationships that texture their lives are left outside the classroom door (Edwards, 1993; Adams, 1996). The work of Gilligan (1982) suggested that working towards relationship was the key factor for many women in moral decision making. Belenky (1986) developed these ideas further, exploring their relevance to women's knowledge acquisition. Whilst Belenky proposed a new model of 'connected teaching' using the metaphor of midwife to re-define the role of teacher, this is still put forward within an academic framework in which acquiring knowledge is essentially a formalised process. Later developments of this work continue to place connectedness as a key aspect of knowing, suggesting that for some women it is of primary importance (Magolda, 1992; Severiens, 1998). Again this work is in the context of formal academic learning, although both Magolda and Severiens note the significance of activities outside of the formal process on effective learning.

Whilst the importance of relationships for women has been noted in a number of spheres, including family, workplace, faith and learning, there is little which examines the place of relationships in either accelerating or inhibiting personal learning. Some critiques of formal learning schemes, such as distance learning, have identified potential weaknesses in the lack of relationships (von Prümmer, 1994). Discussion about access to learning for women sometimes identifies the importance of friendships and togetherness in encouraging participation (Kirkup, 1988; Millar, 1997). In this next section, I will explore a typology of companionship, looking at four different types of people with whom relationship seems to be significant for the women as they pursue their own personal faith explorations.

### **3.0 A TYPOLOGY OF RELATIONSHIPS**

#### **3.1 The Authority figure**

In the Christian world, there is an emphasis on mentoring of a young disciple by an older more experienced person, a model which claims to be based on biblical example, particularly Jesus (Krallman, 1994). However, this kind of mentoring is still born out of the idea of “teacher as expert”, whereby the role of the educator is either to pass on expertise, or to facilitate the environment where learning is possible (Gremmo, 1993). Recent developments in human resource management have put a new emphasis on the idea of mentoring or role model, which builds on the traditional idea of apprenticeship, allowing for a more experienced individual to partner with someone to help her gain skills and knowledge ( Clulow, 1995; Tight, 1996).

The authority figures in the lives of the women in my study do not fulfil these kind of formalised roles. They are relationships, some of which are characterised by intimacy as with Ruth’s parents or Imogen’s husband, where the individual has reflected upon the behaviours and values of another person, and drawn from that an inspiration or challenge in their own processing of faith.

The authority figure is not particularly involved in passing on skill or knowledge, but is rather seen as an example of character and godliness. Again, this reflects Biblical exhortations to leaders - “Remember your leaders: consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” (Hebrews 13 v 7) - which place expectations and responsibilities on both leaders and followers. Leaders should anticipate having a lifestyle worthy of imitation, whilst followers expect to find individuals who are worthy of following.

### 3.1b Authority figure as role model

One of the most clearly identifiable relationships in the women's lives is the role model or mentor, who walks both alongside and ahead, indicating the suitability of the proposed route. I have used the term "authority figure", to convey the sense that the women have of the guide being, at least to some extent a person whom they respect, with qualities to which they aspire. They also occupy positions of formal or 'informal' authority,

There are two clear types of authority figure - the person who is no longer the present companion, but who exists outside of the present timeframe as a reference point to past, present and future. Secondly, there is the person who is a present companion, probably occupying the same territory at this time. Imogen gives a clear delineation between these two types of role model.

"The first one's the vicar that I mentioned in my parish. And, lovely chap, who God knows. And he was a role model because, he combined a tremendous humanity, with a certain fallenness and that was part of his humanity. He had faults, but he combined that with an amazing perception. And a toughness which was still very loving and very compassionate. And I suppose you could say that he was a good model of the broken Christ. Um.. he knew his faults... Um the other role model I had, and have, is actually my husband!" (Imogen)

Both of Imogen's role models are male but they are not role models in the sense of hero worship, but rather people who have aspects of personality which she admires, and "which I would like to adhere to for myself." A key characteristic of the authority figure is that s/he has overcome or struggled with weakness. The guide is not a person of perfection, but an all too frail human being, who combines strength with vulnerability.

"I suppose, maybe it's because a lot of the principles and ideas are like Peter's, but I kinda like the way he's a very prayerful man. He doesn't do anything, He 's not selfish or ambitious, he's there to bring the Lord to his people, and he loves the church and he's there for us. And he wants to

communicate God's heart for us to us, you know, and yeah, he makes mistakes, some big mistakes, but it's good because he's human. It's not so good at the time, but he's human so he's going to make mistakes.”  
(Hannah)

Hannah's present role model is her vicar, and he has considerable influence on key decisions and processes in her life, a theme that I will return to shortly.

As discussed earlier, the nature of leadership in the Church of England, means that many of the role models and guides involved in the women's lives are male, and this is not perceived as problematic.

“Imogen: Most of all, I think the toughness there, the toughness mingled with compassion and love.

*SM: So they're qualities you would want to emulate?*

Imogen: yes.

*SM: And it doesn't matter that you saw them in a man?*

Imogen: No. No. It didn't matter at all.

*SM: You wouldn't say they were peculiar to a man?*

Imogen: No, they're more general qualities. I certainly think a woman could have the same, it's just that he had those at that particular time.”

Although these general qualities of character and godliness are perceived as non-gender specific, there is a change emerging in the Anglican church as women take on leadership roles, and are therefore more consciously identified as role models. Nina talked at some length about the impression made on her by Bishop Penny Jamieson from New Zealand, one of only a handful of women bishops in the world.

“..I was incredibly impressed by Bishop Penny Jamieson from Dunedin at Ripon, the last conference Women for the Ordination of Women, and she came to it, and she was just wonderful. And you suddenly got a picture of somebody, you know, the hierarchy of the church actually being maternal. Completely different. Completely different. ... And the interesting thing about Bishop Penny was that she slouched about in an old anorak all weekend. You would be next to her in the coffee queue, and she'd be chatting normally to you. There was no, she didn't pull any status on you or anything. She didn't have to... [She goes on to compare this with Lord and Lady X] There were no airs and graces at all, and you felt that they were people who were so sure of themselves and so secure in who they were that they didn't need, and I felt the same with Bishop Penny. I felt she was so sort of serene, and there was no need for her to sort of stick

herself on a pedestal, because that, that, that's what the men do isn't it, very often?" (Nina)

This story told by Nina contains a number of the key elements that characterise the archetypal authority figure . Nina encloses the information about Bishop Penny in a story about a conference, and as she recalls the occasion, so she reflects on the significance of Bishop Penny. She doesn't actually know this person, she knows about her, has stood next to her in a coffee queue and has shared Communion with her. In those brief moments Bishop Penny became an authority figure for Nina. She can be respected and is authoritative because she has overcome considerable difficulties to get to her position, and is a model because she is showing Nina a way to survive as a woman in the Church of England, something that Nina struggles with much of the time.

### **3.1b Authority figure as influence**

The authority figure exercises influence in several ways, not just in the abstract or inspirational way that is seen here, but often very specifically influences life decisions. Within the field of adult education and learning there has been considerable debate as to the extent to which adult learning and teaching needs to differ from child-centred methodology. One of the arguments put forward by Knowles (1984) in his argument for a specific andragogical model is that pedagogical models fail to give sufficient responsibility to the individual, relying instead of the teacher taking full control of the direction and content of the learning. One of the alternatives suggested in the development of teaching and learning models that counteract this approach is the place of teaching by modelling. To some extent this is what mentoring methods of training and development have encouraged, although they are still within structured and formalised programmes. In the area of incidental learning the role model or example is not necessarily a party to the

learning taking place. S/he, the authority figure, may be completely unaware of the extent to which her words and actions are shaping an individual's decisions.

Hannah made a major decision during the research to undertake a course of study in Israel, and in one interview talked about some of the factors involved.

“And I was chatting to Lily one night as well, she was sort of saying well, you've got so much Jewish stuff in you, and I said, yeah. And she said you know, the book you want to read, you ought to get a book called 'Appointment in Jerusalem'. And I said, well funny you should say that cos I've had it for about 3 months to send to Louise, who was on our tour last year, who's going to Israel, but I've never had the time to sit and write a letter to go with it. So I've held onto this book and um, so I started reading it and it was just kinda like wow. And it started me thinking.” (Hannah)

The most significant authority figures are Lily and Peter, the vicar and his wife, who appear at various points in Hannah's accounts of her life, and invariably they act either to confirm a direction, or to indicate a possible alternative. Hannah went on to talk about the particular way in which Peter gave her advice and confidence.

“The thing about it is to get in there you need to be 18 years or over, and have just completed the normal 12 years at high school. Well, when I left school they didn't do 12 years, well 12 years of education. When I left school they didn't, there was no like 5th year and that sort of thing. I left when I was 15, so I only completed like 10 years in school. But Peter said that's just like kinda a little point. I think its just saying you've finished your school life sort of thing. So that was one of the reasons why I thought if I did this Antec this year for a year, I would then have a certificate that I could take with me which would give me, gave me access.” (Hannah)

For Hannah, a person who is insecure about her learning potential, these affirmations are very important in helping her to make the transition into this new experience.

However, Hannah herself has not consciously chosen these people as guides:

“I wouldn't want to admit that I am influenced by anybody, you know. I'm kinda like, I'm me, and I'm independent.” (Hannah)

It may be that for Hannah, as a single woman, there is a tension between independence and the need for support (Llewellyn, 1992; Gordon, 1994) In

Hannah's theological framework the people who are influence her are not independent agents, but are instead indicators of the sovereign control and desires of the Lord.

"I think a lot of people that kinda cross my path, I think I can learn certain things. But I know I would certainly, um, I actually think the Lord has shown me. You know, you have these kinda people, and you think oh gosh, I wanna be like that or like that, that person's really good, and in lot of ways at St. C's when I first came here, and bit by bit I was shown areas of them that weren't what I thought they would be. They acted in things in a totally different way from what I expected them to, and it was bit by bit, and it would just seem really normal as well. And I think what it stopped me doing was this age-old thing, where you model yourself so much on somebody you say, well, I'll never make it. You actually put yourself down in everything, and you don't kinda achieve anything. An I think that was kinda a healthy, just prompted from the Lord saying, they've got, they're not perfect either, and lots of different things like that, and really seeing them for what they were. And it made me kinda realise that the main thing that I can do is just try the best I can, do the best I can for the Lord." (Hannah)

For others the authority figure is a more passive and remote person, particularly the authority figure whose voice is only heard from the past. Some of the women drew upon their own family relationships, and told stories of childhood memories to help justify current behaviours and responses.

"Well, my parents mainly, I think. The idea of service to the church was, you know, just completely there. They did youth groups, they taught Crusaders.. they just spend a lot of time on Christian things, and it was just normal.. put yourself out for the church, and they put themselves out for other people too. Their home was always welcoming, and I think that was one of the big differences that I saw between my parents and Ian's parents. Cos Ian's parents would always have said, quite genuinely thinking that there was no other way, no other decent way of looking at thing, 'oh, the family comes first'. Well, I don't think my parents would ever say that and I don't think they would set it up as an ideal, and they would say well, sometimes no. Somebody else's needs came before the family's needs... And we had sort of people for family lunch who were a bit, who were single mums or they were a bit awkward and a pain to have around, and we all put up with it. There was no question of, well, it's not in everybody's best interest, you know, if somebody needed something.. I'm very grateful to them for that." (Ruth)

Whilst Hannah's relationship with those who are influencing her faith development is set in the context of the over-arching relationship with God, other respondents accept the role of mentors or examples in a more conscious way. Ruth clearly analyses the influence of her parents in her life, and knows that they modelled the way that she behaves towards other people, and Zoe also acknowledges the same influences, using her mother's response to grief as a model.

"I mean when [my husband's] brother died, his sister- in-law, well she just went to pieces. She couldn't comprehend. Well, I don't know how I'd be. You don't know till you're in the situation, but I know how Mum's feeling, and Mum's so strong. I mean I know she has her days, but they're only days. When it was their Anniversary in September, she was going to go out, but when the day came, she couldn't go out, and she copes with the day, and she gets through it, and then she's okay. It doesn't go on and on, because she doesn't, she has that faith where she gets her strength, because she asks for strength and she gets it.

*SM: I suppose she has hope as well in the future?*

Yeah, and also that if she couldn't manage then I couldn't live here, cos I'd always told her that I'd go back and help her, but as long as she's okay, then I'm okay. My sister's the same, I was talking with her, you know, is mum okay? Yes, she's fine And the only thing that's got her through is the faith that she's got, and this is why it's so important for me to bring my children up for them to believe in, that there's something that will see them through whatever life throws at them, because it's not going to be easy out there" (Zoe)

Role models are very important in influencing behaviour, although they can also be a pressure as a person performs to another's definition of a given role (Houston, 1996).. This can be sensed in Zoe's story above, where she also used her mother's responses to grief to judge her own and other's responses. A different kind of relationship from that of the mentor or authority figure is that of the peer relationship where a fellow student comes alongside to share in the learning process (Goodlad, 1995; Wagner, 1982). The second type of relationship that I have identified in the typology is related to the idea of peer support, and to that of friendship.

### 3.2 Positive supporter

In the process of listening to the stories women tell about their faith, there are other relationships that emerge, and the type of person who brings affirmation and encouragement in a non-directive fashion I have called a positive supporter. Norris and Tindale (1994) identify three key concepts which characterise healthy interdependent relationships, which they term attachment, reciprocity and entitlement. Adult relationships are identified by finding the need for the other to be present in times of stress, by a degree of permanence and by support which feels fair and equitable - there is a degree of mutuality in these kind of relationships.

The positive supporter relationship has many of these characteristics, although its duration may be unknown, and sometimes the contact with another person may be very short-lived even fleeting. However, these seemingly insignificant points of contact can have great importance in the extent to which they enable an individual to reflect and find meaning in the various events of her life. Nina went through a time of crisis with her local church, becoming aware of conflict in a number of situations. She was beginning to feel very rejected and isolated, and in the context of telling me about this she recounted the following incident:

“ I went into church one day this week, last week, Thursday, Friday and found an envelope with my name on it, don't know how it got here, who it came from, when I opened it, it had an icon in it, and it had a card and it just said inside, 'This is just to let you know that lots of people are still praying for you, and that the hurt our churches do to people does get better.', from someone who care. And then it said on the other side, ' He still loves you very much, and you will always be a special person to Him.' I don't know who put it there. I've been trying to think who it could be.. so somebody has picked up the fact that I'm not quite right at the moment.” (Nina)

This is an example of the kind of positive supporter who makes minimal contact and yet acts as a catalyst in an on-going process of reflection. For Nina, at a difficult

time, another person had made contact and encouraged her to think again about both God and people and to become aware that she is not travelling through these times alone. In a church or Christian context this resonates with some of the experiences of women in non-western contexts who are trying to develop inter-dependent models of church and community which allow space for this kind of supportive relationship (King, 1994). In the context of women returning to study, there has also been an acknowledgement of the need for small supportive groups, where the co-members of a group are an integral part of the learning process (Hobby, 1989).

Sometimes the relationship very clearly acts as an encouragement in making a transition, as in the story that Zoe told about returning to the paid workforce, when after a couple of interviews which had not materialised into the right job, she applied for something she felt would be perfect.

“.. and I knew the lady that worked there, the nursery nurse that works there, and the other nursery nurse was leaving. And I worked with her 9, 9, 10 years ago after just after I’d had Andrew, at the crèche at the Sports Centre. And I knew she’d gone to the CDC: “I wonder if she’s still there?” And she phoned me up after my application had gone in, she phoned me up and said: “Oh, I’m really pleased you’re applying,” and I thought well, cos he knows me, she could make or break my interview. She might have said, “No, I don’t want to work with her,” or you know, she’ll be okay.”(Zoe)

The knowledge that this person felt and acted positively towards Zoë reassured her as she negotiated the difficult process of returning to work; it supported her through the interview process and on into her first few days at work.

When Hannah was thinking about going to Israel, as well as the vicar and his wife mentioned earlier there were a number of friends who acted in ways which affirmed the direction she was moving towards. Hannah had been considering the possibility of a major change of direction for some time. As she recounts the events leading to

her decision, alongside the authority figures who clearly helped clarify her thinking, a number of other relationships emerge as significant and influential,

“And I actually spent quite a long time [investigating] it, and then, so I read this Appointment in Jerusalem, and as soon as I started to read that it was really weird, it’s like a coincidence, but a few days after that I actually found time to write to Louise. So I wrote to her and said, I’ve got this book for you, but I’m reading it, so you can’t have it yet, um, which I found was really sort of strange. And then there was another thing.

(pause)

Yeah, I was speaking to Dawn. and I said to her, I’d been talking about this Adcet course and about doing Hebrew and what not, and she says to me, I’m glad you phoned. I’ve been thinking about you. You’ve been on my mind all week, and she said to me, do you know what you should do? And I said, what, and she says you should go to the King of Kings College in Jerusalem. And I said well, its funny you should say that because I’ve actually got a prospectus here, well, it’s for this year, so I need to send for next years. “ (Hannah)

Louise and Dawn were both acting as positive supporters in encouraging Hannah, making suggestions and reinforcing her ideas. Those who act as Positive Supporters often take on the role of friend, even if only for a short while. They help to provide identity and self-esteem, helping the individual to maintain power and control over various life situations (Griffiths, 1995). However, there are times when the positive Supporter does evolve into a more rounded and complex relationship. Sally talked movingly during one interview of the significance of her prayer partner, a woman friend with whom she met regularly to share, process and pray through the issues of their lives.

“I think personally, the other thing is that I’ve lost my prayer partner. They moved in March, February, and I’ve really found that very hard, because Lindy really knew, she really knew me. And she knew that I had feet of clay. She could read when I was feeling under pressure, when I was stressed (sigh), so that is hard. I still miss her an awful lot (voice breaks, weeps). Sorry. I didn’t know there was a bubble of emotion just there about that. I think it’s because you miss her at the start, you miss *her* because of who she is, but then you just miss having somebody who does know you” (Sally)

A year on from this interview, Sally has still not found anyone who is a ‘positive supporter’ in the same way that Lindy was, but she is drawing more on the support of her husband, John:

“..and at points where I’m lost I find I’m leaning on J’s faith more. The, you know, I always thought that I had the stronger faith than him, more because I’m active and more articulate and do more, but he’s actually got still a very, perhaps what they call simple, but it’s a strong, faith. And at times when I think oh, I dunno if we’re doing the right thing here, I lean more on his faith, and I’ve never done that before!” (Sally)

Husbands, children, parents are all people who can act as ‘positive supporters’ in the individual’s unfolding faith journey, but they represent only one facet of the web of relationships which provide mentoring and peer support. As well as being supported and guided, the women are themselves acting as role models and friends in a range of situations.

### **3.3 Affirming dependents**

Alongside those relationships where the individual looks ahead to someone for support and guidance and those where as equals we speak into another’s life, there are relationships where the individual is herself the role model or encourager. These relationships I have called ‘affirming dependent’, as they are characterised by stories in which the woman herself is being acclaimed as a worthy person. The individual herself is rarely able to mention overtly her own significance or influence, but rather relies on a second-hand story in which a third party has acknowledged her significance. Sometimes these relationships are functional, existing as a result of a particular task or role. One example of this is the youth leader, who is affirmed by both the parents and the young people in her identity.

“And what a lot of people are saying is that, I mean I love being with them, we’re having a sleepover on Friday night, and it’s going to be brilliant! Cos it’s like me and my mates, and Julie and them will pop in from time to time and that. And somebody said to me, you’re doing a

great job, irrespective of teaching the kids, you know, like Val says you're good with Julie and that, and sometimes I can't give them all this. And, you know, cos Julie's always hanging around me somewhere or another, and it's brilliant cos I need Julie's love as well, and I think that's one of the important things of being a youth leader." (Hannah)

Both the young person in the group and the parent are affirming Hannah in her abilities and in the fact that she is fulfilling a valuable role. This kind of encouragement can build confidence, which is often crucial in helping an individual to deal with transition.

In the literature on counselling or negotiating life crises, there is often a call to identify areas where a person feels able to contribute not just receive (Nelson-Jones, 1986; Macleod, 1993). At times of insecurity the role of the 'affirming dependent' is very important, as Nina identifies as she is negotiating her response to a major disappointment.

".. my priority when I go out to a family is to make people aware of God's love and acceptance.. I've just had this really good chat with this really very nice lady about the problems with the father of her first child, and all this stuff came out, and I was only there for 3 and 4 hour, and she's told me her life history. And it's really good, it's lovely. E. said to me, you mustn't leave the church because you're so good with the baptism families, and I said, well I like all the baptism families". (Nina)

However, whilst these two examples are clearly stories in which the woman speaking is affirming her own identity and confidence through the dependency of others, the same stories also present the dilemma which exists for women in the church and other organisations. By focusing on relationships characterised by caring, the women may be simply performing to the presented to them by an androcentric faith and organisation. Alternatively, they may be living out an equal-but-different feminism which identifies relationships as key to women's lives (Graham, 1995; Porter, 1991). Porter in particular argues that the kind of dualism that defines women in terms of

soft, caring qualities precludes women from developing so-called masculine qualities. It can also prevent men from developing caring traits. The care that women give in these kinds of relationships is reciprocated by a confirmation of identity and worth found within these relationships.

I have already introduced Ruth, whose role changed significantly during the study, when she became a carer to her mother-in-law. In one of the later interviews, shortly after her mother-in-law's death, Ruth talked about how natural it had seemed for her to be involved. Whilst Ruth plays down any sense that what she did was out of the ordinary, somehow the comments of other people help her to frame her own experiences.

“And I think He gave us the ability to cope as well, but a lot of people said to me, you know, it's wonderful what you're doing, managing, all that sort of thing. And I was thinking, well, it's got to be done, and we're doing it. And I wasn't feeling, I wasn't even feeling that we were doing anything particularly out of the ordinary. We were doing what we were able to do.” (Ruth)

As the women tell stories about the range of relationships in their lives, it becomes clear that these relationships function as markers to their own faith processes. In the relationships with affirming dependants, the markers often give self-worth and approval. For a woman who is continually engaged in a process of negotiating and re-negotiating the limits of her faith, these kind of relationships are very significant, as they help to reassure that the choices made are effective. Zoe talks about the people she is helping already in her new job:

“Because we are there to help them, and this woman was just so pleased that she'd got some help, that somebody had recognised that there's a problem. But there's gonna be others that, I know, there's one that's very, very negative about is, and my child isn't going to have a proper life, and it's your fault sort of thing, so you are going to get those times. You're going to get those parents who are really glad that you are there to help them, and then those that don't want you to interfere... this is just my job.” (Zoe)

The dependent relationships that Zoe is beginning to form through her work are affirming her in her choice to return to the workforce, and to take this particular job. Affirming dependants play a significant role in helping individuals are another facet of the network of relationships which support women in their lives.

### **3.4 Negative catalysts**

Not all the relationship stories told are positive or encouraging. There are also times when relationships are characterised by conflict. Frequently these stories mesh with the moments in a person's life when she is negotiating a crisis (Brookfield, 1987). However, it became difficult to identify whether there is a particular type of relationship that exists in a time of crisis, either as a 'punch-bag' to deflect and absorb emotion, or more specifically as a negative influence. Nina began one interview with a short story about a recent social event which took place at a time in her life when she was experiencing some strong emotional reactions.

“ Well, I went to this Conference, and that was interesting because, yeah, I was still coming to terms with the rejection [for full-time ministry] and I was pretty good about it really. I enjoyed being there no end and met a lot of clergy friends, and it was all, it was good. But the funny thing was that there was one meal where I blew about the whole ABM stuff. It all came out at one particular meal, and it was all directed at one particular clergyman that I didn't know and who happened to be sitting opposite me at the table.. and he got the lot.” (Nina)

This stranger acts in a role as 'punch-bag', simply receiving the weight of Nina's feelings. However, on another occasion Nina describes a meeting with the man who made a key decision about her future.

“And he said to me three times in the interview, he said, um, “Well, of course, Nina, you've got to remember you're a very powerful woman.” And then a bit later he said, “But of course, you've got to remember, Nina, what a powerful woman you are.” And then a bit later, “But of course, but you are a very powerful woman.” And I said, “Just stop there, Stewart,” I said, “you know, if I'm so powerful how come I can't get you to do what I want?” You know... I thought there's something funny going on here, really.

But, anyway, I was very upset... very, very upset. Um, and along with that, so that was the end of that, really. But along with that, um, at Christmas I had flu and so I didn't go to church and I never, I never went again. Um, and about, and when this happened in February, I said to the rector, I'm not coming back, I just need a space, I've had enough. I can't cope anymore. And he came around here and he said, well okay, you know, um, I think this is right, but no hard feelings. And I said, no, no hard feelings. And he said, well, I think the problem, Nina, is that you're too strong. And you admit that you're vulnerable and it makes everybody else feel very threatened." (Nina)

Neither of the relationships mentioned in this extract fit into the other three categories. Both men are negative influences on Nina's life, failing to offer affirmation or encouragement to her in the crisis she is negotiating.

Imogen has also changed roles recently, and as she negotiates the transition, she too talks about people who are unhelpful in the situation.

"It happened last night at a deanery synod. I was coming out and somebody who I know quite well by sight, said oh, you're still around then! And I said, yes, why did you think I wasn't? You've got this job in London now, and I said, it's just a job like any other job, I'm still here. Oh, are you still working in the parish then? Yes! And I felt really quite cross that anybody should think that I wasn't still based here. And there's another instance. I'd arranged, I'd been going around all over the place talking about Child Protection, and I'd got this particular deanery to book me, you see. It was going to be sometime this month I think. And lo and behold, I got a letter from them earlier on in the year saying we see from the appointments section in the Church Times that you've got a new job... So I wrote back and said well, fairly politely but very pointedly that I hope they would find time to hear what I had to say some time in the future, because I was very much still in the diocese, you know, carrying the CPP hat and so on. I feel dispossessed.." (Imogen)

Whilst these relationships are less obvious, there are clearly negative people in the lives of women, who nevertheless impact on reflection and outcomes. Within the context of formal learning negative input might come through debate or questions designed to challenge student thinking. Encountering negative relationships in the women's lives also acts as this kind of catalyst.

## CONCLUSION

In the tri-partite feminist epistemology developed in Chapter Two, connectedness was an important strand. Belenky (1986) developed a theory for women's knowledge acquisition in which she differentiated between separate and connected knowing. She also showed how for many women separate knowing is seen as the acceptable way of knowing, linked with formal education and schooling. Luttrell (1997) develops this idea further, linking it to women's common sense knowledge which is nurtured through the verbal passing on of advice, information and encouragement.

Belenky (1986), Magolda (1992) and Luttrell (1997) all note the importance of experience outside of the formal education system in shaping women's learning, although it is invariably left outside of the educational framework. Severiens (1998) suggests that women and men both use a multiplicity of ways of knowing, with connectedness being important for both men and women.

Relationships are such an intrinsic part of women's lives that their presence is unremarkable, in the way that Finch (1993) found that giving and receiving help in families is so commonplace as to be beyond comment. I have already discussed how care and relationship are sometimes understood as integral to women's understanding and solving of moral dilemmas (Gilligan, 1982, 1995).

“The ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no-one is left alone.” (Gilligan, 1982, p62)

The women in my study rarely mentioned relationships as an explicit focus, but they form a background and context which interplays with their experiences and reflection to shape their faith formation. Clulow (1995) suggests that there is not a single type of mentoring relationship which supports learning, but rather a wide range of relationships which support student work. Whilst Clulow's work was in the context

of formal adult learning, the idea that a 'constellation' of relationships is involved in reflecting aspects of a mentoring process is borne out in this study of women's faith learning.

A range of relationships, both positive and negative are acting as agents for women's everyday learning, supporting, encouraging and affirming women as they work out the meaning of faith in everyday life. In the last chapter I suggested that the motivation required to validate learning is present in the form of commitment. The role of teacher or facilitator is also present in women's incidental learning through the range of everyday relational encounters. In the next chapter I will consider how these processes effect the core relationship in these women's lives - their relationship with God.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **STORIES OF BELIEVING: THE STRUGGLE FOR FAITH**

At the heart of this study is personal faith, as experienced by women, particularly faith as expressed through the vehicle of Christianity in the organisational context of the Church of England. In much contemporary exploration of the relationship between learning and faith, there is an implicit assumption that faith is a subject to be learned about, and as such is clearly distinct from learning. In the area of childhood education, where much of the literature on religious education is to be found, current issues centre on the notion of spirituality and how it might be identified and indeed fostered in schools (Chesters, 1990.). However, the desire to see faith or spirituality grow is not solely the preserve of school age children, but is also an intrinsic part of life for many adults (Eck and Jain, 1986; Bruce, 1995). The idea of development or progress is an integral part of the Christian life, as the believer develops towards maturity, and to 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Ephesians 4, v 13).

In this chapter I want to explore how this happens for the women in this study, particularly considering the way in which faith formation is experienced as struggle. In Chapter Three I suggested that one of the difficulties for women in describing their faith development is the lack of appropriate language with which to validate their experiences. I also suggested that certain types of experience were considered acceptable as vehicles for learning and that spiritual experiences were generally not seen as a learning resource. In the last two chapters I have considered how women experience belonging to the Church as a tension, and then looked at how a network of relationships support them in their lives. The model of incidental learning proposed in

Chapter Three had four component elements, and I have considered how intrinsic commitment to Christianity acts as motivation towards faith development.

In this chapter I want to consider more closely how spiritual moments are learning moments in these women's lives. I will also consider how the problem of silence or naming affects women of faith as they attempt to speak about their particular experiences of God.

## **1.0 THE RIGHT KIND OF KNOWING**

In Chapter Two I suggested that within the Western contemporary understanding of education knowledge and power are strongly linked, and that those who have access to acquiring formal knowledge are also able to increase their potential for power. However, formal knowledge itself plays a role in perpetuating difference, and for women, in perpetuating the limiting notion that somehow their experience is less valuable than knowledge acquired in the institution (Kennedy et al, 1993). For women in the Church this is expressed in the idea of conforming to the ideas of the institution in order to be accepted. Finding the right ways of believing, of expressing that belief, and producing evidence that faith is growing can become a pressure, albeit hidden. Isherwood (1993) suggests that this dominance of the institution, which she identifies as patriarchal, does away with doubt, allowing individuals to feel safe.

### **1.1 The tension between faith and learning**

In theorising women's learning of faith two particular discourses are being brought together - the discourse of faith and the discourse of learning( Hess, 1996). These discourses are integrally connected to the discourses of formal religion and formal education discussed in Chapter Two. Hess uses the findings of Gilligan to develop a pedagogical approach for adult Christian learning which she terms 'conversational education', which has as its central tenet the need to listen to the stories of those who

are as yet unheard. However, I would suggest that the difficulty is that women in the church, whether feeling marginalised like Nina or integrating into the structures like Val, are caught in a place of tension between these two discourses. The two discourses are not unrelated as already discussed, and the same patriarchal value system underpins both. Women who want to communicate their faith experiences have to draw on the male language of faith, using images of control and authority to affirm their position. But whilst the women do use the language of faith to describe their faith formation, they do not use the discourse of formal learning at all. As Luttrell (1997) suggested the split between formal learning and experience is gendered, and generally the women in this study do not even attempt to validate their spiritual lives in terms of a learning discourse. Instead they experience faith as struggle, as Val ponders in this extract from the end of one interview. I have placed this into a more unusual form, so that the difficulties of language are more clearly highlighted. Val is trying to describe her own sense of both security and insecurity in both church and personal belief, and starts by using a motif of a shaking tree. The language is sometimes obscure and confusing, but that is the heart of the problem for women who attempt to explain their faith.

“So there was that sense of ‘no, no, don’t leave us!!’

The tree was shaking actually,  
but we were in God’s will  
and we’d done enough and  
it’s just a bit harder to sit comfortably.

It’s been such a struggle ,  
I say it’s a struggle,  
but you know, I don’t have doubts  
that God is God,  
and he’s real and he’s working  
or anything like that.

‘And haven’t you done it yet?’  
I try to see Him working in the situation,  
sometimes you can’t (no, you can’t)  
and having to understand that  
He’s working through situations  
And dealing with people because  
they’re, we’re, all so different.  
And sometimes it’s not easy. ‘ (Val)

Val is trying to make sense of God in the situations she finds herself; she is committed to continuing with her Christian faith, and attempts to make sense of herself and her circumstances. This maybe type of incidental learning, but this kind of learning has little if any place within the hierarchical discourse(s) of learning (Walsh, 1996).

## **1.2 The significance of knowledge**

Only one of the women in the study engaged in a prolonged period of study and her response to this time is clearly indicative of a hierarchical understanding of knowledge. Hannah accepted a place on a one-year full-time Biblical Studies course in Jerusalem, and during my final interview with her in Jerusalem we talked both formally and informally of her experiences.

“But really, my relationship with the Lord has had to be drawn from my relationships before I came out here. My learning has grown and I’m sure once I’ve processed a lot of that... I mean. I’ve learned about Shabbat, and I’ve learned a lot more about that, and I can use that more at home.. things like that will change me, and through that.. But how has the teaching changed me? I’m not quite sure, because definitely my knowledge has increased but therefore somewhere along the line my faith will be affected by the knowledge. Because growing as a Christian a lot of it comes through knowledge. You know, the more knowledge you have the more you grow, and so it’s got to affect you somewhere, but I’m not sure” (Hannah)

Hannah clearly distinguishes between relationship with God and ‘learning about’ at different points during our discussions, suggesting that during the time of the course she is acquiring significant knowledge, but that that is not yet translated into spiritual growth.

Hannah had already identified that acquiring formal learning about her faith was very important to her, and would add authority to her experience of Christianity. This is perhaps an example of the hierarchies of knowledge that have been identified across a wide range of disciplines(Walsh, 1996). Walsh gives an example of this in the differing statuses accorded to pure and applied studies, where pure cerebral,

theoretical study holds higher standing than a version which is more experiential and applied. In the area of faith and religion, this polarisation is seen in the weight given to the study of theology, which has been dominated by men, whereas the practice of religion, and the handing down of the customs and practices is often the preserve of women.

Clack (1996) argues that spirituality is closely linked with maleness, having connotations of detachment, coolness, asceticism and a disregard of the body. This has direct implications in the hierarchy of knowledge(s); the formal pure knowledge *about* God belongs to the public, and male, world. It is seen to be better than knowledge acquired through the practice of faith in daily life, which is engaged, warm and bodily.

In order to legitimise religion, formal study becomes a desirable and necessary activity for Christians, as the plethora of Christian study books and courses confirm.

Learning about is seen to be better than learning through, or experiencing about.

Walsh also argues that the lack of status afforded to everyday talk or conversation assists in the separation of the academic or theoretical from everyday life. In the religious world this is even more extreme: silence is holy. By implication that is not, and as women's experience is mediated through the medium of talking, then clearly it becomes of lesser value (Fischer, 1989).

An integral part of the problem for women of validating their experiences as part of their spiritual growth is the difficulty of language. It has already been suggested that naming is one of the core characteristics of a feminist epistemology. In the area of spirituality women have to use the language provided from a male knowledge base to describe their own experiences.

## 2.0 THE LANGUAGE OF FAITH

### 2.1 The language of progress

The sense of ambivalence that the women in this study have about the nature of faith development is seen in their tentative use of one of the primary metaphors for the spiritual life, that of journey or path. Louise recalls how she responded to the idea of a right path, and her own unease with this image.

“We’re told aren’t we there’s a sort of path we are to walk along, you can be in the middle, or you’re on the edge, bit in and out., I remember one of the Bible studies at church, it was about this path that you’re supposed to be following, and I’m bang in the middle of it, because you could be on top, or skipping to the edge a bit, or going up blind allies and then coming back”(Louise)

Hannah also expresses uncertainty about her own ability to live up to the metaphor of ladder, whilst Val explores the same idea using the image of a roller-coaster:

“Certainly some of the issues you work at are a kind of ladder.. It’s not so much a ladder, but something you possibly never attain. Maybe it’s not so much a ladder, but a bit further up the road. Maybe I’m a bit nearer achieving that goal than I was before, and I’ve seen that right through my life.” (Hannah)

“I always think about your walk of faith like a roller-coaster. That you end up you know, you should end up closer to God that when you started off in some way or in a more mature faith or you know, however long that takes, and however big the distance is, there should be a walk where you’re.. , you’re deepening your relationship. But it goes like a roller coaster. And sometimes I think the roller-coaster ends up further down than you started off in it, but the general pattern should be an upward trend”. (Val)

Ladders, roller coasters, or the path that leads to a pre-determined goal are all metaphors that suggest a striving towards finding a right way of being Christian. Yet within the metaphors there is also a tentative tone, as if the women are not quite sure of their own ability to achieve this steady upward and onward progress. There is a clear sense that one ought to be engaged in progress, and there is an attempt to express certainty as the women explore the role of faith in their lives.

Craig (1994) describes various models of teaching and learning activity, identifying one model as being characterised by the pursuit of knowledge in order to dispel ignorance. This type of learning, which in a faith context becomes an emphasis on absolute truth - 'the right answer' - also typifies hierarchical models of knowledge acquisition. Until very recently the authority figures in Christianity, those who appear to hold more of the truth, have been male, perhaps doubly emphasising the fact that pursuing absolute truth is a superior form of knowledge (McEwan, 1991). One of the ways in which some of the women overcome this ambivalence is to use the language of authority and absolutes and link it with their experiences. There are two particular ways in which the women use the language with which the church has provided them. The first is to use the language of God, the ultimate authority and the second is to use the language of the institution.

## **2.2 The language of God**

The language which is available to speak of and to understand God is almost wholly male (Hampson, 1986; Wren, 1989; Isherwood, 1996; Furlong, 1991; King, 1993; Fulkerson, 1997). There have been attempts across all faith traditions to discover and re-employ a range of feminine images, and to engage in a discourse of thea-logy and goddess spirituality (King, 1993). Metaphors are an important element in revealing existing faith values, and also in developing faith into new areas (McFague, 1987). However, none of the women in the research feel able to relate comfortably to a feminine expression of God. They express an understanding that He has both male and female attributes, good female characteristics being love, care, kindness and gentleness.

"He's a man, but with lots of female attributes if you like, loving and caring and so on, but .. I mean, His main attributes aren't sort of the justice, and the punishment, but I mean I'm conscious at the back of my mind, yes, he is an all-judging God as well.... but the attributes to the fore are his sort of love,

and tenderness and care. But he's still a male figure if you like, in that I picture him - I'm not very good at picturing things .. I mean its probably some awful picture I saw, some 16th century drawing of a God that I have in my head, long white hair of thing, smiling chap.

*SM: I'm just curious really, whether as a woman who has a faith, whether people have any particular ways of expressing it that means its personal to them in roles like being a wife and mother and so on. Does God identify with those things? Can he understand that if he's male?*

(long pause). Yeah. He understands everything. He's an all-powerful being, but I don't want to see him like something off Star Trek, so I have to give Him a human picture. But I'm conscious that I see something, but with God, I mean He understands my problems as much as He understands my husbands. He doesn't have a male slant on it all. He's sexless, if you like. But I want to see him as a physical shape, I don't want to see him as a ghost who goes through walls. As I say, some alien from Star trek.." (Louise)

Louise is making an attempt to articulate her understanding of God, and although she wants to define God as sexless, she can only really picture God as male - with female attributes. This again reflects the binaries of gender discussed in previous chapters.

God is described in absolutes of one sex or the other, and there is no language or imagery with which to explain God in any other way. In making the attempt to formulate a non-polarised understanding of God, Louise resorts to the language of science fiction and fantasy.

Imogen is the one of the research participants who has had some formal theological education, and as one of those involved in the debates about the ordination of women to the priesthood has given some thought to sex and gender issues.

"I do have great difficulty with God as a woman, because I also have great difficulty with God as a man. I don't think of God as.. that's not right.. I was going to say I don't think of God as a person, but do you know I do. But I don't think of God as either man or woman. It's really hard to express how one thinks of God, because I don't think that you can. I think that God is beyond talk. I feel God (pause), and I suppose God is all that one would wish in a totally rounded person. I think I'd put it like that rather than as a person. All the aspects of the whole human nature are there. Now that may be a projection, of course, but then we can only think of God in terms of our own projections. But feminine liturgies, feminist liturgies, talking about God our Mother, and She for everything, I actually find quite a lot of difficulty with. But that could be simply because it's not what I grew up with, that may be something to do with it, I dare say I could get used to it. But to me it's tipping

the balance the other way just as badly. I just try to get away from saying 'he' or 'she', and if I want to refer to God, then I say God, rather than He, or whatever." (Imogen)

Imogen acknowledges the difficulties of language in describing God. However, her strategy for dealing with the lack of language is to avoid the problem and continues to use the male language form with which she is familiar. Male language and metaphors for God link to authority and all of the women seemed to find security in metaphors that reflect a sense of control. .

One woman described God as like a farmer directing operations from over the hedge, whilst yet another said He was like a juggler, keeping everything moving, including her. Whilst neither of these metaphors are specifically male, they are both variation on authority themes. A further variation of the controlling metaphor is that of God as Father, which is a very powerful and central description of God in the Christian tradition. One woman described herself as a child cuddling up to God, whilst another agreed with the child motif, but saw herself as a naughty child, frequently running away from the benevolent parent.

"I'd be nearer the child on God's knee. I feel he's there watching over every aspect. Sometimes I'm a bit of a naughty child, not as good as I should be."  
(Louise)

This clearly links with the idea that there is a right way of being a Christian and that part of the right way involves submission and obedience, rather than an independent questioning of the world. The language of faith becomes the language of control and provides a framework in which individuals can feel safe and protected (Balmer, 1994).

One of the devices which some of the women use to align themselves clearly with this benevolent but controlling God is by placing responsibility for their thoughts and decisions with God. Frequently interviews are littered with expressions such as 'God

said', and 'the Lord told me', revealing a certainty about faith and direction. There is a sense of being partakers in the big picture, part of a meta-narrative, which will supply all of the answers to all the problems. This results in a sense of passivity, as the women appear to surrender their own autonomy, allowing God to take responsibility for the decisions in their lives.

“And you think, and you go back, yes, okay that was how God told me. And you go back to it. ... I think at the time I was so. I was almost certain that the Lord was calling me to that, and I think S. certainly was, but I needed to ask myself if it was definitely what the Lord wanted me to do, and not what I wanted to do. Because as you know I had a desire to do that anyway and I knew that it would be a tough situation, and I had to know” (Hannah)

“My contract finishes at the end of this term, and I resolved, sort of prayerfully, that if the Lord wanted me to carry on in teaching then he'd provide me with a part-time post, but that I wasn't going to go looking for it. On the basis that I hadn't gone looking for this part-time post, but it had come to the fore without me looking for it, they'd come looking for me, they'd come looking three or four times asking me to do the job, and eventually I said yes, because I kept saying to God, no, I won't do this job, but if I'm wrong Lord they'll come back and ask me again. And they came back three or four times, and in the end I said yes. It's been a very hard experience though. And I'm not too sure why the Lord wanted me to do it” (Sally)

For both Sally and Hannah there is a sense that aligning their decisions with God's purposes is an added security. There is also a clear sense that there is a right thing to do, and that finding it will involve both work and opposition. Learning then becomes a process of discovering the next steps on a pre-determined path towards God, expressed in metaphors about ladders or stairs or journey, with a definite sense that progress ought to be upward towards maturity. This sense of progress is reinforced through the structures and language of the church.

### **2.3 The language of the Church**

Having seen that the language of God available to the women in this study is based on a particular construct of God that reflects authority and power, I now want to consider the language of the church. Just as the women invoke the name of God to

give stability and authority to their decisions, so too can they utilise the authority of the church. Val, a churchwarden, talked over several months about a situation in her church congregation, which clearly dominated her life for a while. Whenever she talked about the situation, the conversation was littered with ‘us’ and ‘them’ language. She is able to align herself with the authority source in order to share the power and to become the arbiter herself of the ‘right’ way for people to express themselves. In this extract she is talking about the plans that were made to resolve some perceived problems and shortcomings in one of the Sunday services.

”We reorganised the service to a certain extent. A lot of it was twiddling with bits, and but, we, to help worship, to help the flow of the service, to allow God to move. Some of the things we were doing we felt were actually stopping him. One of the thing, one of the practical things we did, we took the collection out of the service. And we just have a plate at the back now where people put their money in when they come in because they felt that that was, you know, whatever we did, if we had it during a hymn or a song the song was wasted by people fiddled in their purses, and you know, if we asked people to be quiet they weren’t quiet, if we played instrumental music whilst the collection came round, they talked to their neighbours, so it just was a, so we took that out and um, that helped the flow of it.... We tried to upgrade the things that we needed to encourage like the stewards and the sidesmen who work with the team, and kind of enhance their role and show them that what they do is important, and that sort of thing. It was a little bit tricky  
Umm... what else did we do? Oh, yes, putting things in place which would, but the fundamental thing was the worship, and we still haven’t got it right”  
(Val)

Russell (1990) identified this style of authority as paternalism or ‘male domination without a contract’ (p227). She also suggests that this kind of paternalism within the church is often characterised by the benevolent language of caring. As Val described the situation in her church, she is suggesting that it is for people’s benefit and well being, and in order to achieve her purposes she has absorbed herself into the hierarchical structure of the organisation.

The language that the women have available to talk about their faith is a language developed in a patriarchal system, and using it enables the women to express

themselves with a great deal of conviction, voicing an understanding of faith as certain and truth as absolute. This traditional understanding, perhaps limited by the lack of language to express themselves as women of faith, and by the externally goal-oriented learning which has been the means of developing faith in the Church of England, may inhibit exploration of faith as an internal learning process. Church becomes a safe and dependent place for women, and therefore organisational and formal learning becomes non-reflective and passive.

### **3.0 THE LANGUAGE OF STRUGGLE**

Over the two and half years of the study the research respondents have talked openly about the events of their lives, and shared something of the significance of their personal faith. Although there are many occasions when they confidently assert faith, there is also a personal dimension in which faith is explored in daily moments of informal learning and connectedness with life and learning. It is not only the explicit faith dimension that is sometimes expressed tentatively, but there is a sense of self-discovery, which is characterised by uncertainty, rather than the repetition of the confident assertions of the church.

“I’m quite unsure of my picture of God.. I have a feeling that he has a personal interest in me and He loves me. I’m frightened about [the uncertainty], apart from my faith that He loves me.” (Ruth)

It is in the honesty and vulnerability of these statements that a more tentative faith is seen, and perhaps a learning process that is more akin to the kind of incidental learning that Marsick and Watkins (1990) discuss. Through the way in which daily life triggers reflection, the ability to learn experientially and to test out emerging possibilities is fostered. These abilities are considered crucial to self-development (Thompson, 1997).

The gap between the reality of life and the heard absolutes of the church becomes a

place of uncertainty, and it is in these gaps that reflection and learning begins to take place (Ward and Wild, 1995). Thus, this tension is expressed as religious doubt, as women try to align their experiences with the received teaching of their faith, but also struggle to find the language with which to explain their own situation.

“So that I think I need to do that, and to pray. Even though sometimes it just seems to be a total waste of time, I’m sure that it isn’t, but sometimes I sit there and I think I don’t know what I’m doing here, don’t know where You are, if you’re there at all..” (Imogen)

Religious doubt is one of the ways in which a more questioning approach to faith is expressed, but it can often be accompanied by a sense of guilt as well. The guilt can be expressed in a sense of failure to meet demands and expectations. Louise responded to questions about how she sustains her own faith with statements about what she ought to be doing, and how a recent Conference had supported her.

“Yes, I do think I ought to.. I mean I used to be quite a regular at Bible Study, we used to have them here on a Wednesday. I must admit since teaching and everything else, I haven’t been quite as good at going to things like that and er, praying. I suppose I saw it as a bit of a boost in that, a blow-out, a concentrated, and we bought all the books and you come back with all the things recommended.” (Louise)

Other women expressed similar guilt about their perceived inability to meet the expectations placed on them by the Church. For Nina this became entangled with her faith about God, and her sense of identity.

“But one of the team vicars, X, wanted me to go and pray with her once a week, and I said no, I can’t do that yet, I’m not ready for that yet, I can’t talk to God like I used to, Because I felt that God was guiding me towards ministry, and clearly either He wasn’t or the church has got it wrong, and I can’t, its too painful. And R. said you can’t stop praying, because if you, you’ve got to have 2-way communication or the relationship goes. Well, I’m not convinced that I’m getting 2-way communication, anyway. It feels as if I’m talking to myself. So, I haven’t got back to prayer”. (Nina)

There is a clear sense of expectation for Nina that she ought to be praying and the invitation and encouragement to prayer came through the formal voice of the church, via the ordained clergy. However, Nina is very unsure at the moment as to whether her relationship with God even exists. Sally also went through similar uncertainty about her faith and her identity at various times during the research. Sally is a writer and often uses metaphors to explain how she is feeling, and in one interview she described how she felt as if life had been cosy and certain, like sitting in a warm bath, and that somehow she now felt as if:

“the plug has been pulled out, leaving you naked and exposed and not knowing what to do next.” (Sally)

Sally continues to use this metaphor as we meet to explain and explore the contrast between her current uncertainty about faith and life with her previous simplistic understanding, as she describes it. Sally expresses this tension as she tries to explain how she simultaneously feels she is in a kind of crisis related to ageing or maturing, yet is also still in need of basic reassurance about identity and purpose.

”I’ve felt that I’m sort of in a mid-life crisis faith wise. And yet in a peculiar way I feel, I still think about what I want to be when I grow up. I don’t really feel that I’m ready for this, do you know what I mean?” (Sally)

It is moments of insecurity such as these, as the tension between what is expected and what actually happens is explored, that faith begin to be explored, and the potential to find space to be oneself unfolds. The metaphors of linear progress, such as ladder, path and journey, are replaced by the metaphor of uncertainty as a way of exploring the emerging gap.

Faith is clearly more than simply finding your place in the competitive community, or paying lip service to tradition. Yet the language available has to be stretched if it is adequately to allow the uncertainties of faith to be explored. For some women faith itself is a dynamic factor, whilst for others it is a point of reference, a signpost in a

changing or unclear world. Zoe talked about the seaside resort where she grew up, reflecting that whilst the buildings and environment change the seashore remains in the same place. She adds: ‘that is how God is for me’, and so she grapples with the question of suffering and injustice, an issue still unresolved for her, but nevertheless part of the tapestry of her learning. Tapestry is a metaphor that Nina uses to explain how she finds the relationship between the choices we make and the theological doctrine of the sovereignty of God.

“She used to say that God was sitting behind a tapestry and um , we would push the needle through a hole and God was sitting the other side and would say, oh, well I didn’t really expect it to come through that hole, but never mind, lets see what kind of pattern we can make with that, and then would push it back to you and you’d have to find a different, you know, so we’re making decisions and God is using them, and we have to take another decision, and God perhaps uses that, and I can relate to that really.” (Nina)

Using creative and unfamiliar metaphors is one way in which women can begin to break through the limits that have been placed around their experiences of learning faith. But whilst the language of faith can be stretched and developed in talking about their lives, it still does not constitute a form of learning as far as they are concerned. I now want to look at some specific moments in the women’s lives, and consider how these moments have been learning moments, even though they are described using the vocabulary of spirituality.

#### **4.0 LEARNING MOMENTS**

In the arena of learning faith it has already been suggested that formal learning approaches equate to learning about faith, giving rise to a pressure to conform and to move onwards and upward towards an unspecified goal. However, the experience of living out faith contributes significantly to the way in which faith is integral to women’s lives in particular (Woodhead, 1992). Faith, or spirituality or religious belief (which are not interchangeable terms), then becomes a type of learning, rather

than a subject to be learned about. Whilst people may learn the belief system, the experience of living becomes the means for the learned beliefs to be turned into a dynamic faith or spirituality. A different metaphor for explaining this process might be the Celtic ideal of *perigrinazio*, which is a type of pilgrimage in which the outward journey mirrors inward spiritual growth. Using this model to reflect on women's experiences of faith learning, I would suggest that faith is the very reason for the exploration to begin, rather than the content of the journey. It is the food eaten, rather than the hostelry visited; it is the earth walked on, rather than the route taken - the experiences of life become the route. To return this to more academic language, I am suggesting that whilst religion can be learned about in formal systems, the incidental learning of everyday life is what gives it meaning .

#### **4.1 Learning in crisis**

One of the women, Hannah, has suffered some major traumas in her life, notably the pain of infertility, followed by the death of her husband when she was around 40. Her faith remains resolute and strong.

“Yeah. Learning how to trust God and to hang on and believe that he is there. I remember when C. died looking at the passage in the Bible that says God is always with you. Yes! And where is he now, then? You know? But having to learn what that really meant, and having to.. you know, often I want to stand up in the church when people read a passage out of the Bible and say that's lies, that doesn't work ! I mean I had the faith for it, but it was being tested to the breaking point. And I thought that's not true. You know, there's still, you know, I kinda think the songs we sing in church ... I think that's possibly what I expect. I expect the pain, the loss of something. And then like something good for me. And I do think that's probably what it means. There is a rose there, but it's, but it's not for me . Its not going to make me, it's not going to be something absolutely wonderful and exciting in my life for me. It'll be something that He is going to do out of that, and then in those kind of situations, and see what's going to come out of that, ready to let him be all things to his people.” (Hannah)

As Hannah talks through this phase of her life, now some seven years ago, it is clear that there was a tension between the beliefs that she had been taught by church and

Bible, and her life experience. Somehow working through the bereavement process has impacted her faith, and, in her case, made it a more secure part of her identity. It is this process of living through experience that makes faith more than just a subject to be learned.

As Ruth became more and more involved in caring for her mother-in-law, she found that some of her own assumptions about religious belief were challenged. This was not just in the specific process of becoming closely involved with pain and death, but also in noticing a gap between her own tenets of belief and her mother-in-law's life. She talked about her husband, John, and how his relationship with his parents had influenced her own assumptions about their religious beliefs.

“When John became a Christian at 15 he did so because (his family) moved into a new home, and the local Anglican church was quite evangelical and did a really good visiting sort of thing. And John listened to his parents saying, we don't need to go to church, we don't think it's necessary to go to church to be a good person. And it didn't stack up as far as he was concerned... So I suppose John's sort of rejection of a lot of their attitudes has coloured my attitude to them, basically as not being Christians, because John hadn't found his Christianity through them....

*SM: But it does make you think though, it does throw up questions these things happening against what you've always thought, doesn't it?*

I may be wrong. But at least I think now that I can't make that judgement. That I don't know what her relationship with God was. She certainly believed he was there, and she certainly believed it was worth praying. I don't know, she told George one day, we just have never known, but she said she always said a prayer before she went to bed.

*SM: Yeah, my Mum would say that as well*

And I was thinking, well, she's more faithful than I am. And after she said to G., I just say my, she was talking about how well she was doing, I just say the prayers that I always say, and I thought well, that is lovely. She says she enjoys being in our home and at our church, and the clergy in the church have been very good to her... and yet she's given something back to our children. She's reinforced the idea that it's okay to pray.'

In terms of a learning process, Ruth uses none of the language of formal learning to describe the change in her views. However, she does use a related vocabulary of reflection, with phrases such as 'I was thinking' and 'I suppose'. Ruth has gone through a process of experiential learning of the kind that both Mason (1993) and

Henry (1992) might identify with. Ruth's assumptions were challenged as she identified a gap between her assumptions and what she observed, and so her frameworks moved, and in terms of her faith, like Hannah, her faith was defined differently. She engages in a core learning activity, that of reflection, but uses a different language to describe it.

#### **4.2 Learning in the everyday**

Hannah and Zoe both experienced a shift in their faith perceptions by going through some specifically traumatic events, and then later thinking about those events in the light of their previous understanding. For some of the women there have been very specific moments which have become significant. In some ways, Zoe has a less sophisticated approach to faith than either Ruth or Hannah. For her faith is inextricably linked to church, and is a bedrock in her life. It is also something she wishes to pass on to her children. She describes an occasion when she and two of her children were anxious about a very significant family and church event.

“But I, I (pause) can't, couldn't live without that faith; when Lewis was confirmed we were all very nervous and got very worked up, because it wasn't that long since Dad had died, and really, he would have been so proud. And Lewis was getting, that's the first time that I've seen him get worried about something. He was sick, you know, physically sick, you know he was getting ill, and [the vicar] came round and said are you okay? And I said, no I'm not, and Mike was away, he was coming, he was arriving on the Saturday as Lewis was confirmed on the Sunday. And we were just getting so worked up, and I was getting worked up, and she came round and she just held all our hands, Andrew was there, and me and Lewis cos he was in bed, cos he'd had the day off on the Thursday and Friday.. it was in the week, and she held our hands, and she said a prayer. And the next morning we woke up feeling like we were all fine, phoned her up and said, I don't know what you did (laughter), well, I do know what you did, I know what's helped us, and it works, it works.” (Zoe)

Zoe's experience of these moments is of vital importance as evidence to her of the effectiveness of faith and prayer. The story reveals a complex web of faith, relationships and experience, as the simple act of prayer impacted her family.

Bright (1996) identifies various differences in the activity at work when people engage with experience. He suggests that there is efficient and inefficient reflection, and also a difference between contemplation and reflection. He does not suggest that one or the other constitutes the key element in experiential learning, but rather that the outcomes may be different.

Zoe's form of reflection on the event may be even less conscious than Ruth's, although she indicates a process of internal questioning has taken place. Jarvis (1987, 1992, 1994) argues that for everyday experiences to be effective learning it must include a process of reflection. I suggest that without using the language of learning at all, Zoe and others in this study are clearly engaged in reflective processes on the everyday moments of their lives and this reflection deepens their personal faith.

However, within the discourses of formal learning, learning is concerned with acquiring new knowledge and understanding rather than affirming or consolidating previous learning.

As previously mentioned, Sally was engaged in a process of re-framing her understanding of her Christian faith, and re-counted a number of creative and thoughtful episodes in talking to me about her thinking. During one interview she had been explaining how she had generally been unsettled and discontented over the previous few weeks following an unsuccessful attempt to move house, and general uncertainty about the future.

“It was like discontentment was a kind of fog around me, and when the fog of discontent lifted I could start to see things that I hadn't noticed before and I came back, and really started to enjoy the things about being in the house that I hadn't enjoyed, and that resentment had meant I.. I really started to enjoy the garden. Now this really is a change, and I do think its close to a miracle really because I was brought up in a house where nobody was really interested in gardening. So I've always been really, really ignorant about gardens, and I've always been fairly sort of intimidated by people who do know about gardens. So I'm fairly sneering in my appreciation, you know what I mean? I don't mean to be deliberately rude, but I feel so intimidated

that I can't really be enthusiastic about their interest. But, um, I think its one, its, the Lord's just given me a real love for gardening, and a real love for my garden. And I go out there and I potter about for a couple of hours and I feel really unwound by the end. And its like I've been seeing in black and white and suddenly we can see in colour. And there was a friend of mine who came round, and I went round for coffee with her and just in those two mornings she taught me so much about different plants in a way that didn't make me feel stupid, you know, and I really enjoy it now. I go out there and I think oh, that's so and so, and that's a so and so, and I get really enthusiastic about it, you know, and that' really helped me slow down, so I suppose that effect lasted oh, at least until half term from Easter. I was able to take one day at a time and walk [as a Christian], and sort of quietly, if you know what I mean.”  
(Sally)

I enjoyed this particular story from Sally, as it embodies a kind of entangling of the everyday with spiritual development in a very honest way. Again, like Zoe and Ruth, Sally does not use the language of formal learning, but instead she talks about ‘seeing’ and ‘pottering about’, and also notes the effect that this had in enabling her to slow down and deal with her life. However, I also note the appeal to the authority of ‘the Lord’ to legitimise this interest, which she may otherwise have felt foolish and/or guilty about.

The process of developing faith in these circumstances has come about through the input of a friend, alongside time to reflect and to relax. A few months after this Sally and her family did move house and she felt that she was more equipped to deal with that process because of the garden experience. Adjusting to these kind of milestone or life events might simply be part of a linear development towards adulthood (Moran, 1982) or part of a process leading to a maturity or wholeness which embraces spirituality as well as other signs of age.

#### **4.3 Learning in spiritual revelation**

Specifically spiritual moments are very intimate, as has already been discussed in Chapter One, but can also be ‘epiphany’ moments when individuals feel that their spiritual life has surged, rather than unfolded, into a different phase

Hannah describes one such occasion, which took place during Easter week, about six months into the research. The account of the event was detailed, and there was a clear build up throughout Easter week, with various points of emotion, culminating in the response Hannah made on Good Friday. This is a somewhat lengthy extract from a lengthy description, but it was a very intense, significant and personal experience for Hannah.

“And I knew when (the vicar) said that... all the palm crosses, they had a lot left over from Palm Sunday, and he laid them all out the front, and he said, come up to the Communion Table, and he said - there was much, much more to it than that but it was really moving - and he said that you know, Jesus is asking us to take up our cross, and to carry that. But he said, you know, I’m warning you now you need to know what you are doing, and you need to be sure that’s what you want to do, and that God’s calling you. And my heart was really thumping, and I thought to myself here we go again. I knew that was what God was asking me to do, and I sort of said, no, come forward and pick up, come forward and do this, and I said I’m not gonna be the first. Yet I wanted to do just dive out there and pick it up, and say okay, but I wasna gonna be the first one out... the church army captain went out, and I went after him, and people picked up, and I came back and sat in my seat. And I was a wee bit tearful, and I said to my friend, you know, I know that’s what God has been asking me to do, but I’ve been telling him, oh go away, go away.. It was kind of important I think, and I know I’ve made a serious step here. But actually since then I haven’t felt that sense of loss. I thought to myself the faith that I’ve got is now is through losing everything that’s important to me. I lost my husband, I lost any chance of having a child, and I lost my sister-in-law, I lost my cousin; I’m about to lose my brother - I’ve lost an awful lot, and I just don’t know that I can face another loss. .. He’s gonna have to replace these people in my life, really, and I think maybe that’s what he’s been saying, but certainly not to hold on to the things of this world maybe. And so it’s been another kinda step along the way. I’ve been thinking for the last few years that all I’m living for is Jesus. There’s nobody to kind of take his place. There’s nobody to step in the way and clutter it up, at all. And I think, you know, that he’s been, I’ve known, I’ve felt him calling me the last few years. I’ve known that, I’ve known without a doubt that he’s been calling me. saying let me be all of these things. And I’ve found that difficult” (Hannah)

It is difficult to capture fully the sense of awe and importance this experience held for Hannah. She referred to it often in subsequent interviews, seeing it as a turning point or landmark time. Hannah’s account is a truly personal account of her thought processes as she makes sense of a symbolic moment in her faith journey. Whilst

women are encouraged to see such revelatory moments as a learning resource, it is usually commented on within the context of formalised studies (Bignell, 1996). In the formalised learning setting an individual might be encouraged to recount incidents from their lives and be guided as to how to reflect on these moments in terms of gender. Hannah's retelling and reflection is self-generated, and is part of her personal faith learning.

During the course of our meetings, Val had expressed both the confidence that comes from belonging to the church and the uncertainty of exploring her own faith at times, in her own way.

“Oh, I quite like being on my own in the house, as long as I'm not feeling cheesed off. You know, I'll put worship tapes on and I'll think, I'll think things through and thinking have I got any jobs, or maybe I'm reading my devotions, or thinking upstairs, you know. That's okay. And I'm quite happy to do that and I feel quite um, yeah I know I can do that, and that's from me, and that's from me, I haven't taken that from [the vicar] or anybody else I know, you got that from, I know what God wanted me to do, and I might not like it, but. “ (Val)

It is clear from these extracts that Val is involved in processes of reflection or 'thinking things through'. These moments may be complementary to the formal teaching offered through the church, or the moments when, for Val, incidental learning is taking place. Imogen also reflects on the way in which learning happens in her life.

“Well, I'll take learning from anywhere I can get it. Um, I'm a real hoarder of knowledge... And I'll get something from a book, or from a film, or a piece of music, or a meditation, a walk... Anywhere! And it's all seized on, stored away.

And do you know, that, that seems to be it, that a whole world's there... to learn from!... For instance, quite some time ago, there was a peak because a whole lot of lights went on, one after the other in my head, about various things to do with creation spirituality, and letting go, and personality. All sorts of things. And I kept on having, um, little sort of, glimpses -- Oh, I see that! And then, a week later, something else in another context and oh, I see that! Hey, that connects with that! And I got quite excited because over a period of about three months, I suppose, there were about half a dozen

separate incidents or processes which all locked together and resulted in a big .. Um, so that's how it seems to work.” (Imogen)

Imogen is able to articulate more precisely the kind of reflection, learning and development that is going on in her life, making the kind of connections that might seem to echo Mezirow's transformation theory (1997). He argues that the most significant learning is that which allows people to both understand and shape their actions. In the area of faith development it is not always clear that the reflective processes lead directly to changed behaviour or actions. Indeed to attempt to examine faith in this way falls immediately back into hierarchical patterns pre-occupied with measurable outcomes. Learning of faith cannot simply be measured in activity, but rather is a complex activity unfolding in a myriad unseen daily moments, alongside moments of crisis. It is this which constitutes faith development or learning for these women, an interactive, dynamic process of discovery, which stands outside of, yet in tension with, the formal learning that is offered.

## **CONCLUSION**

Women's stories of faith cover a range of experiences and responses, but as suggested in the title of this chapter there is a clear sense of struggle towards this faith. This chapter has particularly focused around the gap that emerges between the formal knowledge of the church and the experience of faith the women encounter in their lives. This gap also reflects the polarised lens of gender through which the women in the study view life and faith. They use predominantly male imagery to describe God, and the authoritarian language of the church to support their ideas. However, when something happens to disturb these ideas, the language with which the women are familiar is inadequate. The gap between the certain and the unknown is then expressed in terms of doubt, tension and struggle.

The moments of struggle are moments for reflection, and although the respondents do not use the language of reflection, they are clearly engaged in thinking about or mulling over the events of their lives. Although there is some awareness that adults do relate aspects of their lives in myriad ways (Blaxter et al, 1997), this kind of incidental learning is not widely explored, and is frequently under-privileged. However, using the model I proposed in Chapter Three, it is clear that these women are both motivated and reflective, thinking through their experiences and using them to foster their own understanding of what it means to be Christian. These learning moments occur in times of crisis as well as in everyday occurrences.

The final element of the learning model is the evidence of some kind of outcome. In the next chapter I am going to draw together some themes that emerged in the women's lives across the thirty months of the study, and consider the extent to which their experiences are valid as learning.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **A SLICE OF LIFE: STORIES OF LEARNING**

The data for this study has been collected over a period of thirty months, and in this chapter I want to consider some of the themes and patterns that emerge by looking at that period of time as a whole. In particular I want to focus on the phase of learning known as outcomes, looking at the ways in which the women confirm that their faith is dynamic rather than static. It is in the dynamism of faith that evidence of learning is found, rather than in any of formal evidence shown through portfolios, certificates or accreditation.

As discussed in Chapter One the women were invited to participate in the research as a result of personal contacts and networking. At the time of initial contact in the autumn of 1995 the majority of them were in fairly settled situations. Nina was beginning to realise the likely consequences of being not recommended for training for the ordained ministry. Louise talked a little about new jobs and house moves. Nevertheless, the overall picture was of a group of women with stable, ordinary lives. In fact, during the thirty months all of the women went through external changes of some kind, although the emotional and spiritual responses to these changes varied considerably. Some of these changes were planned for and anticipated, such as job changes and house moves, but even with these the emotional and spiritual consequences had greater impact than expected. Other changes were not planned, for example, sudden illness or abrupt departures and these two elicited a variety of responses.

The lives of the women do not fit neatly into thematic boxes for the purposes of research, but it is possible to identify some kind of continuum in terms of response to

change. This continuum is probably best expressed in a spiral, but here the names are show in circular form, indicating the significance of change in their lives.



The three segments on the outer circle represent different types of outcome in terms of faith development. The words are chosen to indicate a degree of movement, although some of the women’s faith seems to develop around a fixed point, whilst others seem to move away from that point towards a possible new position.

Diagrams are always problematic in that they imply fixity, whereas the reality is that lives exhibit ranges of responses at any one time. This is an attempt to point out some patterns that emerge.

In this chapter I am going to consider what the three points on the continuum mean for the different women, particularly in the light of the outcomes phase of the learning model I proposed earlier.

## 1.0 PROGRESS: THE DESIRED OUTCOME

At various points throughout this thesis the idea that learning can only be deemed successful if it can be measured in terms of visible improvement has been noted.

The notion of improvement in educational terms is linked to ideas about ‘advancement’ and betterment’, ideas carried forward from the days when education was the privilege of a monied minority (Harrison, 1961). Behind these notions is a

Western pre-occupation with progress, a notion which itself needs to be questioned (Burgess, 1996). There are a variety of synonyms for progress and improvement, some used more commonly in education, others such as development used more in areas such as faith and spirituality. Development always implies a favourable change, from simple to complex, from unfortunate to fortunate, from bad to good (Esteva in Sachs, 1992; Knox, 1986). Esteva also argues that for a person to pursue development it is first necessary to perceive the need for change. The link between this kind of awareness, or consciousness raising, and learning or change, is also part of Friere's philosophy of education. The educational process has to become something which a person experiences and does, rather than simply receives (Shor, 1993). This clearly places the discourse of development into the same structure as that of formal education, where there is an implicit hierarchical power relationship between those with knowledge and those who lack it, the teacher and the taught (Hull, 1985).

Defining development is then problematic, in that it requires assumptions and value judgements to be made, as it centres on some notion of improvement (Sugarman, 1986). These judgements may be made personally, or corporately, but somehow the notion is communicated that there is a norm to be achieved or a standard to be beaten. It may be then that substituting the term development for learning or education is no more than an acceptable renaming of the same agenda, that is, the achieving of goals which are desirable to the wider society.

At a very fundamental level the notion of development is applied to the physical maturing of a human, describing the process of moving from baby to physically mature person. Some theories take this a little further and add a psychological maturing into the process that then continues through adult life to encompass old age.

(Elkind, 1970; Rosenfeld and Stark, 1993) If development implies improvement, then these theories inherently assume that adult is better than child, and than older is better than younger. Several of these theories have devised a hierarchical stage model to describe both physical and psychological development. This type of model has been carried over into educational and other developmental theories. Classic educational theorists such as Piaget have clearly defined stages through which each person proceeds on the way to maturity. Egan (1979) is a later educationalist, but his theories still centre around a linear model of development. Thus, he stresses the importance of living through each stage, suggesting that there is a kind of cumulative effect through life of ‘experience and knowledge as gifts that enrich the soul we started with’ (Egan, 1984, 1979).

The suggestion that a person is somehow an accumulation of a series of events building towards a goal is consistent with a humanistic understanding in which the end result is integration of the whole person (Moran, 1980). Approaches to being adult involve acknowledging the need to move beyond child behaviours and become able to respond as a unique integrated person (Harris, 1973). More recent approaches to adult development suggest that a person has a number of selves co-existing at any point in time (Brady, 1990; Gergen, 1991).

Moran (1980) moves towards a rejection of development as circle and lines, suggesting instead that whilst time passes by bit by bit, it never actually leaves us. This is more consistent with an understanding of how women might perceive time and life-cycle as an inter-weaving of events in a non-uniform pattern (Davies, 1990, 1996). The place and nature of experience in the course of lives varies accordingly. For Moran transition is always pre-figured by crisis, whereas those who see life holistically rather than linear find daily events to be significant (Brady, 1990;

Sugarman, 1986).

Within a learning discourse that is shaped by an ideology concerned with improvement, then outcomes can only be understood in terms of change judged to be positive. The idea that development might involve deeper understanding of an existing position is problematic. Terms such as ‘entrenched’ or ‘unassailable’ are used to describe those who hold viewpoints that remain largely unaltered. However, for women engaged in the process of living out their faith principles, the outcomes of their learning may not always be evidenced in terms of change. In the development of religious belief there are also different understandings as to the relationships between time, events and personal belief. The evidence of development, or legitimate outcome may look very different, but this does not mean that learning is not taking place.

## **2.0 CONTINUITY: A DIFFERENT ANGLE**

Over the course of the study there were some women whose lives and responses remained very stable and the development or exploration of their faith might metaphorically be expressed as seeing the same thing from a different angle.

Louise, Val and Zoe are perhaps the three who most express this kind of continuity, although their stories and responses are very different.

### **2.1 Continuity as caution: playing it safe**

Louise is perhaps the person who most embodies the kind of learning that sees continuity as desirable. Whilst she experienced guilt and doubt on occasion, her overall desire was to aim for stability. In one of the early interviews Louise expressed her fear of upheaval

“Maybe that’s why I haven’t followed the path. I’ve convinced myself, and often people who are on that sort of path often get some horrendous things happen to them.. I f you stay on the edge, you’re sitting on the fence, you’re playing a bit safe, you know people have these awful traumatic events - there

parents die, their spouses die, or the kids die or something. And their faith is tested, and how did they cope with that. And I don't want my faith to be tested like that. So I'm very timid I think" (Louise)

Louise's fear of traumatic events that might test her faith was repeated in slightly different ways in almost all of our interviews. Whilst she did experience a number of external changes over the time of the study, her emotional and spiritual response to these changes was consistent. Louise acquired a new job, moved house and changed church, but found none of these events demanding or stressful. In one interview I asked Louise if changing church had given her any kind of new energy or input for her faith

"It's been nice not to be doing all the time, to be able to go to a service, to go from beginning to end, and not to feel you've got to rush out do something, whatever, to take part. But we're beginning to feel .. we're beginning to get involved. And, doing the odd reading - it is a slippery slope! But again that's all part of getting to know people. I don't know that my faith has changed. I mean because you are not committed to do anything, it's easy to miss a week.... So because you're not committed to doing anything, then you can opt out. I don't think there's any danger of us just slipping away and not going anywhere, but it's nice to be able to dip in to that - it feels like a congregation, but not feel so involved.." (Louise)

Louise's response to life events often seems to be that of the detached observer, taking events as they come and managing to control them on her own terms, a phrase she uses to describe both church membership and her job.

Teaching is also something she does because it works for her, but she is not wholly committed to her current job, often finding it depressing or overly demanding. In our final interview Louise found it hard to say how she had changed and developed over the past months. She talked about the things she ought to have done, and the need to think about her job more, but basically she is content with the position in which she finds herself. She re-iterated again her basic creed, which is that there has to be something to give life meaning, but that she doesn't want to get so involved that it

disrupts her life.

“I mean I think it’s all to do with that [identity]. It’s being a whole person. I mean yes, I’m a Mum, yes, I’m a teacher, and being a Christian is part of acting out, and being a Christian is going to church, trying to do the best you can ... you know, honest. I don’t cheat people and, you know, try to live a good life. But unless I was actually involved or attached to a fellowship of people it would perhaps be a bit missing. I’d feel guilty” (Louise)

“It’s so hard to see whether you’ve moved forward. I mean I’ve got the job, and I’ve got the house.... I mean I’m probably not keeping my side of the bargain in some ways, in that He has been very good ..... it’s all part of this security and guilt thing... “ (Louise)

Throughout the time of the research Louise consistently restated her viewpoint, using life experiences to confirm her views and to establish her beliefs more firmly.

However, in both of these extracts there is also a sense of unease and guilt. Louise wants to adopt a cautious approach to life, consistent with her understanding and personality, and yet also feels a pressure to be striving for something more. There is a sense in which Christian discipleship can never be complete. The Christian engages in a constant lifelong goal, with the goal of perfection only attainable after death. The language of learning and development do not allow her to express her desires and experiences of faith and church in a positive way. For women the desire to create continuity and stability is a valid one, often related to concern for family and relationships. Yet it is hard to voice that kind of stability as a valid outcome of processing life and faith in a culture which is dominated by the notion of progress.

## **2.2 Continuity as depth: going deeper**

Val is a very different kind of woman from Louise, and whilst some of her experiences and understanding are clearly shaped by her identity as a woman, other aspects are perhaps related to personality. Val’s external life changed little during the 30 months - she stayed in the same job, house, family and church. When we first met Val had just been elected church warden, and it is the events of church life which

seem to provoke uncertainty in Val's life, as in the story told in Chapters four and six about the conflict in the church. In one of the first interviews Val told me how she came to be involved with the music at church:

"It's definitely stretching me at the moment because we've lost our music group, and we're having to do the music on Sunday mornings. Now I'm not a guitar player. I taught myself to play the guitar. Now the Lord has developed the worship, and He's taken me on, but I feel totally inadequate, and that's caused me to say, well Lord, here I am, but you've got to do the work,,,. One morning I was standing doing the washing up before the children went to school and I just had an urgent, overwhelming need of a guitar. It's most peculiar - it's a sensation I associate with the Lord - 'agh! I've got to have a guitar now, which was ridiculous because I didn't have anything to play it for, but the next morning I went out and bought a guitar, and lo and behold, 4 weeks later I'm lined up for doing the worship, It wasn't my plan.'" Val

In Chapter Six I suggested that one of the ways in which the women aligned themselves with positions of certainty was by using the language of God, which is something in which Val frequently engages. Whilst overtly Val is not avoiding change, she clearly places responsibility for it with God. This attitude does not change throughout the study. Val uses domestic situations such as the one above to illustrate the nature of her relationship with God, as in this story about family holidays told almost two years later to illustrate the way in which her relationship with God is unfolding.

"I'll have to tell you a funny story about holidays again. Because you know last year it was a gift from God, so this year, I've learnt my lesson, we pray a bit about it. Now we're going to Guernsey on this J10 [a club for young people] outreach kind of thing. A lot of money it's going to cost us for one week, so we prayed about that and we felt that was right, so I'm happy with that as far as, but what are we going to do cos that wasn't going to be good enough for our annual holiday as family? We needed the time together as a family, so should we stay on in Guernsey for another week, cos we're there, you know. It costs us a lot of money to get there, so should we stay on? Or would we go back to Cornwall and um, we very much liked Cornwall, so that was a possibility. So what does the Lord want us to do, you know. ... We thought, well Cornwall's not going to be there, so we went ahead and booked this extra week in Guernsey. Another lot of money, quite a bit more than Cornwall, only to find out that two weeks are now available in Cornwall. So I'm thinking, ah Lord, you know, what am I supposed to do with this? You know, um, you know, we'd prayed about it, did we do it wrong or anything. We didn't feel any sense

of I'd done it wrong or anything. Mum and Dad came back from their holiday last night, they'd been in the Canaries, and they sat here, and they said we'll take you to Spain in October, and we'll pay for all the flights and everything. (Oh, that's very wonderful!) Is this you Lord, you know, um, I don't know. And I think that the thing is trying to be faithful for what He wants you to do, and He calls you ever into a deeper relationship. He never asked me to pray about holidays ten years ago, that was never in His scheme of things, you know, He just wanted, every thing He, every aspect of your life in He tends to draw in a bit of the time, and that's where the maturity comes in. And you can say yes or no to that, you can say I'm not going to do that, and um, I think that this year He almost said 'Actually, H., I don't care what you do for your holiday because you trusted me and you've asked me, you know, I don't mind, you know, just go and enjoy yourselves. (that's right) I think He sometime says I don't mind what you do, and it's a trust that's the maturity. Trust in him. And I needed to trust Him in September....' (Val)

Val can clearly identify an outcome that occurs as a result of her experience and thinking. In her terms she can see that her relationship with God has changed in some way, although Hull (1985) would identify this as the kind of learning which deepens knowledge of something that is already in existence. However, I would suggest that Val uses her experiences to confirm and reinforce her existing understanding of God, a position that does give her resources to draw on in times of crisis.

In our final meeting an event had occurred which disturbed both Val's external and emotional worlds more than at any other point during the 30 months of the project.

Val's vicar announced that he would be leaving, and she was truly grief stricken, with the events and emotions dominating our final interview. .

"He's very, very loved, very much loved. The general reaction so far that we have picked up and its only been two days is one of great sadness, real grief and bereavement and yet a sense of , a lot of people have said, I think this is right you know we can grow now, we can grow up now. ...  
(later in the interview) Just trust in God but the way that God has been reassuring and been in it. I didn't think God was in it at all to begin with you know I can see now that there is something nagging at my brain at the time and I didn't want to listen to what God was saying" (Val)

This event pushed Val towards a faith crisis, to the extent that she felt her relationship with God was no longer valid. However she comes to believe that the most significant thing she has learned is to trust God, that she doesn't need to know

the future, but that she just has to trust him. The outcome of thinking through her experiences is a different perspective on the same things.

### **2.3 Continuity as process: a gradual unfolding**

Zoe is also a person whose life is marked by stability and continuity. The major change that happened for her during the course of the study was to return to paid work after an interval of 10 years. At one of our meetings Zoe talked about how she had obtained the job, and then went on to share the excitement she felt now that she had started work.

“And my first week, this is my first, last week was my first proper week, so my first week that I did was an induction week, where I visited the children’s ward and Brooke nursery which is a special needs nursery, and an ordinary nursery school. I went out on a visit with a lady who visits families whose children have got problems. It was just like a variety of things for that week, and then last week it was.. so we’re on our second week. It’s just so interesting, and each week, each fortnight is going to bring something new, cos you only have them for seven sessions” (Zoe)

Zoe’s response to change is very positive. She is enthusiastic about the events in her life, although worried a little about the likely effects on home and family. In our final interview Zoe talked about some of the recent developments in her life, and her plans for the future. She doesn’t think that she has changed, but her confidence has increased and she now participates in a group that explores the meaning of faith. She comments:

“A lot of things coming into focus, things from the past. I mean I was always brought up in church, but I think that now as I’m getting older things are starting to have some sort of, it’s all beginning to mean something. There seems to be a point to it all.” (Zoe)

She now has an interest and desire to go to some kind of Bible study group, contrasting this with her original feelings of inadequacy when she first started to lead a children’s group at church. For Zoe faith is foundational to her life; she is committed to its continuation, and deliberately reflects every day by using a journal.

However she finds it very difficult to express the ways in which her faith has changed, because church and God have been such a constant in her life.

“ I think life’s experiences bring out the faith that you have... I think, yeah, my faith has just grown stronger and deeper over the years.” (Zoe)

In some ways Zoe is dismissive of the learning and development that has taken place in her life, treating it as matter of fact. She would not presume to offer it as learning in any kind of formal sense, and it would be difficult for her to gain any kind of academic credit based on these kind of reflections (Challis, 1998). Zoe’s reflections include a daily diary:

“ I couldn’t be without it [daily reflection]. Years ago when I first started writing my diary it was about how you felt, and things, and it is , it’s a way of praying, and I often (whispers) take a few minutes to do it, and I’ve only written five lines and Mike says, have you written your diary yet!... It’s just five lines, yet sometimes it can take me an hour to write it, because I’m thinking about what I’ve done and what’s happened, and either asking God to help, or pray, or whatever. It’s invaluable.. I couldn’t not write my diary, and I panic if I haven’t written it... but it’s certainly a way of reflection.” (Zoe)

Zoe goes on to describe how absolutely private the diaries are and how they will be burnt unread when she dies.

The place of reflection has already been noted as a key factor in determining learning, yet this kind of reflection is not deemed valid as learning because there is no tangible ‘outcome’. As Zoe talks about her diary she laughs and jokes about something that is clearly central to her values. For Zoe stability is key to her life, and her faith is the core of that stability. Her reflection and subsequent development stem from that, and she integrates new experiences, and painful events into that basic framework. Continuity is a valid learning outcome for Val, Louise and Zoe - their faith is integral to their daily lives, even though they do not have the language to name their experience as learning.

### 3.0 DISEQUILIBRIUM: Rocking the boat

Whilst Val, Zoe and Louise all dealt with the various events in their lives by incorporating them into their existing frameworks, and developing a more secure position with deeper knowledge of the same things, some of the women were more shaken by the events that happened to them.

#### 3.1 Deliberate rocking: a planned career move

Imogen and Sarah are both articulate and thoughtful women, although fulfilling very different roles from each other. Imogen was already ordained priest when the research began. Life was fairly stable for her, but about half way through the study she changed jobs, moving to work in the central organisation of the Church of England. This was more unsettling than she had anticipated:

*SM: So do you feel that the job has already sort of expanded your faith, your life or whatever?*

Ummmm.. probably not. (laughs) It may do, I don't know. I mean bureaucracy is a funny animal. And its, I find quite a lot of things quite difficult to deal with. There's a lot of legalism, and this is how we do things, and I mean it's good in that you're helping people to explore their ministry at the conference. You're talking to them - I love the conferences. That's really the reason why I wanted the job, the chief one .. that, and the travel. But, no, I think the opposite effect, funnily enough is happening. You're so bound up in the structure of the church, making sure things tick, and shuffling paperwork, writing reports. You have to be very sure to keep in touch with what really matters, and I'm finding it difficult.

I'm feeling detached from this parish. I'm obviously still licensed, so I can minister at the weekends, but still operating at St. C's. But because I'm not here during the week I'm feeling a stranger to the parish, and I used to live for a time outside the parish, and I don't like that. There are things going on at the moment, which are not very comfortable, and I'm just wondering what that is about.”  
(Imogen)

Imogen has made a career move for a number of pragmatic reasons to do with income and pensions, but the move has affected her identity in ways that she did not anticipate (White and Cooper, 1992). Although Imogen is in fact relatively close to retirement and did not make the move for career development, she is drawn into the inherent tensions for women in the notion of career (Nicolson, 1996). Career is a

place where identity comes under pressure, and there is a need to restate the ongoing personal self as well as developing a professional and organisational identity (Marshall and Wetherell, 1989; Burke and McKeen, 1994).

For Imogen this is expressed in statements about her own insecurities, and statements that re-iterate her personal identity. A tension also begins to emerge between her expectations of the organisation and her experiences of it. The contrast between her life as a parish priest and that of a commuter working in a bureaucracy is unsettling. The conflict is between the desire to achieve and to conform and the sense of satisfaction that existed previously (McLaren, 1985; Aldridge, 1994).

Much of the work that Imogen undertook as a priest might have been termed 'invisible', in that it was about being in the community, building a network of relationships, rather than a range of visible tasks (Daniels, 1988). Imogen experiences the change as disequilibrium - she is prepared to be changed by the experience, but finds it an uncomfortable place at present, aware that change has both positive and negative aspects (Fisher and Cooper, 1990).

"I've got a feeling that the very fact that I'm fairly inarticulate about all this expresses the fact that there are all sorts of things going on inside, you know, it's a bit of a melee. You talked about one of your interviewees who talks in pictures, and I've got this picture of a big deep pot with a stick in the middle, and it's all being stirred up! And it feels like that" (Imogen)

Imogen is also aware that the transition itself is important, and that it is a place in which faith is re-visited and re-valued. Within the formal discourses of learning there is a suggestion that for learning to have taken place a measurable outcome of changed behaviour or attitude needs to have happened (Claxton, 1984). Imogen has some strategies ready, drawing on her past experiences to take her through this time.

"It's happened before. It's not a new thing, um, and it does happen at times of great trauma as well, and my own feeling about God is that you just wait, and you don't try and push it, you just remain faithful to the disciplines and sooner or later things change. And um, my own ideas about it are as well, that feeling

actually, nice though they are, are not really important when it comes to matters of faith. Faith has to be there whether you've got nice comfortable feelings or not. So you've got to continue holding on in the cold times as well as the warm times. So that's where I am at the moment. Just waiting, knowing that, you've got to defend that concern to people. Well, yes, this is important to me, and it's still important and I'm not going to change on it. And that takes quite a lot of energy - perhaps it makes us re-evaluate all the time what all our values are, and is this really one of my fundamental values or is it just that I did cos I was in that slot. Transition is really a very important thing.. maybe the pilgrimage was a kind of model for the next bit or something..”  
(Imogen)

### **3.2 Shaken by waves: the unexpected crisis**

Ruth was less prepared than Imogen for the effect that transition might have on her faith, but she too was open to being changed by the events that happened. For Ruth this involved a change of role as she became involved in caring for her husband's dying mother. The assumptions that underpinned her faith were challenged during the process of dealing with suffering and death, and also in getting to see a different kind of religious belief in action. I interviewed Ruth three weeks after her mother-in-law died, and one of the most moving times in any of the interviews was Ruth's account of the death, partially told in Chapter One.

“We spent a very harrowing night, Thursday night... And that was probably, very humbling, we were unable, they were unable to settle her down. Their aim is to have somebody pain free and as conscious as they can be, and they'd done everything they could to make her sleep, and they couldn't. And I was sitting praying by her bed, and I was praying for her to die, because I just, you know, I was saying to God, well, why can't she die now? Why has she got to go through this? Just take her now, because she's going to die. I found that, I mean that combined with lack of sleep, made it much harder to deal with in the night than the day, and watching the distress of other people who were with us as well. Looking back on it, I think that she was given the dignity in a way, that she was able to find, she was a very strong person, and that was what she wanted to do, so she was given the dignity of not being faced with the inevitability that she was going to die. Because she didn't admit that to herself. Nobody forced her to die.”  
(Ruth)

In the experience of watching someone die, Ruth was faced with some of the most difficult issues related to the religious tenets of her faith, such as suffering, human

dignity and the power of prayer. Again Ruth does not use the currency of learnings, but talks of 'looking back' and finding meaning for herself in the events of that night. In our final interview she again talked about how her mother-in-law's life, death and beliefs had caused her to rethink her own definitions of Christianity .

"When I first knew his family, I thought, they're not Christians, they don't go to church, they don't acknowledge God at all. And having got to know her more, she would have been appalled to know I thought like that.. now that doesn't stop me wishing that she had a richer life and more explicit knowledge of Jesus, but I don't think I can now say she knew nothing of God, because she trusted in God...

It's not something I would have liked to have run away from.... It was horrible but it made us stronger. Good things came out of it, you know, like getting to know her better, and the experience of people supporting us." (Ruth)

The pattern of learning that emerges for both Ruth and Imogen is one in which unsettling things are allowed to shake their faith. They are both prepared not just to see the same thing differently, but to be different as a result of their experiences. For them incidental learning is a process of learning through living, of reflecting on specific experiences and allowing those experiences to impact their core beliefs (Burnard, 1991).

#### **4.0 UPHEAVAL: SHIFTING GROUND**

The difficulties of understanding how people develop spiritually have been acknowledged in a number of places (Nelson, 1993; Puttick, 1997b, Rees, 1987). The development of faith is related both to external circumstances, emotional and intellectual states, special events, and to the way in which people relate all of these things to their concept of relationship with God (Nelson, 1993). Astley and Francis (1992) develop a framework for faith development based on 7 processes which underpin values and knowledge, and which they term faith. These processes include logic, perspective, moral judgement and social awareness as well as the relationship to local and global society.

Faith is understood by Astley, Nelson and others such as Webster (1992) as a way of knowing, rather than simply a religious belief system. Webster likens the process of faith development to a series of lenses through which an individual views the world, rather than a series of pigeonholes or stages through which a person must pass (Fowler, 1981; National Society, 1991). However, the development model itself can be understood as a problematic metaphor that contains implicit assumptions about hierarchy (Privett, 1994). This adds to the pressures on individuals to improve and successfully to negotiate through various 'levels' of belief in order to fit the definition of mature.

Puttick (1997a) is particularly concerned with women's experience of New Religious Movements (NRMs), which have generally been perceived as oppressing women in heavily authoritarian structures. Whilst Puttick is concerned with the motivation of individuals, and uses Maslow's hierarchy of needs to develop a typology of belonging, she also suggests that there is a hierarchical progression in which more complex thought patterns correspond to higher level needs.

The spectrum that I have proposed here is not a hierarchy, nor a series of stages, but rather a way of describing the responses of a group of women to change. This final group of women are those who might appear to be most obviously engaged in faith development, making transition from one stage or process to another, but as Sally herself said sometimes she feels like an adult, whilst at the same time longing to be taken care of like a child. There are aspects of each woman's story which exemplify the different aspects of the continuum drawn earlier, and in these extracts I am simply focusing on the more demonstrable aspects in specific lives.

#### 4.1 The complete change

Sally, Hannah and Nina all experienced life-changing events during the course of the research, and alongside the external changes, all of them were engaged in a thoughtful, sometimes troubled process of re-negotiating the meaning of their Christian faith. Hannah's story over the thirty months was one of decision-making, as she considered her own future and made plans to move away from all that was familiar to study in a new culture. Hannah decided to undertake a course of study in Israel, and her life changed radically in September 1997 as she left the security of paid employment, and the familiarity of church, friends and culture to immerse herself in a totally different lifestyle. Suddenly she was a foreigner, a student, house-sharing and non-earning - all of this at aged 44.

My last interview with Hannah was in Jerusalem, and I was able to observe the ways in which she experienced the tensions of changing role, changing culture and changing circumstances. She had found it difficult to sustain her own spirituality in a Jewish environment where the familiar liturgies of Easter and Christmas were no longer available to her. She found herself drawing on the resources built up over many years. For Hannah the thinking and preparation she had done prior to going to Israel were all essential resources to sustain her in this new situation. She acknowledged the importance in her life of thinking and of prayer:

“ I often just lie in bed in the morning when I'm awake but tired, and often the thoughts that I have turn to prayer. The best prayer times are lying in bed in the morning, and like often almost by the time I've got up I'm a bit grumpy, because I've been processing what's happened.” (Hannah)

But her uncertainty about life is in marked contrast to the confident assertions she made at our first meeting when she was sure about her life and her role:

“ Maybe it is a gift from God [being good at administration], and I was beginning to think if this is a gift from God then (a) I've just accepted it and realised it, and (b), I should be using it for the church. Because we've all got

gifts in the church, and if God has given me the gift of administration then I need to use that, same with teachers and all the rest of it.” (Hannah 1995)

In Jerusalem, Hannah was less confident about the future, yet also secure enough in her self and her faith to live with uncertainty. This confidence could be deemed a learning outcome from the reflection in which she so clearly engages.

*“SM: Where do you see the future going now?”*

I have no idea. I haven’t a clue. I know that I’m meant to be in church this summer, and I can’t even think what I’m supposed to be doing there.... I’m not going to be doing anything in the church, I’m not going to be doing the administration, I’m not going to be doing the youth, but I haven’t got a job to do, as such, as yet. But I just feel that the Lord wants me back in church.” (Hannah, 1998)

As I listen and observe Hannah, and look back over the thirty months of our acquaintance I can see and hear differences in the way in which she understands her faith. It will be interesting to meet with Hannah in another six months to see how the experience of living in Israel has been assimilated into her life and thinking, and how it changes the way in which she contributes to her community. These kind of learning outcomes are not measurable, nor are they the currency of human capital, yet learning has taken place outside of the province of adult educators (Thorpe, 1992)

#### **4.2 Dislocation: self and geography**

Sally is also able to identify differences in the way she understands things, illustrating these changes with a variety of anecdotes. Sally’s husband changed job, which instigated a family move some 150 miles north to a totally unfamiliar location. Sally had been restless for a while before this, wondering about house moves or job changes, and this uncertainty spilled over into a process of re-thinking her own faith. Sally’s role had also changed as she had become a published author, and taken on increased responsibility in the church, all of which seemed to change people’s expectations of her and of herself. She told this story to illustrate the way in which

her understanding of how God might guide decisions has changed:

“Well - they’d been praying you see for somebody, for her to leave the village, she’d been there about 20 years and had this new-agey shop, and it’d been quite difficult really, so they were very pleased that she was going. So we thought maybe we’re the answers to these people’s prayers, buying this house. So we went along to see this house all sort of um, spiritually keyed up if you like and it was awful. It was a total disappointment: there was no way we could possibly have made it into a home.

I don’t know, the story of my life the last three months seems to have been listening to God, and listening for God and getting the wrong end of the stick (laughter) over and over again! I mean that was just a kind of tiny example because lots of little things seemed to tie into that and I think, the way that I used to read God would have meant, would have, the ultimate conclusion would have been that that was the right house, and we would have bought it, but it didn’t seem to work out that way” (Sally)

Sally went on to say that for her the story of her faith, was not one of growth but rather of how her faith had weakened and been characterised more and more by doubt. Implicitly, Sally understands spiritual growth in terms of certainty and improvement, shaped by a formal understanding of learning in which the aim is always to gain more knowledge. The last time that I met with Sally we spent several hours talking together about all the changes in her life, and how unsettling she had found the move and the loss of the various roles in her life. She continues to question her faith, and to make attempts to find a level of certainty again. She refers back to a comment made in our second meeting when she talked about being sat in an empty bath as a metaphor for her realisation that faith was no longer a security in her life.

“I am a different person spiritually now than I was from that experience. It still, it still, continued to affect me and change me and, you know, and I still have periods of real doubt. I think when I got here, I realised that I had been serving, like beyond the capacity of what I was, actually of where I was, actually at as a person. So I was feeling that I was giving out more than I actually had inside me. (yeah) So that created a real vacuum and I couldn’t cope with that. I found that really hard and I think that I was rescued from (there)at just the right moment. So I’ve been trying to say well, I want to fill that vacuum and I want to know what I believe and why I believe it and what. I haven’t really been progressing lately, I’ve been sticking my head in the sand” (Sally)

Faith development for Sally is clearly not a neat linear process, but instead is

informed by a clear sense of struggle as she re-thinks her belief system. Some of the struggle is to do with her identity as a woman and her sense of loss as she finds various roles disappearing at different times. The struggle also comes from trying to eliminate doubt from her life, because of her basic understanding that doubt is wrong. And yet in other ways she sees that she has a much more realistic way of looking at life, as she tells in the story about buying houses.

#### **4.3 Emotional and spiritual turmoil**

Nina's story began in our first interview when she was struggling to align her personal faith with a decision made by the Church of England that she would not be recommended for ordination training. For much of the next two years this struggle has continued, alongside various other situations that arose in the church. All of these contributed towards Nina's view that the struggle is intrinsically connected with her acceptability as a woman in the church.

“But I really, I really feel, I really feel that the Church of England can't cope with me as the woman that I am. It's just sad. They want me to be somebody else that I'm not. And I can't do that. If I was going to lie and pretend to be somebody different, I might be more acceptable. But I just can't do that. I've got to be me. I'm sure God wants me to be me.” (Nina)

On one occasion Nina reflected on the difference women priests, and one day women bishops, might make to the way that the Church understands ministry. She has been visiting a cathedral and reflects on the stone effigies she sees there.

“And I was wandering round the cathedral and I thought .. I have problems with effigies, of bishops in Cathedrals, because you get all these terribly kind of remote, authoritarian stone figures lying there in death, clasping their crooks or their mitres or their ears. And I just look at them and I think well, I hope somebody loved them, you know, because they seem so inhuman somehow and then I think of Bishop Penny, and think well, what will they do with the women. You can't imagine stone effigies of the women. You know, its going to change the whole structure of the church for the better, and then I think perhaps you can start seeing a more feminine side to God .. “ (Nina)

This small incident out of daily life drew together a number of the themes in Nina's life. It expresses her anger at the authoritarian male-ness of the church and her hope that women will somehow bring a difference into the way in which faith is communicated and understood. The spiritual and emotional turmoil in Nina's life eventually led to some external changes. At our last meeting Nina had made a successful move to a new job, and following a short time in the Catholic Church where she found acceptance and community, she has also begun to explore a new life in a different Anglican church. Claxton (1984) suggested that learning was the interaction between action, thought and feeling, resulting in a change as a consequence of being touched by life in some way. Nina engages with thinking and feeling in her responses to the situations she finds herself in. Although the external changes in her life were no different from those experienced by Zoe or Louise or Imogen, the internal struggle for faith was much more of an upheaval in her life. It is perhaps easier to see learning outcomes in the lives of Nina, Sally and Hannah, where external changes have impacted significantly on their outlook (Blaxter and Tight, 1995). Nevertheless, they too find it difficult to express the changes in their lives in the language of learning, preferring instead to talk of increased understanding or tolerance or wisdom.

## **CONCLUSION**

The key questions that I raised about these slice of life stories were concerned with the extent to which the patterns emerging in women's lives are evidence of learning that has taken place. Each of the women in the study is an individual person, with individual needs shaped by a variety of factors. However, there are patterns emerging in these stories which might suggest that the tension and struggle which is so often apparent might be shaped by gender factors.

The language of faith that is available to the women does not easily allow them to speak of their experiences in terms that present them positively and as acceptable. The outcomes of their experiences are presented in terms of doubt that needs to be overcome, or uncertainty that needs to be resolved. The one woman (Nina) who was strongly aware of gender as a dimension in her religious faith experienced it as conflict and as a difficulty.

Points of transition are often identified as formal and distinctive moments connected with the linear development towards adulthood and marked by implicit or explicit ceremony (Irwin, 1995). They can also be moments that act as catalysts towards educational participation (Blaxter and Tight, 1995). The women in this study are also engaged in transitions and rarely is there a space to articulate these transitions as valid within the faith community to which they belong. Instead their development is to be forged in isolation and then re-interpreted into the language of the church (Bellous, 1995). The sense of learning is limited, characterised by guilt, doubt and struggle - and yet it is clear that some kind of change is taking place. In the next chapter I will examine an alternative vocabulary which will attempt to give voice and form to the kind of learning of faith that is taking place in women's lives.

## CONCLUSION

### A VOCABULARY FOR WOMEN'S LEARNING?

This research has been concerned throughout to hear women's voices and to value women's learning experiences within the theories and practices of lifelong learning, particularly within the context of personal religious belief. It has sought to question the place of women's incidental learning in daily life within the dominant discourses of faith and learning. In the previous four chapters there have been many interwoven fragments and stories from a group of women, stories that are both positive and negative. It is in the contradictions between such opposites that the heart of this thesis is found.

The story that has unfolded is one of tension, inwardly felt, and conflict, outwardly experienced, resulting in a story of faith which is formed in a process of struggle. In this final chapter the central questions will be re-visited and examined again in the light of the stories of these women. Is the experience of struggle connected to their particular experiences as women? In other words, is it part of the epistemological framework developed in Chapter Two?

As I consider the patterns that emerge in the women's lives I will consider to what extent these patterns are shaped by gender; how they might be shaped by the discourse of formal education and learning, and finally how both these questions are themselves shaped by the presence of Christian belief. Finally, I will propose an alternative vocabulary for women's incidental learning, using the model developed in Chapter Three to show how learning has indeed taken place in these women's lives, but who are often without the means of expression that would validate it as such.

## 1.0 IS THE STRUGGLE A GENDER ISSUE?

In Chapter Two I outlined a feminist epistemology which was characterised by oppression, silence and connectedness. Whilst these three characteristics are identified here as integral to the way in which women know or make sense of the world, they are also characteristic of women's experiences in the social world (Abbot and Wallace, 1997; Wilson, 1995). The sense of displacement and inferiority that women feel is well documented through early childhood, girlhood, marriage, family, work and leisure (Davies, 1989; Irwin, 1995; Acker, 1994; Itzin, 1995; Green et al, 1990; Paechter and Head, 1996). The same experiences have also been widely explored in the area of theology and religious studies (Hull, 1987; Isherwood, 1996; Gill, 1994; Chopp, 1997), concluding that religious belief is also potentially negative for women. However, many women experience religious faith as positive in their lives, giving them purpose, identity and sometimes status (Puttick, 1997a; Mananzan, 1994).

Women in this study were no different - most of them to some degree or other are desirous and content to remain in the structures of faith and church, and to maintain the images and structures that reflect a male and female hierarchy. Hannah decided to discuss the notion of the femininity of God with her youth group. She told me strongly how she feels about the situation:

"I think as well I wouldn't see God as a mother because I still think of Him as male, a male role, and therefore I can't. I mean I was just talking to my kids [at the youth group] last week about it, how the Church of Scotland or someone is rewriting their hymn books or planning to, and changing a lot of contexts to the Mother-earth, or Createss, changing titles to female and that. And I think that's wrong, that's wrong. And we were talking to the kids about it.. how would you describe God, and they were saying - what about these people who say God could be a woman, and they all scoffed, and said, oh for goodness sake, that's rubbish. And I said, well why? And they said cos it talks about He; God is He, Jesus is He. And I said can you think of anywhere in the Bible where it says that? So I got them to turn to Colossians, the part where it

says Jesus is the image of the invisible God... Jesus was a male, we know He was a male, so what does that tell us about God?" (Hannah)

But whilst Hannah is adamant about the masculinity of God and of the church structure, she still experiences her faith as a struggle, as do the other women in the study. This brings back the question as to whether the experience of learning faith can find a place within the feminist epistemological position outlined in this thesis, even though the women themselves would not align themselves at all as feminists. I suggest that the answer can only be yes. The characteristics of a feminist epistemology are evident in the women's stories, although only acknowledged exceptionally. The data shows the problems that the language of faith gives to women, dominated as it is by the maleness Hannah has described, and also by the values which underpin the structures and practices of the Church. The context in which they learn faith can be seen to be oppressive, although expressed in language of frustration and conflict by the majority of the women. The exception would be Nina whose experience of rejection has led her to a much more explicit awareness of gender dimensions in the Church of England. Thirdly, the women all experience their faith within a web of relationships spanning family, friends and colleagues, but they can also be dismissive of the significance of these relationships, perceiving individualism and autonomy as preferable.

The key tensions that appear in the women's lives can also be seen as the product of a gendered ideology. A number of binary opposites were outlined in Chapters Two and Three, such as body against spirit or silence against gossip. These polarities often represent the extreme points of a hierarchy. There are three areas of dichotomy or contradiction that particularly emerge as the women in this study negotiate the context and values of their faith.

MALE	FEMALE	Questions of belonging, identity and belief
CHURCH	NETWORK	
CERTAINTY	DOUBT	
LEARNING	EXPERIENCE	

I suggest that the constructs on the left are shaped by male ideologies, and are those that are deemed to be desirable and dominant. Those on the right are seen as less valid, and are those with which many women are more familiar. Faith is experienced as struggle as the women try to align and re-interpret their experiences with the acceptable behaviours of a male ideology. It may also be the case that men experience similar struggle as they attempt to reconcile an inner spiritual life with the demands of a society focused on tangible, performance-related activities. This research could provide the basis for further explorations into the extent to which the gendered dimensions of Church life impacts men and women.

### 1.1 Church organisation or network

Chapter Four was largely concerned with stories of belonging, looking at the ways in which the women felt, understood and spoke about their experiences of organisational life. This was characterised by an emerging tension between the expectations they felt that the institution made of them, and the realities of their own lives. In contrast, Chapter Five outlined a wide range of relationships that influence and sustain the women in their lives, a kind of network in which each person is valued. Both the organisation, whether church or workplace, and the network are essential for the women in answering the questions about identity, belonging and beliefs. Perhaps this was most strongly expressed by Val when she tried to explain how difficult it is for her to separate her identity from the church.

“I can’t actually see beyond where we are at the moment because I feel that I’m in the place where God wants me to be right now, which is probably the first time. When I became church warden it was as if I’d come home, and as if all that had been going on had been leading up to putting me in this hole - shaping me. .. It’s a worry that I have that I am consumed by it... and yet, a lot of stuff I read fits in, about being totally devoted and committed. It’s in my thoughts, it’s just to the fore of my mind. It doesn’t take much to bring it back” (Val)

Val goes on to say that because she has no other paid work, then her role in church is who she is; it embraces her self, her beliefs and her belonging to the extent that in one interview she said “I am church”. However, although Val embraces so absolutely the values of the church, her story is also told using the language of struggle, perhaps more strongly than anyone else. She often uses the word ‘struggle’, along with phrases such as ‘up in arms’, ‘trail of destruction’, ‘huge blow-up’, and talks about anger frequently. It is almost as if in denying that there is any potential contradiction between her own identity and that which the church demands, Val ends up feeling the tension even more strongly.

Sally articulated this tension as a kind of fear as she expressed her need to find a place where she could maintain her own identity

“We were so up to the eyeballs in church work anyway part of me said blow it, if I’m going to live in the parish as well, you know k, cos I know I’ll just be, you know , life’ll be taken over by church. and it does feel like a bit of an escape, a bit of a retreat just to come out here, playground mums aren’t church mums. I don’t live, work, breathe in the parish and in the people that I see in church on Sundays.” (Sally)

The nature of the dilemma is in the desire to conform to the expectations of the Church that demands total commitment and the need for a life that is made up of non-demanding relationships. The structures and practices of the Church are modelled on the same foundations as those seen in many other organisations and institutions, where organisational life is of paramount importance. A feminist

analysis of work organisations and women's career development has shown how space is denied for other aspects of life within the workplace( Apter, 1993; Blundell, 1992). The conflict and guilt that many women then feel between the workplace and the home is echoed in the church as the women feel pressured to allow church to absorb their whole lives. However, there are men in the church who feel a similar pressure as the church demands that they are both good members and exemplary fathers and husbands (McCloughry, 1992). This does not alter the gendered dimension of the tension that women feel, but rather emphasises the patriarchal foundations of the church.

### **1.2 Religious certainty or doubt**

The second theme of tension that I have identified is a product of the tension between hierarchical truth and relative truth. Modernist thinking, developed from the Enlightenment onwards, produced an emphasis on rational, objective thinking which in turn would lead to objective, rational truth (Lyon, 1994). Whilst dis-satisfaction with this idea is by no means the exclusive province of feminists, feminist thinkers have been in the vanguard of exploring alternative ways of understanding truth (Tuana and Tong, 1995). Explorations around alternative ways of arriving at truth have centralised in the various debates about post-modernism, which itself raises problems for Christian thinkers (Lyon, 1994). Christianity is centred on claims of absolute truth and as Chapter Six suggested this stance is the one to which the women aspire. The language of God is the language of certainty, and doubt is a problem to be eliminated rather than an experience to be savoured. Louise was finding her job more demanding than she anticipated, and talked about how driving to work had become a time for prayer.

“I mean I pray. Sort of talk to God as I’m driving along, turn the radio off, and talk to Him then. I suppose I feel he’s there and listening because of

what's happening, like with the job, and so on. That's(the job) such a major part of my life at the moment, although I don't want it to be, It was meant to fit in with the kids, but, like everything, eventually it takes over. So as I'm driving up to Stevenage usually I'm saying is this right, and He's sending back answers to prayer, like, yk, stick it out because there might be something better next year something different, something more. So I said, because I get feedback if you like, I'm feeling He's there, and maybe He's listening to me. I'm afraid that I don't think enough about Him, growing in that sense.. I need to be better at that.. It's gone a bit, I don't have a daily quiet time or that.." (Louise)

Louise feels that the kind of informal, experiential pursuit of relationship with God is less than adequate, and berates herself for her lack of formal thought. At other times the tension between doubt and certainty is connected to a sense of identity and self-worth, particularly at moments of significance.

Hannah downplays her own self at a time when she felt that maybe God had said something very important to her:

"I'd probably say almost like lights flashing off everywhere, but if I said that I'd probably be recognising that's what happened and God is really speaking, but because I'm still unsure of how much of me is really in it, I'd, you know what I mean, I'd be a bit reluctant to ...," (Hannah)

The tension that Hannah expresses is between the certainty of knowing that God has spoken, and the fear that somehow too much of her own hopes and desires are still involved in the process. Again, whilst this pattern may not exclusively be gender-related, it is possible to see that one of the reasons for women's sense of guilt and inadequacy about their faith is that they are continually striving to conform to a theology and religion which are based on male ways of knowing (Belenky, 1986; Magolda, 1992). Ruth shared some thoughts about how she thinks the church evaluates people:

"If you asked a church for its core members they would all be doing people, they would be the most faithful. It wouldn't be the wife of a non-Christian who has spent ten years balancing his needs and her children's needs to go to Sunday school and her needs to go to a worship group. That would not be

somebody that the church would have put on its core list because she would have not been able to make the commitment that other people can make.. “  
(Ruth)

The tension that the women experience between organised church and their own network of relationships, together with the struggle they sense as they attempt to eliminate or justify doubt in their beliefs, both relate to the third tension which is at the centre of this thesis.

## **1.2 Learning or experience counts**

In Chapter Three the concept of informal and incidental learning was discussed, and it was suggested that these concepts are themselves by-products of a formal education discourse. All forms, theories and pedagogies of learning have to justify themselves in relation to the dominant ideologies of learning, which themselves are formed from patriarchal constructs based on male knowledge systems. This means that the debates around the place of experience in relation to learning inevitably come back the question of which experience will count (Challis, 1998; Stuart 1995; Stuart and Thomson, 1995). Stuart acknowledges that the discourse of education is still focused on learning in institutions as the only valid form of learning, and suggests that schemes that validate experience are simply concerned with making people ‘fit’. However, I would stretch Stuart’s argument further and suggest that the discourse of learning is still focused on formal learning as the only valid form. It is not simply a matter of deciding which experiences will ‘fit’ but rather a problem with the language of learning itself. The language of experience and the language of learning are in tension with one another.

I have already suggested that the reasons why incidental or experiential learning are contested concepts may be gender related. The language of experience is the one which is used primarily by women in the course of their everyday lives, whilst the

language of learning is perceived as belonging to a different world (Luttrell, 1997). Both Luttrell and Stuart suggest that notions of education and intelligence are central to identity, with words such as stupid, dumb, brain box and clever clogs being used as descriptors. I would go on to suggest that the linguistic currency of learning is highly gendered to exclude women's experience and hence confirm them as inferior. The language of self-doubt used by both Hannah and Louise previously is also language that implies inferiority.

When the discourse of learning is used alongside the discourse of faith it compounds the problems for women in these situations. Both discourses have little room for 'everyday' experience, concentrating instead on finding ways of making experience relevant within the existing frameworks. In church terms this becomes a range of appropriate activities, geared towards demonstrating the effectiveness of the organisation and the validity of the belief system. Val talked about the Mums and Toddlers group and the need for people to lead.

"I mean we struggle, we've got two Mums and tots groups at the moment, and there is nobody, we're short of leaders and there is nobody to take over the leadership of one of those groups. And um, we feel they need to be a Christian. I mean, people are willing to come on the committee from the Mums who come to the group, but we feel that it needs to be the Christians who run that, because of the Christian influence, and you can pray for people and (yeah) all that sort of thing. And there's no.. it isn't a case of nobody's willing, I mean there are some people who aren't willing, but if you look at the pool, the pool is a puddle of people to choose from, because there's nobody available. And the other thing that I see happening, particularly with women, is if they go out to work, they then start to drop. They're not so regular on a Sunday, and they're not so regular at different things, and actually their own spiritual life starts to decline. And I've seen that so many times, and I think that's really sad." (Val)

The experience of leading the Mums and toddlers group will only 'count' if it is specifically Christian. This is akin to the processes involved in attempting to credit prior learning through experience, where the experience has to be translated into the

appropriate terminology so its acceptability can be assessed. Likewise with Christian experience - simply meeting with a few people for coffee would not be a sufficiently valid experience.

Luttrell's (1997) distinction between 'common-sense' and 'school knowledge' suggested that common-sense is the knowledge which grows out of life experience, and is seen as belonging to 'ordinary' or average people, as set against professional or educated groups. Whilst this distinction is helpful, and develops the idea of gendered ways of knowing further, there are differences when it is applied to the learning of faith. Of the women in my study, five had been educated to post-graduate level, but they did not seem to carry this professional learning across into their religious life. As far as Christianity is concerned, the distinction between 'life experiences' and 'learning' can be drawn again.

The important distinction in spiritual growth is having the right knowledge and understanding, being able to communicate the truth within an accepted discourse of faith and learning. Ruth was faced with this dilemma when she wondered whether it was appropriate to share with the youth group her experiences of caring for her dying mother-in-law.

"And my work with the Cypher group, the youth group, and somehow I just basically .. literally hoping that it would mean something but, not finding it easy. I think a lot of my experiences, I was going through, which normally I would share quite happily with them all, but it wasn't that appropriate to. I think there was a danger really that when you lead a youth group when you are going through bad times.. And you think that you are teaching them something important, but actually it's not appropriate. They're still young people. It's not meant to interrupt how they deal with their lives, having to deal with a terminal illness or dying or whatever!" (laughs slightly) (Ruth)

Ruth makes a judgement that her experiences are not appropriate learning for young people who are exploring the meaning of the Christian faith, implying that there are types of experience that might be more appropriate for learning. Again, this echoes

the debates about experiential learning, and the problems of deciding which kind of experiences might count as learning.

In Chapter Three I suggested that there were certain characteristics which identified whether a particular experience might qualify as valid learning. These hallmarks included motivation, reflection, and to a lesser extent the presence of some kind of external facilitator. The means of describing these factors is limited to the accepted vocabulary of learning. Women learning faith do not find this an appropriate vocabulary to describe their lives. Instead they find themselves caught in a struggle to fit themselves into the dominant discourse(s). However, as I have already suggested in Chapters Five and Six, these characteristics do indeed feature in the women's anecdotes of their lives. I want to explore more fully the alternative vocabulary suggested in Chapter Three, which would allow the women's stories of faith to be heard.

## **2.0 A VOCABULARY FOR LEARNING FAITH**

### **2.1 Motivation or commitment**

At the centre of the model for learning that was proposed in Chapter Three is the concept of motivation. Motivation has been identified as perhaps the most significant factor in determining whether any particular experience might qualify as learning. Within the discourses of formal learning the concept of motivation is firmly linked to the goal of improvement via institutional education (Cox and Pascall, 1994). In spite of rhetoric about recognising the validity of learning outside of the organisation, any activity taking place outside of formal educational establishments can only be valid if it is motivated by an intent to participate in the formal system. Stories about adults who explore learning in unconventional ways end with their success in acquiring recognised educational credentials (Pye, 1991).

A second aspect of motivation is that there needs to be an individual decision to participate. There does not seem to be any place for community motivation towards learning, but only a personal decision to work towards self-development (Clark, 1991; Jansen and Wildemeersch, 1998). Whilst an organisation, such as employer, might enforce attendance on some kind of training course, this would only qualify as extrinsic motivation. For a person to fully interact with the learning experience she would need intrinsic motivation, a desire to learn for her own reasons (Brookfield, 1986; Harrison, 1997).

The vocabulary of motivation is not readily available to those whose learning is in the area of values or beliefs. It is also not easily applied to the development of common sense or wisdom - a person does not decide one day to acquire common sense. By its very nature it is a gradual accumulation of information gleaned from experience. However, there is a sense in which people are motivated to continue with the gathering of wisdom or common sense, and a sense in which they make a decision to persevere even in the face of difficulties. I suggest that in the domain of incidental learning that the vocabulary of motivation is replaced by the vocabulary of commitment. This concept is used by Garrison (1997) but with a specific application to task continuation.

In this study this is seen in the commitment that the women show to both their personal beliefs and to the organisation of the church. In Chapter Four there were a number of situations in which the women chose to carry on with their church involvement in the face of stress and tension. The notion of commitment instead of motivation would explain why people do indeed benefit from involvement in a wide range of voluntary activities and causes (Moore, 1985). It is clearly observed that those who join voluntary organisations do not do so with any intention to learn or for

self-development (Percy, 1988; Sargant, 1988; Woodman, 1991). However, the outcomes of voluntary participation are often a range of skills and increased confidence (Daniels, 1988; Gold, 1971). What characterises involvement in a voluntary organisation and activity is often commitment to a set of core values (Handy, 1988; Stalker, 1993). The vocabulary of commitment then replaces the vocabulary of motivation, and the foundation is in place for learning to take place. The sense of commitment to an ideology has greater potential for generating a level of group motivation, a factor deemed as desirable in management and group learning, but which is difficult to foster (Gibbs, 1994). The women in this study show commitment on two levels - a personal commitment to the Christian faith and a group commitment to the Church. However, women experience both believing and belonging as tension. Strong commitment also become a means of manipulation for those with power. This has certainly been the case at different point in the history of the Church of England, where the loyalty of women contributed to decisions about their need for more authority and power in a negative way (Gill, 1994; Furlong, 1991).

Conversely, as women began to think about their experiences, there began to emerge a 'common struggle against their manifold oppression' (Mananzan, 1994, p347; O'Neill, 1990). Sometimes this had led to collective action, including an act of leaving the organisation (Ward and Wild, 1995). For others it involves remaining committed to the cause, and trusting, like Imogen, in God and process for situations to change. Commitment, then is a foundation present in women's lives and one that equates to the presence of motivation in a traditional learning model.

## **2.2 Reflection or processing**

The second element that is deemed to be necessary to transform an event into a learning experience is the activity of reflection. Within the current vocabulary of learning 'reflection' is becoming both more widely used and more widely debated. In the context of improving practice it is advocated as technique for improving performance, rather than a learning process in itself (Lucas, 1996; Rolfe and Jasper, 1993). In this context reflection is understood as a process of learning from experience, of drawing on past models and understanding in order to act in the present moment (Marsick and Watkins, 1990).

This understanding of reflection traces its heritage back to Dewey (1916) who identifies reflection with thinking and discernment in the context of an experience that requires action or decision. He also suggests that reflection is the acceptance of responsibility for future consequences resulting from present decisions. More recent application of the reflective idea suggests that it is essential to personal growth and fulfilment (Hammond and Collins, 1991).

The implication in both of these approaches is that reflection is not a usual activity for people, but rather one that needs to be fostered and encouraged. This gives reflection status as a privileged learning activity within the discourse(s) of learning, whether formal, informal or incidental (Mezirow, 1997; Boud et al, 1996; Edwards, 1997). The individual learner can cultivate a sense of detachment and hence name the processes in which she is engaged (Griffin, 1987). This creates a sense that reflection is distinctly different from everyday 'pondering'.

Reflection is clearly linked to the notion of experience itself, as it is reflection which will access the learning potential within any given event (Fraser, 1995). However, as Fraser herself goes on to say all experiences are not equally valid, and reflection is generally concerned with outcomes, that is with doing rather than being. When this

is imposed into a Christian context this interpretation of reflection begins to look problematic. As the stories of the women have shown, the experiences in which they are engaged rarely contain the need for a deliberate decision about future action. The key question for the Christian woman is how can I be more effective, a question which is re-interpreted in the formal learning paradigm as ‘what should I be doing?’ This returns to the sense of tension and struggle at the heart of this thesis.

Nevertheless, throughout the various stories, both those heard in this thesis and those left on the cutting-room floor, is a clear reflective theme. The language is not the language of formal reflection, but rather constituted in moments of shared conversation or in self-questioning (Boden, 1994). The techniques of reflection are not taught, instead they are found in the daily habits of prayer, worship and talking to fellow believers (Cadrin, 1997). Oduyoye (1994) writes about how African women find religion empowering in their lives, using prayer and praise ‘to make affirmations of God for which we have no vocabulary’ (p368). Other habits of reflection used by the women in the study included the practice of diary or journal keeping, and for one or two of them more creative activities such as poetry or painting helped in the reflective process. These are all techniques which Hammond (1991) and others suggest need to be taught to individuals in order to help them learn.

Interestingly, the use of reflection is suggested as important in developing wisdom, which links to Luttrell’s division between ‘common-sense’ and ‘school-knowledge’. Thinking about and talking over are important factors for women exploring their spirituality whether as individuals or in a group setting (Davie, 1995).

The problem with reflection as part of the language of learning is that it has been constructed to be part of the detached, objective learning process that belongs to the patriarchal hierarchical ideology discussed earlier (Michelson, 1996). Michelson

argues that the use of reflection as a process for producing knowledge reproduces hierarchies of power and knowledge. By placing reflection within the discourse(s) of learning it is detached and disembodied from the event itself. However, for the women in this study, reflection is not a detached activity. Rather activities such as prayer and ‘wondering’ are integral to the moment, and are fundamental to the experience itself. There are two alternative phrases that I would substitute for reflection in the process of learning faith. The first is that of ‘mulling’, the second is ‘processing’.

‘Mulling’ is a domestic metaphor, referring to a cooking process in which something is simmered for a period of time, allowing flavours to mingle and develop. It also means to cogitate or turn over in the mind, which is a good descriptor of the processes taking place as the women recount various incidents. Although it is not a term that the women used during the study, it is a good metaphor for reflection, and one that could be explored further.

Processing is a word that the women sometimes use themselves to describe their thoughts. It also acts as a metaphor for the kind of integrated thinking that is happening. It has a number of meanings. Processing is of course also a domestic metaphor, referring to a variety of cooking techniques in which something is changed from one thing to another, usually over a period of time or by a specific action. It is also used to describe a sequence of events during which some kind of change is effected or activity created. There are also other terms that the women use as they talk about events and thoughts, such as ‘wondering’ or ‘feeling’. However, because ‘processing’ emerges from their own language and vocabulary I think it is an important word to use in the context of faith development - a concept which itself needs to be re-thought.

### **2.3 Development or exploration**

The previous two concepts, commitment and mulling, both find a clear place in the processes of incidental learning of faith. Within the current ideology of learning there is a focus and concern with the goal of any learning process, the phase of the learning model known as outcomes. In terms of Christian faith the outcome is presented largely in the language of development, rather than the language of learning, so that the desirable outcome is not presented as series of learning goals but rather a development of self and faith. Policies and programmes are then constructed within this framework, echoing the pre-occupation of secular education and training. The pre-occupation with education as improvement or progress begins with childhood education, itself heavily influenced by stage developmentalists such as Piaget (Holt, 1982, Wood, 1988; Davis, 1991). This influence continues into adult education, where the pre-occupation with measurable skill and cognitive outcomes continues (Waldron, 1991; Thomas, 1991, Smith, 1992; Parsons, 1993). Training and development then become used as one term in describing workplace schemes, with an emphasis on enhancing skill, knowledge or expertise (Patrick, 1992; Ljosa, 1992). The same emphasis is also apparent for women entering training, education or development programmes - unless there is a sense of progress or improvement then learning is not taking place.

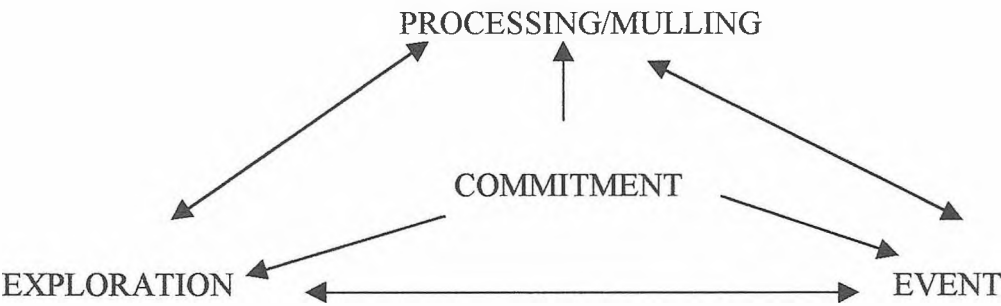
As the women in the study discussed their spiritual life the need to demonstrate some kind of upward movement was often apparent, reflecting the fact that progress is embodied in the language and tradition of Christianity (Thornton, 1984). The use of the phrase development, already laden with meaning from a discourse of education,

reinforces the fact that the church's concern with education is inextricably bound up with progress, and perhaps success (Ellis, 1990). Development, like the terms education and more recently learning, is used to describe both a process and a goal (Abercrombie, 1988; Hamm, 1989; Sachs, 1992). It contains within it an inherent sense of hierarchy, of movement from lower towards higher, or worse to better. The outcomes visible in the lives of the women in this study are not always in terms of improvement. They are sometimes evidenced in confirming the views that they already hold, or in becoming open to the possibilities of asking questions. If the evidence of learning is based solely on a notion of changed or improved understanding (Jarvis, 1994), then these women cannot be said to be engaged in faith development.

Yet the tension between the sense that faith itself is an on-going event in their lives, and their inability to express this as a learning outcome is evident, particularly in Chapter Seven. When asked what they had learned over the course of the study, the women often hesitated and used phrases such as 'not learned as such' or 'I think I'm different, but I don't know really', suggesting an unease at placing their faith into a discourse of learning. However, in terms of a learning model the women have clearly shown commitment, mulled over events, and their lives evidence an outcome. There are some other terms used to talk about faith over the course of human lives, one of which is faith formation instead of faith development. Formation is less suggestive of improvement and of hierarchies, although as a metaphor it carries tones of an outside influence moulding and shaping. An alternative concept is that of exploration, conveying a sense of movement and discovery, yet also capable of implying depth as well as distance. Explorations go down into caves, as well as traversing over terrain. Exploration is also a team endeavour as well as

individualistic, a concept which can be important for women as they pursue their understanding of faith within an inter-connected set of relationships (Edwards, 1995).

The model of learning proposed in Chapter Three can now be shown using only this different vocabulary.



The model of learning in Chapter Three showed the terminology employed within the boundaries of adult education and adult learning. These terms - reflection, motivation, experience and outcomes - have meanings that make them difficult to apply to the kind of learning engaged in by the women in this study as they learn faith. This re-construction of the model places the new vocabulary - processing, commitment, event and exploration - into the same structure.

**3.0 WOMEN LEARNING FAITH in a lifelong learning context**

The discourses that shape the theories and practices of lifelong learning are embedded within a discourse of learning that is shaped by a hierarchical and patriarchal understanding of knowledge acquisition. Lifelong learning as both rhetoric and reality is concerned primarily with economic and social outcomes, albeit disguised within a high-minded discourse of the development of human potential

(Longworth, 1996). Just as the vocabulary of the processes of learning are not able to contain women's experiences of faith, likewise the discourse of lifelong learning itself does not easily allow for spiritual experiences.

Knowledge and its acquisition play a significant role in perpetuating forms of patriarchal power, and hence women's oppression (Kennedy et al, 1993). The discourse of learning within the religious community is involved in the same task. The tension and struggle that have threaded through the stories told in this research stem from the experience of attempting to fit everyday life into the dominant male religious and educational order (Rapoport, 1998). Women need a relationship with knowledge, including their own spiritual knowledge, which is not simply part of an ideology of personal and economic fulfilment, but which is also part of a holistic and interconnected exploration of their own selves (Thompson, 1997).

Within this context I would suggest that the term lifelong be replaced with 'whole-life' suggesting an integrated, holistic approach to learning which is not of linear construct or goal oriented. Within such a context women could begin to discover the ways in which their voices can be heard, and develop their own language with which to continue their faith explorations. Learning of faith would then become a weaving together of the events of everyday life, and as women begin to discover their own inner authority then it becomes possible to speak of their own knowledge into the learning society dialogue (Morgan, 1996).

#### **4.0 WHERE NEXT?**

Whilst this research has focused on exploring the learning of Christian religious faith the issues it raises about the dominant ideologies of learning are applicable to a wide range of non-traditional forms of learning. The learning that continues to take place in voluntary, religious and political organisations is often pushed to the margins

within the current pre-occupation with economics and productivity. Likewise the wisdom and common-sense that is held within many communities who do not have access to formal learning structures goes largely ignored. Further research is needed to develop and explore the validity of the alternative vocabulary of learning which I have begun to develop. The concerns in this research have grown out of the experiences of a group of Christian women. Further research could consider whether the experience of struggle in faith exploration is a particular concern for white Christian women, or whether women of other faiths experience the same tensions. As the research identifies patterns of learning which emerge in women's lives, further research could include male experiences of faith formation to further understanding of the extent to which this is a gendered issue.

## **CONCLUSION**

This thesis stands as an inheritor of the work done by Gilligan(1982), Belenky (1986), Magolda (1992) and others in exploring and understanding the ways in which women make sense and validity of their lives. However, this research suggests that whilst relationships and connectedness are indeed a significant part of the story of women's faith formation, there are other elements involved. As Severiens (1998) and Hekman (1995) both suggest there are patterns that emerge as to how women know, but there are also a multiplicity of voices to be heard. There is no single way of knowing or knowledge to be acquired for women.

This research examines how a group of women within the Anglican church learn faith. As women in the church they experience oppression, lack language and voice, and draw strength from relationships. Their experience of these things is particular to their circumstances. Because it is distinctive it can give insight to new understanding and other knowledges. The eight women in this study are being changed by the

events in their lives, and by the particular way their lives are shaped by being Christian women and by being women in the Church of England. Their stories are learning stories, but they are not readily heard within the rhetoric of lifelong learning that is gaining currency at present. By focusing on their understanding and knowledges I hope that both inside and outside the Church of England the voices of women will be heard as a distinctive contribution to understanding the learning of faith.

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