

BEING IN COMMUNION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF YOUNG LAY
WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF THE EUCHARIST

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores young lay women's experiences of Communion in the Church of England within a framework of practical feminist theology.

After grounding the study in a review of relevant feminist literature on the Eucharist, the use of qualitative research methodology is described. Semi-structured interviews with ten young women revealed three central themes: ways in which women experience and respond to exclusion and alienation from Communion; the importance of relationality and community; and how experience leads women to construct their own understandings about Communion.

Ambiguity and difference within women's experience are key concepts. Some embrace traditional understandings and practices of Communion; others subvert these to claim new and liberating understandings for themselves and their communities.

The thesis points to a desire to deconstruct boundaries, creating a vision of inclusive and egalitarian Eucharistic community where loci of power and authority are challenged by the quest for personal autonomy and relationship in community.

The research process is shaped by the pastoral cycle method of theological reflection. This leads to the suggestion of a metaphor of birthing as a means of responding to the experiences and needs revealed by the research and a model for developing liberational Eucharistic theology for women.

Dedicated to

my children

Dominic, Gregory and Anne

who were born

and my father

Michael

who died

during the writing of this thesis

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1. INTRODUCING THE THESIS

The woman who seeks to articulate her experience through the sacramental symbolism of the Christian tradition has access to a neglected hinterland of linguistic meanings and symbolic gestures that are fluid and dynamic enough to accommodate the female body without doing violence to her difference or her desire. At the same time, the symbols are reactivated and become life-giving signs of hope and redemption to those who had previously been untouched by their promise (Beattie, 2008, p.246).

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis presents my research into young lay women's experiences of Communion in the Church of England. It arises from the context of my own experience and my commitment to those who have been marginalised by the Church. As such, this thesis is intended as a contribution to developing a more wholesome, life-affirming and embodied view of Communion for young women. In this chapter I describe my own context for undertaking this research, the significance of which is explored more fully in my methodology in terms of the reflexivity of the researcher, and set out the aims of the research. I then locate the research in the fields of feminist practical theology and qualitative research before turning to consider the distinctiveness of this piece of research within those fields. Finally I provide a synopsis of the thesis, outlining the content and purpose of each section.

1.2 MY CONTEXT AND THE AIMS OF MY RESEARCH

This study emerged out of my pastoral and sacramental ministry as a Church of England priest. My first years in curacy were spent working with three town centre congregations, predominantly female and post-retirement age. From here I transitioned to ministry as a university chaplain, working amongst young people, a majority of whom were female. In

both places Eucharistic ministry was at the heart of my wider ministry and I was fascinated by how women connected with and received from this sacrament. Recognising that it was the older women who largely sustained the lives of the churches in my first parishes, I questioned whether the ritual and understandings of the Eucharist, the most frequently practised sacrament in the Church of England, were proving healthy and helpful to a new generation of women on whom the future survival of the church may well depend. My questioning was informed by the insights of feminist literature, explored in the literature review, concerning women's alienation in the church. These texts testify to the way

the abundance inherent in the symbols is contradicted by the actual experience of the Eucharist. The performance defies the freedom the Eucharist promises. An embodied knowing of God is limited, an identity with Christ is partial, the experience of the Spirit is restricted when language, leadership, sacred stories, gestures, sounds are exclusive. The experience cannot express the ultimate gift of God's freedom and lavished love (Walton, 1996, p.93).

As a young, female, communicant member of the Church of England I have experienced for myself the alienation and frustration of the inflexibility of the church, in practice and theology, towards views which differ from, or question, the male established norm. However, having been ordained aged twenty-four, my experiences were likely to be quite distinct from those of the vast majority of young women in the church. I was in a position of priestly leadership and authority, where they were not; I had formal theological education, where most would not; I stood at the altar celebrating Communion, they could not. I wanted to know how lay women were experiencing the Eucharist; whether they found similar

frustrations, and if so, what strategies they found to deal with this. I wanted to seek out how the church might learn from their insights to foster a more healthy Eucharistic theology for women.

My first degree in theology and my MPhil in nineteenth century church history have both shaped my understanding of the ways theology and practice develop in context. This perspective fosters my desire to see the process of interrelationship between the authority of the church and the practice of the people to continue in a way which now justly recognises the views of women, too long excluded from their place in shaping Eucharistic theology, ‘an attempt to make it clear, after years of being marginalised from church structures, that *women are church*’ (Grey, 1999, p.101). As Reuther argues,

Women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and Eucharistic famine ... They desperately need primary communities that nurture their journey into wholeness, rather than constantly negating and thwarting it (Reuther, 1985, pp.4-5).

During the period of my research, I have been further challenged and shaped, personally and professionally, by giving birth to and mothering three children. With the birth of each child I have moved increasingly from a position of ministerial leadership to ever more disempowered participant in the worship of the church, as I wrestle to keep under control, and meaningfully engage, three under-6 year olds in Eucharistic worship! The consequence has been an eye opening insight into the struggles women experience to connect with worship which, at times, seems utterly disconnected with the realities of life in the pew, as

well as the glimpses of hope and harmony when suddenly we find ourselves embraced by liturgy and theology which truly does reach out and connect. The insights, which the profound experience of giving birth and my new role as mother have brought, have undoubtedly contributed to the development of this thesis in claiming a meaning for Eucharist of birth-into-wholeness for women and for all people, outlined and discussed in chapter seven.

The overarching aim of this study is to listen openly to young women's experiences of Eucharist in the Church of England, with the explicit intention of considering how their insights might contribute to enhancing our understanding of Eucharist so that it may be more positive for women. Within this there are a number of more discrete aims which shape my research:

- Explicitly acknowledging my committed standpoint as a feminist Christian researcher, to employ a non-oppressive methodology with the intention of emancipatory outcomes.
- Recognising the discrete research group, which is not intended to be representative, but rather elucidatory, to be particularly alert to points of difference and of convergence in the young women's experiences, and to consider the implications of this for developing Eucharistic theology.
- To dialogue with existing feminist literature to explore how this qualitative study, grounded in women's individual experiences, resonates with or challenges the extant views around women and the Eucharist and is able to inform development and transformation.

- To focus on what the experiences of women may mean for how we understand and interpret the Eucharist. The development of Eucharistic practice which is appropriate to women, for example in liturgy, language and ritual, has been given attention in other feminist work which I draw on through this thesis. While acknowledging that even this resource is limited and warrants further development, this research will attend specifically to how the experiences of women may inform feminist reconstruction of Eucharistic theology.
- To draw conclusions about how the findings of the study can be used and taken forwards beyond the scope of this study.

1.3 FEMINIST PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

This study of women's experience of Communion, using methods appropriate to women for the purposes of liberation, is located within the genre of feminist practical theology.

The work of feminist theologians since the 1960s has brought awareness of the absence of women's perspectives from traditional male-dominated theology to the forefront. This heightened consciousness has led women researchers to bring the voices of women and their lived experiences to the heart of their theological work. This foundational principle led me towards practical feminist theology, an emerging strand within the genre of feminist theology. Slee (2004b, p.5) describes the key features of feminist practical theology as

concerned with a feminist theological analysis, critique and transformation of the life and practice of the Christian community, and having its roots within practical and

pastoral theology more widely as well as feminist discourse and theory, including feminist theology.

A practical feminist theology marries the insights of feminist theology with the methodological strategies of practical theology which has been developing rapidly since the 1960s and the emergence of liberation theologies in Latin American base communities (especially Gutiérrez, 1973; Brown, 1993). It has broadened to include more theologies of liberation from marginalised communities, including black theology (Cone, 1997; Beckford, 1998; Reddie, 2003), feminist theology (Daly, 1968; McFague, 1983; Ruether, 1983; Johnson, 1992) and queer theology (Althaus-Reid, 2000; Goss, 2002).

Each of these theologies has arisen through a praxis model in which theory and action or, in a Christian context, faith and practice are in a constant dialectical relationship which produces transformation, most especially the liberation of the oppressed and marginalised. In this cyclical relationship 'Truth is encountered and demonstrated in praxis, and it is praxis which validates theology' (Forrester, 2010, p.144). In explicating the relationship of the Marxist principles of praxis to the realm of Christian theology, McBride (1996, p.184) argues that the example of Jesus is an archetype of lived praxis, the revelation of God in historical presence

transforming the human situation ... Thus, in the person and praxis of Jesus are found the grounds of human liberation from all oppression and discrimination.

Within feminist theology a theological epistemology of praxis has arisen in the form of feminist practical theology.

Feminist theology is contextual; it works within specific situations to name experiences, to identify sufferings, and to articulate possibilities of transformation ... aimed at emancipation and enlightenment (Chopp, 1996, p.222).

This, Chopp (1996, p.222) argues, has been the key to developing the transformation of doctrines and symbols within the Christian tradition 'to produce new images and possibilities for flourishing'. It is within this framework, a self-consciously '...social and political activity which is innovative and directed towards a transformation...' (Forrester, 2010, p.143), that my research is located.

Locating my research within practical feminist theology, I sought a methodology which listens to and creatively engages with the un-voiced experiences of women and decided a qualitative research methodology was most suited to the aims of the research.

This study joins the growing body of qualitative feminist theological research, including Nicola Slee's (2004b) *Women's Faith Development*, Jan Berry's (2009) *Ritual Making Women*, Anne Phillips' (2011) *The Faith of Girls*, Sue Shooter's (2012) *How Survivors of Abuse Relate to God*, and the collection of essays; *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls: Qualitative Research Perspectives*¹ (Slee et al, forthcoming).

¹ In which a paper based on my research will be published (Wasey, forthcoming).

Four key features of qualitative research drawn out by Swinton and Mowat help explain my choice. Qualitative research ‘takes human experience seriously’, is ‘careful and rigorous’, looks for ‘knowledge that has the potential not simply to comment on the world, but to change the world’ and is ‘complexifying’ (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.31-32). As a research strategy, qualitative methods recognise the diversity of human ways of knowing; they foreground individual and transitory human experience and story, and validate this form of knowledge as it is articulated by participants on their own terms. The rigour of the process is also vital. It is not a naïve endeavour, but demands the rigour of any other theological enterprise. Women have the right to name their experience and allow it to shape our understanding to counter the universalism of men’s experience in sacramental theology to date. Beattie (2008, p.235) writes of the tension in feminist sacramental theology between ‘the appeal to women’s experience that risks a naïve literalism and lack of critical analysis’ and the risk of ‘adopting an esoteric form of critical theory at the expense of engagement with the experienced realities of women’s lives’. ‘Careful and rigorous’ qualitative research provides a means of negotiating this tension to produce validated outcomes. The search for knowledge ‘to change the world’ reflects the intentional nature of the research and the standpoint of the researcher, in my case as Christian and feminist. The research is transparent in its purpose of seeking transformation. Finally the ‘complexifying’ nature of qualitative strategies recognises that it does not intend to be simplistic but aims to engage in the complex, multifaceted messiness of human experience without expecting consistency or conformity. It is in this that discovery and transformation occur; ‘the world is complexified, challenged and transformed as the envisioned eye of the qualitative researcher encounters it’ (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.32).²

² Whilst drawing on the features of qualitative research suggested by Swinton and Mowatt, I question their

1.4 THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE STUDY

Within the field of feminist practical theology the contribution of feminist theology of the Eucharist remains minimal. There has been much more work done around women's experiences and understandings of church practice in general and ways of seeking development and transformation, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether's (1985) *Woman-Church*, Marjorie Procter-Smith's (1990) *In Her Own Rite*, and Letty Russell's (1993) *Church in the Round*. In the Church of England context, concerns about women's priesthood have dominated (Barr, 2001; Rees, 2002). More recently focus has shifted from women's exclusion from the Eucharistic ministry of the priesthood to the experiences and theology emerging from those women who are now able to exercise ordained ministry at the altar. This has led to some consideration of how the understanding of the Eucharist may be affected by the presence of the woman priest, exemplified in Ali Green's (2009a) *A Theology of Women's Priesthood*.

In contrast to the dominant focus on women's priestly ministry, my research focuses on the experiences of young lay women: research into lay women and the Eucharist is extremely scarce. The Eucharist is touched on briefly in Clark-King's (2004) *Theology by Heart*. This arises from her time spent listening to working-class women of various denominations in Newcastle, and I refer to her findings in my analysis chapters, but her research was not intentionally directed towards exploring the Eucharist. A further piece of qualitative

claim that 'taking human experience seriously does not imply that experience is a source of revelation' but rather 'holds much relevance for the continuing task of interpreting scripture and tradition' (2006, p.5-6). This is contrary to the premise of this research that human experience is revelatory, providing a resource for theological reflection, and that 'what have been called the objective sources of theology; Scripture and tradition, are themselves codified collective human experience' (Ruether, 1983, p.10).

research was undertaken by Sheila Dierks (1997) in *WomenEucharist*. Dierks researched the experiences of lay women in twenty-six small communities across America who gathered regularly to share Eucharist outside institutional churches without the presence of a priest. Some of these women had left the church, while others remained within their own church communities and religious orders. She presents her engagement with the formation, nature, beliefs, experiences and impact of these groups as ‘our story, our voices braided together’ (1997, p.20) and as such it is difficult to draw out the key findings from her work. However, she concludes that ‘the WomenEucharist experiment is a conversation with Eucharistic tradition’ (p.264) which brings ‘hope for the future’ through ‘renewal, transformation, alternatives, envisioning’ (p.272-273) and highlights the importance of themes of openness and acceptance (p.276), connection between liturgy and ‘the fabric of our lives’ (p.281) and ‘doing justice’ (p.283).

A final contribution to this field is found in Susan Ross’ (2001) work on feminist sacramental theology, *Extravagant Affections*. She argues (p.207) that ‘the long experience of Eucharist, of sacramental worship ... has not always been as clerically centred as it has come to be’ and asks (p.209) ‘How is women’s practice of worship in relation to community and church *already* redefining what we mean by the sacraments?’ She considers this question in the light of interviews with eighteen women involved in parish work. Ross’ (2001, p.229-230) findings that what ‘the activities of women in sacramental pastoral ministry ... reveal is that the sacraments have slipped out of their institutional and liturgical confines’, and that (p.231) ‘women’s experiences make a difference in the theology and practice of the sacraments ... to the extent that they make more concretely present God’s

gracious and all-embracing love' form part of her feminist sacramental theology which is examined in my literature review.

Ross' work on worship and the sacraments as a whole is located explicitly in a Roman Catholic context, and her qualitative research draws on the sacramental understandings of those women who chose to remain within the institutional church and exercise lay ministries of various forms. Dierks' *WomenEucharist* focuses entirely on the Eucharistic activities of those women outside the church and in the absence of a priest.

Situating my work alongside these contributions, my research differs in a number of ways. It is grounded in the experience and understandings of the Eucharist in the Church of England. As such it arises from, and is addressed to, the context of Eucharist within established church institutions, especially, but not exclusively, the Church of England. My thesis draws on interviews with young lay women who did not hold ministerial positions within their church communities and who remained within their churches without seeking opportunities for Eucharist elsewhere. This focus is unique and so the theology that I seek to develop in this thesis is different in nature and distinctive.

1.5 A SYNOPSIS

The overall shape of my thesis derives from the process of research and analysis, drawing on the pastoral cycle as used by feminist qualitative researchers. Qualitative research methods, with a continual cycle of data collection and analysis (Flick 2002: 44 fig. 4.1), complement the praxis or action/reflection models of practical theology as discussed by Slee (2004b, p.6-

7) in relation to the Pastoral Cycle and in Russell's (1993, p.31) concept of a theological spiral. Slee (2004b, p.7) describes her engagement with the different movements of the pastoral cycle in research in terms of 'experience', 'exploration', 'reflection' and 'response', while Berry (2009, p.35-49) presents them as a methodology of 'Hearing the stories', 'Interpreting the Stories', 'Re-presenting the women's stories' and 'Telling better gendered stories'.

Experience, specifically women's experience of Communion, underpins the whole research enterprise. Women's experience is a highly contested concept (Thistlethwaite, 1989; Young, 1990; Hogan, 1995), which has undergone challenge and development within feminist theology and beyond, finding ways to resist 'its tendency to become reified and universalised' (Graham, 1996, p.193). My use of the category comprises an awareness of the specificity and value of each unique voice, which brings insight into the interaction in the wider diverse arena without seeking homogeneity, therefore emphasising 'a hermeneutic of difference at the core of feminist thinking' (Hogan, 1995, p. 41). It is the ground in which I have engaged in 'exploration' through the use of qualitative interviews and initial analysis techniques explained in the methodology chapter. The process of reflection involves drawing out the insights and themes from the process of exploration and bringing them into dialogue with one another and with wider theological resources to seek a fuller understanding of how the data contributes to new knowledge. Reflection is focussed particularly in the presentation of my findings in chapters 4 to 6. The response element of the pastoral cycle is often described as being the action which arises from the theological reflection. The research 'does not simply seek to observe and understand the world', but 'seeks to change it' (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.255). In this thesis, the response is to offer

a new image for understanding and interpreting the Eucharist in the light of the research and to consider how this research might direct and inform future work. In fact these movements are not so clearly discrete and there is analysis, exploration, reflection and response present at every point of the process; ‘They flow out of and into each other in complex and intricate ways, with a kind of organic fluidity which is intrinsic to any genuinely creative activity’ (Slee, 2004b, p.7). However, this four-fold pattern represents the main emphasis at each stage.

This first chapter of introduction sets out the motivation, purpose, academic context and shape of the thesis. Chapter two reviews existing feminist literature concerning the Eucharist to highlight areas which may be problematic for women and moves to an analysis of feminist Eucharistic liturgies, identifying themes which characterise them to see how these might inform and engage with the data in my research.

Chapter three explains my methodology which used semi-structured interviews as a method suitable to the task of engaging in a non-oppressive way with the self-articulated experiences of women in relation to the Eucharist. Here I discuss the principles which informed my research design, the research group itself and how participants were found. I detail the interview rationale and technique, along with the stages of data analysis. Finally I outline the themes which emerged from analysis which I then move to discuss in the following chapters.

Chapters four to six examine in detail the findings from my data analysis and begin the process of interaction with themes drawn from the literature review and wider theological

resources of liturgy, scripture and theology, which comes to a conclusion in my response to the research in chapter seven. Chapter four examines the women's desires for personal inclusion and the obstacles they encounter to this in their experiences of Communion. Chapter five considers the significance of community to the women and the bearing this has on their understanding of Communion and their desire for corporate as well as individual inclusion. Chapter six considers the meanings women bring to Communion, how they interpret its purpose, and the points of dissonance between institutional and personal belief about Communion.

Chapters seven and eight represent the 'response' part of the research cycle. I weave together the themes examined in the preceding three chapters in dialogue with those drawn out in the literature review and the resources of wider feminist theological work, to offer a creative response. In chapter seven I offer the metaphor of birthing as a way of understanding Eucharist that is liberational for women and reflective of their experiences. It is not intended to be a complete Eucharistic theology, it is only a beginning, but it offers an exploration of how the process of qualitative research '...foregrounding the experiences and needs, stories and voices of women...' (Moore, 2002, p.18) can provide a means of transformation for women who choose to remain within the church.

My conclusion in chapter eight begins with a reflection upon the learning journey which this thesis represents for me as researcher, and outlines the rationale for some of the decisions I have made in that journey. It then briefly reviews the thesis as a whole and considers where the journey leads next and the practical implications for taking this research forward for women and for the church.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This literature review surveys existing feminist perspectives on the Eucharist, acknowledging that these are often limited and arise in the context of wider exploration of worship and the sacraments. It explores these perspectives through the two lenses of feminist theological scholarship, and feminist Eucharistic liturgy, drawing out key themes and patterns which will inform my research process. This review sets the context for the research process and findings presented in this thesis.

In the first section I survey aspects of the Eucharist which feminist literature highlights as being problematic. These are summarized in the three areas of power and authority, language and imagery, and theology. An overview of responses that feminist theologians have made to these difficulties follows. I was interested then to see if these themes identified by feminist theologians were borne out by women in interview.

The second main published resource which reflects women's experiences of and responses to the Eucharist is feminist Eucharistic liturgy. Liturgies formed in women's communities, as well as liturgies informed by feminist insights from mainstream churches, have been a means of protest and reclamation for women in the church. In the second section I explore characteristics of these liturgies to provide a further foundation for the process of engagement with the data in my study.

The final part of this review considers the work of developing Eucharistic theology appropriate to women and where this stands at present, with particular regard to Susan Ross' feminist sacramental theology which is at present unique in the field.

2.2 FEMINIST LITERATURE ON THE EUCHARIST

Women's struggles with the Eucharist are well documented. Post-Christian Mary Daly (1973) first 'urge[d] women to reject the Eucharist because it upholds patriarchal power while denying women's experience and power' (Goudy, 1996, p.209) and Sheila Dierks (1997) documents the growing WomenEucharist movement in America in which groups of women, as well as children and men, meet outside mainstream churches to celebrate their own Eucharists. In 1997 she had identified over 100 such groups meeting across America, with many group members continuing to participate in traditional (usually Catholic) churches and religious orders, but needing an alternative context outside their church to nurture their Eucharistic life. 'As one respondent put it, "My group of women gathering to pray is what makes it possible to remain in my parish"' (Dierks, 1997, p.17).

For women who stay within the church, Walton (1996, p.93) argues,

the abundance inherent in the symbols is contradicted by the actual experience of the Eucharist. The performance defies the freedom the Eucharist promises. An embodied knowing of God is limited ... when language, leadership, sacred stories, gestures, sounds are exclusive. The experience cannot express the ultimate gift of God's freedom and lavished love.

In response, a growing number of feminist scholars are calling for reclamation of Eucharist and striving to find methods of reconstruction. This section reviews some of the central difficulties identified by feminist theologians and their efforts to address and redress them.

2.2.1 The problem of power and authority

Women's exclusion has been heightened by structures of church authority. This is focussed in Eucharist because the concept of *valid* sacraments has been prominent in church practice and theory.

Historical development of sacramental theology and practice has emphasized patriarchal protection of the correct form and matter, as well as hierarchical and clerical control of the distribution and access to sacraments (Thompsett, 1996, p.251).

Canon law lays down who may perform sacramental ritual, what must be worn, used, said, and done and this, Ross (2001, p.54-55) argues, has its basis in dualism.

Sacramental theology, over the centuries, has become closely linked with legal thinking, especially to canon law ... a dualistic emphasis on validity risks turning sacramental theology and practice into legalism, and ignores important pastoral dimensions.

This is damaging not only for women, but for all who are marginalised for, as Ross (2001, p.55) points out,

when such legalism rules sacramental theology and practice, not only is a sense of sacredness lost, but pastoral opportunities for reaching those hungry for healing, nurture, reconciliation, and union are also endangered.

Primavesi and Henderson (1989, p.90) bear this out in their liberation theology, proclaiming,

Laws of Eucharistic discrimination which we endure today try to define what is sacred bread and who is worthy to touch it ... What body was more sacred than that of Jesus? Who had access to it? What were the visible effects on those who touched him?

They highlight how Gospel accounts of the marginalised, particularly many women, touching and being touched by Jesus³ become even more poignant when discussing women's alienation from the Body of Christ in Eucharist.

The Eucharist should be the symbol of our nurture, growth, and participation in the authentic human life of mutual empowerment. Yet it is the sacramental symbol that has been most radically alienated from the people and transformed into a clerical power tool (Ruether, 1985 pp.77-78).

This is a disenfranchisement of women, and of the whole laity, thus compounding the situation for lay-women who are doubly disempowered.

³ Examples include: Matthew 8.14-15, Mark 5.25-43, Luke 7.36-50 and 13.10-17.

It is a matter of elevating this simple symbolic act of blessing and giving food and drink into the symbol of the power to control divine or redeeming life, a power that the clergy claim to possess in a way that is beyond the access of lay or merely 'natural' human being. (Ruether, 1985, p.78)

The experience of hierarchical power relationships is also manifest in the physical context and practice of the Eucharist. Traditional church buildings, intended to inspire focus and deference towards God, often hinder communal interaction. They create separation through the distance between worshippers in the pews and priests at a far removed altar, and also through the physical markers between those locations; steps into the chancel, more steps to the sanctuary, a Communion rail where participants kneel to receive Communion, which may be ceremoniously closed during worship - all these serve to further emphasise the divide between the 'holy' sanctuary and 'ordinary' people.

These separations become more damaging when reinforced by powerful ritual actions, gestures and relationships. Bell (1997, p.74) sets out the impact of the physical experience of ritual as 'an event, a set of activities that does not simply express cultural values or enact symbolic scripts but actually effects changes in people's perceptions and interpretations'. In the light of this, the fact that 'most traditional postures of prayer are postures of submission: kneeling, prostrations, head bowed, eyes closed' (p.48) and that these postures are often incorporated into Eucharistic practice, means that women's experience of Eucharist is reinforced as a place of subjection to a higher power which demands humility and subservience, evoking feelings of unworthiness. As 'ritualization is a way of acting that tends to promote the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate

situation' (p.82), the Eucharist as ritual has great potential to reinforce internalized concepts of outside control, vulnerability and powerlessness.

2.2.2 The problem of language and imagery

The required use of authorized texts for Eucharistic worship in the Church of England inevitably brings linguistic problems. Sexist and exclusive language and imagery in church is a well-trodden path in the literature. Almost three decades ago Ruether (1985, pp.4-5) wrote that

Women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and Eucharistic famine. They can no longer nurture their souls in alienating words that ignore or systematically deny their existence. They are starved for the words of life, for symbolic forms that fully and wholeheartedly affirm their personhood.

In Church of England Eucharists this situation has moved forward little in the intervening decades. While recent liturgical reforms (in *Common Worship* 2000) have gone some way towards inclusive language for humans, this is still very limited and has often simply meant the removal or substitution of the words 'man' and 'men', as in the Common Worship (2000, p.173) contemporary language creed. Despite this small development, the language used in relation to God remains almost exclusively masculine in titles, names and imagery. It remains a challenge for women to find in Eucharistic texts a God who is anything other than male. All eight Eucharistic prayers address God as 'Father' and the only overtly female image is found in prayer G; 'As a mother tenderly gathers her children, you embraced a people as your own' (p.201).

A further implication of set texts is creating what Procter-Smith (1995a, p.27) terms 'univocality'. She points out (p.30) how the dualistic, valid/invalid dichotomy in prayer and worship removes space for heteroglossia where individuals are free to create many meanings through their many voices. A patriarchal system which authorises only the univocal masculine voice leads inevitably to invalidating the voices of women. The confining impact of this 'univocality' for women is challenged by Clark-King (2004, p.210) in her vision

of a 'choral theology' – the church singing with not one voice, but many. Unity comes from the fact that the Church is singing of the revelation of God via Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit; it is this that provides the lyrics for our singing. However, the voices are not one but many, each singing the lyrics to the music that their experience of God has written into their Christian faith.

Diverse imagery has also been stifled by patriarchal control of the Eucharist. Ross (2001, p.55) believes a particular problem of Eucharistic theology historically has been

... the division between the 'real' and the 'symbolic' ... symbols were reduced to the category of mere sign (which bears a one-to-one relationship to its signifier) and the multivalent possibilities for symbolic representation were lost.

Similarly Green (2009b, p.12) argues that religious symbols, though generally surviving through their openness to interpretation over time,

can also run the risk of solidification into idolatry and gnosis, where instead of opening up a panoply of meanings they give way to a turgid, dogmatic mythology impervious to new experience and insight or to creative imagination.

2.2.3 The problem of theology

One example of ‘turgid, dogmatic theology’ is the sacrificial understanding of what is taking place in the Eucharist and why, which has profound implications for women. ‘The equation of love with self-sacrifice, self-denial and self-abnegation in Christian theology is dangerous to women’s psychological, spiritual, and physical health’ (Ramsey, 2000, p.121). There are three aspects to the difficulties which the concept of sacrifice causes in the context of the Eucharist.

Firstly, the background of sacrifice as ritual is problematic. Women have been excluded from being ritual agents, particularly in the church. Russell is among those feminist writers who draw on Jay’s (1992) seminal work *Throughout Your Generations Forever: sacrifice, religion and paternity* which has provided feminist theologians with a detailed background for understanding not only how the practice of sacrifice became a male preserve, but also the gendered aspects of blood rituals cross culturally, and particularly how sacrifice became a means of maintaining patrilineal social ordering. Russell (1993, p.143) observes,

the connection of the eucharistic tradition with other exclusive rituals that are used to guarantee male privilege in patriarchal societies ... the usual pattern of blood sacrifice

is that it takes place as an exclusive male ritual in which the pattern is one of taking life and shedding blood, in contrast to the women's role of shedding blood to *give* life.

I do not intend to address the issues this has raised, and continues to raise, for women's ordination to the priesthood, since this is not the subject of this thesis and is dealt with by others elsewhere (most recently by Green 2009a). Nevertheless this backdrop sets the scene for a ritual arena in which women are identified as being other, unable to participate both by their gender and also ironically through their own natural rather than ritual blood-letting which renders them ritually unclean and disempowered by the use of ritual which maintains male hierarchy.

The language of sacrifice and atonement used in the celebration of the Eucharist relates to the fraught area of atonement theory in feminist thought and this is the second aspect of difficulty. There are several excellent surveys of the difficulties of atonement theories from a feminist perspective, including the chapter entitled "Can redemption be redeemed?" in Slee's (2003) *Faith and Feminism*. Whether the death and resurrection of Jesus are viewed in terms of substitution or satisfaction, Christus Victor or moral influence, all consider Jesus' suffering and death as necessary to bring about reconciliation in God's relationship with humanity, and 'are exceedingly problematic in that Christians have been and still are likewise called either to suffer and wait for God to act, to suffer like God for others, or to suffer in the hope that others might change their behaviour' (Tatman, 1996, p.11).

Whether it is the positioning of women as 'Scapegoat' (Daly, 1973, p.77) or the threat of the 'Cosmic child abuse[r]' (Brock, 2001, p.157), Brown and Parker (1989, p.2) are

uncompromising in their belief that the direct implication of the image of the crucifixion as redemptive is that ‘Christianity has been a primary – in many women’s lives *the* primary – force in shaping our acceptance of abuse’ and conclude that ‘Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering’ (p.26). Marjorie Procter-Smith (1995b, p.473) observes that this theology is inherent in the Eucharist, arguing that the Eucharistic texts she has examined ‘suggest that life and salvation (the literal meaning of which is “health”) comes as a result of suffering and death’.

For Fiorenza (1995, p.350) this raises the question ‘How can we point to the Eucharistic bread and say, “This is my body” as long as women’s bodies are battered, raped, sterilized, mutilated, prostituted and used to male ends?’ and Procter-Smith (1995b, p.472) affirms this position in her consideration of Holy Communion and survivors of abuse, arguing that the model we are given to emulate in the Jesus of the Eucharist is one of passive acceptance and endurance of ridicule, suffering, indignity and death.

This image of Jesus as the submissive, innocent victim, led lamblike to his own suffering and death, pervades the communion service in such overt ways as well as more subtle ones.

The pervasiveness of this view of soteriology in the formation of Eucharistic liturgy leads to the third, closely related, area of potential difficulty. Focussing on the need for sacrifice and atonement emphasises the sinfulness and unworthiness of the recipients. In her study on the perspective of female survivors of violence, Marjorie Procter-Smith highlights the tendency for blame to fall on the powerless and the marginalized, and so the impact of this emphasis

will fall more heavily on women than on men. She argues that the way 'current communion liturgies include explicit and implicit references to human sinfulness, without distinguishing between the sinner and the victim of sin' compounds the problems for those who are already in the position of victim and 'contribute[s] to the general tendency of the church and culture to blame the victims' (Procter-Smith, 1995b, p.474).

2.2.4 Renewing language and imagery

Despite the sexism of traditional liturgy, Eleanor McLaughlin believes there remains potential for women to reclaim and recreate liturgy as healthy and affirming. She argues that Julian of Norwich's religious language has pointed the way for this re-creative process; 'her words illustrate powerfully the way in which the tradition could reflect and affirm women's being and experience and in turn be shaped by that experience' (McLaughlin, 1979, p.101). Elizabeth Johnson (1992, p.71) agrees that there is a

basic justification for speech about God in female symbols, since women themselves are theomorphic. If women are created in the image of God, without qualification, then their human reality offers suitable, even excellent metaphor for speaking about divine mystery, who remains always ever greater.

As feminist sacramental renewal continues, Goudy (1996, p.210) argues 'greater study is needed regarding the influential role of symbolic expression and the power of the imagination in human becoming'. Renewing language and imagery is an opportunity for drawing on women's embodied, 'diverse experiences, memories and imagination' in

‘shaping their own symbolic universe’ (Thompsett, 1996, p.252) and the process of discovering ‘a renewed sacramental imaginary can challenge us to recover the power of liturgy to transform’ (Grey, 2000, p.55).

2.2.5 Finding horizontal space and embodiment

The movement towards horizontal space in feminist liturgy counters the misuse of power and authority over women. ‘Feminist spirituality proclaims wholeness, healing love, and spiritual power not as hierarchical, as *power over*, but as *power for* as enabling power’ (Fiorenza, 1979, p.137). The physical reordering of space and methods of interaction reflect the desire for liturgy to express equality in embodied and practical ways. Reflecting on ‘Presiding like a woman’, Stephen Burns (2009, p.46) speaks of the feminist emphasis on ‘the assembly as Christic community’ set against the focus on an individual president, relating this (p.36) to Ruether’s (1985, p.75) demand for replacing ‘hierarchical clericalism’ with ‘an understanding of ministry as originating from the community and continually based in it’.

This practical and metaphorical horizontal space can emphasise embodiment and relationality. As Goudy (1996, p.209) argues, these themes have become central as feminist sacramental thought has developed beyond initial rejections of sexist language and clerical power; ‘the sacraments must be reconnected with ordinary biological life and grounded in incarnational theology which honours human embodiment and the bodily experiences of women as well as men’. Marjorie Procter-Smith’s (1995a, p.57) work epitomises this development and describes how horizontal space in feminist worship ‘recognizes the

primacy of the body and of the physical world' as well as the interrelatedness of the participants. She is emphatic that 'women need ... an understanding of our bodies and their functions as manifestations of God' (1990, p.152) and brings together the two elements of embodiment and mutual relationships in the following statement:

Feminist emancipatory sacraments ... must reveal God's self-disclosure in women's lives. The loci for this feminist revelation are found in women's struggle for survival and dignity; in the rich and complex particularity of women's lives, influenced both for joy and for sorrow by gender, race, class, nationality; in women's experiences of embodiment; in the sense of connectedness with all that is ... and in women's experiences of love of self and of other women (1990, p.153).

2.2.6 Asserting ambiguity

Feminists reject the dualism which 'resists complex and fluid relationships between dual realities, and defends instead clear and distinct boundaries' (Ross, 2001, p.54). There is a need for ambiguity: 'The most effective religious symbols are not static: where a focal meaning may appear to be clear for a period, the polysemy of the symbol constantly demands fresh discursive thinking' (Green, 2009b, p.11-12).

Liberating women from the dualisms of male/female, lay/ordained, holy/impure requires that free-will and ambiguity be affirmed and different voices validated.

In place of A/Not A thinking (valid/invalid), we must discover or create standards of Eucharistic praying that recognize and honor diversity, that empower the disempowered, and that create ritual environments that nurture resistance, survival and well-being (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.120).

Ross (2001, p.156) asserts the importance of creativity and fluidity for women especially because of their inherent 'bilingualism'. Central to her feminist sacramental theology is her belief that the nature of sacrament intrinsically contains ambiguity (p.78) and that this has been lost to the detriment of the church and its sacramental system.

Symbolic thinking is marked by an ability to hold together multiple ideas and meanings without collapsing that into an either/or dichotomy ... Paul Ricoeur's famous dictum, 'the symbol gives rise to thought', suggests that symbols provoke reflection, kindle the imagination, make more complicated what cannot be easily simplified (Ross 2001, p.78 citing Ricoeur 1969, p.347).

Correlated with the need for ambiguity in sacramental understanding is the unpicking of concepts of validity. By considering the underlying meaning and purpose of the sacraments Russell (1993, p.140) redefines validity. In church, to be valid means the right person saying and doing the right things, in the right way but Russell takes this concept of 'right'-ness and suggests it needs rediscovery.

When we seek to understand what it would mean to administer the sacraments *rightly* ... Certainly that meaning would go beyond proper preparation, administration, and

celebration of the words and actions of Jesus. In fact, the word 'rightly' probably would include the need for the community of celebration to live out a life of righteousness or justice.

The patterns of authority and validity in the church mean women find themselves seeking God not in a place of freedom, but a space where choice is removed and authority imposed. Procter-Smith (1995a, p.50) is critical of this and is emphatic that

in order to engender feminist liturgical prayer and externalize our legitimate anger, we must claim the churches, their liturgy and prayer, and our relationship with God as our proper domain. We must create a noncoercive space where the *no* of our anger can be articulated and can receive uptake, can be received as legitimate.

Redefining the meaning of 'valid' Eucharist and attending to the need for ambiguity creates the freedom for women to value their individuality and difference within the community.

2.2.7 Reinterpreting Jesus' death

Feminist responses to atonement theology which may help inform a feminist view of the theology of Eucharist have been creative and varied. A model of Jesus as co-sufferer has become significant in womanist and Asian feminist theology. Here Jesus stands in solidarity with and shares the suffering of oppressed women. As such the cross becomes a symbol of empowerment (Chung, 1991, p.55f; Grant, 1989, p.212f). Others have sought to re-image the cross, for example understanding death as the moment of the birth of the church

(Watson, 2008). Another approach has been to relocate the understanding of atonement and redemption away from Jesus' death, arguing that 'it is Jesus' life and his ministry that redeems humans' (Williams, D., 1996, p.18) or the resurrection as God's rejection of the unjust death (Ruether, 1998, p.107). Another strand of feminist thought seeks to renew the understanding of redemption, viewing atonement in terms of at-one-ment and establishing right relations of mutuality (Heyward, 1982; Grey, 1989, p.84ff). As Tatman (1996, p.12) points out, this model can extend beyond human relationships in an eco-feminist perspective on right relationship.

Efforts to address the impact of atonement theology on women's experience of Eucharist reflect some of the responses above. Feminists argue for a thoroughgoing reinterpretation, or rediscovery, of what Jesus communicates in the sharing of bread and wine.

The sacrificial aspect of the eucharist, like the second birth of baptism, needs to be carefully retraditioned from a feminist perspective. It is possible to celebrate at table in memory of the sacrifice made necessary by the injustice of the religious and political authorities of Jesus' day and the victory of God's justice and love over injustice (Russell, 1993, p.143).

Similarly, Procter-Smith (1995b, p.465) calls for 'a serious rethinking of our theology and practice of celebrating the Christian meal so that it both nourishes and empowers'. She argues that a wholesome understanding of Jesus' life and death should contradict the pervasive message of life first requiring death.

Good does not come because of suffering, nor even out of suffering. *In spite of* suffering and death, God brings forth life ... The resurrection thus becomes ... a sign of God's *rejection* of the injustice of Jesus' death, a divine correction of human injustice (p.476).

2.2.8 Reconstructive strategies

Many feminist writers have pointed to the way in which women internalize a process of redefining or interpreting input they receive which is unacceptable and unhealthy to them in order to reconstruct it at a personal level. In terms of worship and liturgy this has been termed 'praying between the lines' (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.17), a form of translation from the received language and meaning, into a form which is more meaningful and helpful to the individual. Procter-Smith (1995a, p.32) claims this 'counter-reading is very common among women and among other marginalized worshipers in our assemblies', and explores a number of strategies women employ (p.36-38). Ultimately these are survival techniques rather than empowered claiming of just and healthy prayer and liturgy for women. While not wishing to invalidate them, women's ways of 'praying between the lines' are too hidden to create significant and radical change in the church. There is an urgent need for 'moving from coded strategies to disruptive and reconstructive strategies ... in order to make room for freedom' (p.36).

One means of moving from coded to reconstructive strategies has been the creation of feminist liturgy and it is to this which I now turn.

2.3 FEMINIST EUCHARISTIC LITURGY

The Eucharist itself ought to be a place for celebrating women's stories. Women are the makers and providers of food. Women's bodies and blood are the nourishers of new life. Far from the violent symbolism of sacrifice, and authoritarian restrictions based on appropriateness and purity, women's approaches to the Eucharist have been freeing, celebratory and inclusive (Wootten, 2000, p.46).

The requirement to use only authorised Eucharistic Prayers in the Church of England means that the search for feminist Eucharistic liturgy must take place in other denominations that have greater freedom in creating their own liturgy and in WomenChurch or WomenEucharist communities. Dierks (1997, p.16) describes such alternative Eucharistic communities as:

community without hierarchy, we sit in a circle. Community without sexism, we experience each other as image of God, and God as Mother, Breath, Ruah, Shekinah. Community without rigidity, we may all participate in shaping the celebration to reflect our own journeys and how God is a part of them. Community without slavery to fixed space, we can rediscover our bodies in gesture and dance, free-flowing movement. Community without judgement, we may, as women, finally offer our best gifts without fear that they will be refused because of our gender. This is WomenEucharist.

In this section I draw out significant features of women's approaches to Eucharistic liturgy formed in contexts where women have freedom to search out ways to express their Eucharistic praying authentically. This will enable a consideration of how these themes resonate with or respond to the experiences of the women in my study.

2.3.1 Anamnesis of women

The relentless absence of women from the story of the church, from lectionary readings and from set liturgies, causes women to 'suffer from liturgical amnesia, a lack of liturgical tradition that remembers, celebrates, and mourns the memory of women' (Procter-Smith, 1990, p.36). In the Church of England's Eucharistic liturgies there is a weaving together of divine story and human stories in a way which may appeal to the feminist Christian, and yet the narratives in Eucharistic prayers are not the narratives of women. The institution narrative lacks 'any reference to the presence of women, unlike other meal stories in the New Testament, such as the miraculous feeding narratives, or Jesus' meals with social and religious outcasts, including prostitutes' (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.123). As a result 'feminist liturgies, however varied they may be, seem always to make room for women to tell their stories' (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.58).

Specific biblical women are brought to mind in 'a mourning meal' (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.137), as an act of 'feminist liturgical anamnesis' (Procter-Smith, 1990, p.52). Jephthah, the Levite's concubine and Tamar are named as examples of women who suffered and felt abandoned by God. Procter-Smith observes that these examples may be supplemented by post-biblical and modern day instances of the suffering and persecution of women. Enabling

women to stand in continuity with forefathers in the Christian tradition empowers women and brings the significance of the past into the present. Janet Morley (1992, p.46) uses a refrain common to many of her Eucharistic prayers to reconnect and create solidarity amongst Christian women of the past and the present, replacing 'therefore with angels and archangels...' with,

Therefore, with the woman who gave you birth,
the women who befriended you and fed you,
who argued with you and touched you,
the women who anointed you for death,
the women who met you, risen from the dead ...

The Eucharistic prayer prepared for 'a community celebration of women's ministries' (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.141-142) at Perkin's School of Theology in 1991 seeks to connect Jesus' experiences with those women encountered in the institutional church;

He too knew rejection, conflict, and suppression.
His ministry too has been distorted,
His gospel of liberation silenced.

In this prayer the institution narrative remains, but there is no mention of 'body' or 'blood' and the emphasis is on remembrance, through which betrayal can be overcome to find new life. Procter-Smith (1990, p.36-37) argues, 'All of Christian liturgy requires a profound remembering, which renews and reclaims the significance of past events for the present'.

Part of the creative process of feminist Eucharistic praying is rediscovering and remembering the significance of the Christian faith narrative for women. The first Eucharistic prayer in the book of services and prayers of the St Hilda Community (1991, p.66) speaks of a God who promises 'solidarity with us on our journey'. The prayer reclaims the meaning and significance of the Eucharist, as relevant to the circumstances of the present, 'now as then in Jerusalem', and again seeks to join the prayers of the gathered with the witness of women forebears, through the example of nameless women as well as the named Tabitha, Lydia and Priscilla.

2.3.2 A present hope for all creation

Recalling the significance of the past for the present reality of women's lives is an act of empowerment. This search for empowerment can also be seen in the way feminist liturgies avoid overly spiritualised, transcendent and future orientated eschatological hope, and instead articulate the desire for change, resistance and deliverance in the present, firmly grounded in creation and valuing all life.

The concluding words of 'a mourning meal' - 'Rise up, come to our help. Save us for the sake of your steadfast love' (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.138), articulate a hope which is for now, not simply a future eschatological hope which has too often been used to minimise and legitimate the suffering and oppression of women and others in this life through the promise of a better hope in a life to come. There is often an urgency in prayers for the coming of the kingdom of God into the present time, to effect change and transformation, epitomised in the refrain used in Procter-Smith's (1995a, pp.139-141) 'A prayer of

resistance and demand for justice, in eschatological hope': 'How long, O God, will you look on? Rescue us now!'

The same 'prayer of resistance' also demonstrates concern for the wholeness of creation, bringing together traditional words in praise of God - 'Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, O God; your judgements are like the great deep' - with the assertion 'you save humans and animals alike' (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.139). This is reflected in Jan Berry's (2000, p.85) Eucharistic prayer which sees creation as the locus of both human and divine activity, which happens in partnership:

We praise and worship you, holy Wisdom,
playing before and beyond all that is created,
delighting in beauty, dancing in the heavens,
rooted in earth and one with humanity,
living and dying and rising again.

...

As we take this bread and wine,
May your Spirit give us new vitality,
Empowering us in the struggle for life,
Making us your partners in creation.

2.3.3 Equal and embodied participation

The way these prayers are intended to be used also reflects the feminist agenda. There is often space within the prayer for multiple voices to be heard and for differing perspectives to be articulated. In ‘A prayer of resistance’, participants are encouraged to ‘name their struggles for justice and resistance against suffering’ (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.139), with each petition responded to by the gathered community’s refrain. This enfranchises the whole worshipping community to share in addressing God and encourages equality in communal participation.

As women are encouraged into fuller participation there is greater emphasis on the bodily and embodied nature of the sacraments, recognising and valuing the bodies of the participants. Janet Morley’s (1992, p.47) epiclesis is one example,

Come then, life-giving spirit of our God,
Brood over these *bodily* things,
And make us one *body* with Christ (italics mine).

Another is her introduction to the Sanctus which recalls the women who interacted with Jesus on earth, ‘who gave you birth’, ‘touched you’ and ‘anointed you’. After the Sanctus, she emphasises, ‘Blessed is our brother Jesus, *Bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh*’ (italics mine) (p.48).

Jo Harding's (2005, p.40-41) Eucharistic prayer, 'Re-membering and Reconciling', presents a highly embodied view of the incarnate Jesus. The language of the words of approach are rich with the vocabulary of physicality and interaction: 'hands that touched', 'arms that ... embraced the outcast', 'legs ... that danced at celebrations', 'eyes that blazed against injustice, knew how to cry' and 'lips that wove stories'. Her prayer is framed with the understanding that the people gathered at the Eucharist continue to embody this divine life, beginning

We gather at this table to celebrate Life:

The life of God in the world,
Made flesh and blood in Jesus,
Embodied in us.

The prayer continues, 'may we embody your kingdom', words which are echoed again at the conclusion of the prayer, in,

the task of re-membering you,
of being the body of Christ,
of living your life in this world.

The embodied image of Christ, made manifest through the incarnation, is to inspire and call an equally embodied response in the lives of the Christian community.

‘Liturgical anamnesis’, Procter-Smith (1990, p.45) argues, ‘is more than mental remembering: it is *embodied* remembering, and as such involves action and the use of the body in a way which communicates the sacredness of that body as a locus of divine activity’. The ‘Silent Eucharist’ from the St Hilda Community (1991, p.86-88) is a remarkable example of embodied liturgical Eucharistic prayer. The complete liturgy from opening Kyrie to final blessing is celebrated through silence and gesture, without words or sound other than a bell to guide the time for meditation. Each part is shared by every person through communal gesture, including the expression of confession and mutual absolution. The Eucharistic prayer continues in this way, as worshippers follow the gestures of the celebrant, creating a context of mutuality and equality in celebrating the sacrament, not unlike a con-celebration by all present, lay and ordained, embodying physically the sacramental action.

2.3.4 Using wider Biblical resources

Searching for language and imagery which is wholesome and connects with the experiences and needs of women in creating liturgy, feminist liturgists draw on a wider variety of biblical material than has traditionally been found in Eucharistic prayers. For example, in ‘A Prayer of Resistance’, Sanctus and Benedictus are replaced by a ‘cry for deliverance from Psalm 35 and Luke 18.3’ (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.139). Although the last supper is briefly referred to in this prayer, the institution narrative is replaced by an account of Jesus’ time of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Here, and in summarizing Jesus’ ministry of healing and deliverance, ‘Jesus is remembered as a model of resistance to suffering, pain, and death’ (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.140). Space is given for the experience of those who suffer similar

injustice, and anger is explicitly named in the invocation of the Holy Spirit. The significance of the symbols of bread and wine 'are transformed into signs of life and freedom by resistance to suffering and demands for justice' (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.140).

A similar transformation of symbolism is seen in Jan Berry's Eucharist. Instead of wine becoming the 'blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Common Worship, 2000, p.192), it is portrayed as life giving in that it enriches and enlivens for celebration, rather than cleanses.

As we take this bread, broken for all to share,
may our lives embody your love.
As we drink this wine, poured out for all to share,
may our lives celebrate your glory (Berry, 2011, p.101).

Janet Morley (1992, p.50-51) has powerfully adapted the form of a Eucharistic prayer to celebrate the act of foot washing on Maundy Thursday. The institution narrative is replaced with the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, and the symbols of bread and wine are therefore replaced by the symbolic mutual washing of feet by the participants.

2.3.5 Sharing in redemption

The feminist work towards discovering models of atonement which provide a healthier basis for the faith development of women is reflected in the writing of feminist Eucharistic prayers. Instead of the institution of Communion at the Last Supper, using alternative

narratives reflects the desire to communicate different models of atonement and redemption. These counteract the prevailing message of authorised Eucharistic prayers where the death of Jesus is remembered and re-enacted at each Eucharistic celebration as an offering and sacrifice which atones for the sin of the world.

‘A mourning meal’ contains no oblation ‘since there can be no acceptable offering in place of all who have suffered’ (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.138). There is therefore no concept that the bread and cup in any way become the body and blood of Christ, or are nourishing and life giving; rather it is specified that they should contain stale bread and bitter wine, which remain as symbols of the suffering being experienced.

In place of prayers which portray Jesus as a figure who suffers on behalf of others, there is a common theme of shared suffering, a God who suffers alongside those who suffer on earth, and therefore also a shared striving in the work of liberation. Morley (1992, p.46) reflects this theme in her Eucharistic prayer for ordinary time, with the words, ‘You laboured with us upon the cross’. This offers a non-substitutional and participatory interpretation of the significance of Jesus’ death, where humans and God are relating in a communal model of partnership. In common with this theme, Berry’s (2011, p.101) Eucharistic prayer gives thanks

for the love which welcomes us into being,
invites us to share in your work of liberation.

An implication of this change in the theology communicated by Eucharistic prayers is a shift from redemption through the forgiveness of sin, to redemption as transformation. Thus the words of thanksgiving are framed to affirm and encourage the fullness of life given by God, rather than of sinfulness and need for forgiveness, and the language centres on transformation rather than sacrifice. The thanksgiving to God in this prayer is not for the salvific death of Christ, but for

a life that could not be ended by death

a purpose that could not be silenced by the forces of violence

a deep desire within you for the transformation of the world

...

for cherishing the potential in us

and for calling us to be partners

in your vision for this world (Harding, 2005, p.41).

2.4 DEVELOPING THEOLOGY

The final task of this literature review is to consider how the difficulties encountered by women in Eucharist, and the patterns of reaction and development, can inform the creation of new Eucharistic theology. Despite assertions of the need to reclaim the Eucharist, there is to date little reconstruction beyond the liturgical movement outlined. Feminist sacramental theology, and particularly Eucharistic theology, remains an underdeveloped field. There is a growing literature on women's rituals - Berry's (2009) *Ritual Making Women*, which broadens the concept of sacramentality and Dierks' (1997) *WomenEucharist* looks at

Eucharistic practice outside the church - but within the church Ross' (2001) *Extravagant Affections* remains the only substantial systematic contribution to feminist sacramental theology.

Ross (2001, p.130-133) uses the model of family as the embodied context for sacramental theology, arguing that it 'involves a community and interdependence', 'is dynamic', 'multidimensional', 'does justice to the complexity of women's roles' and 'can claim scriptural roots'. Her model creatively engages with many of the issues identified in this chapter. She uses different aspects of familial relationship to illuminate the themes of her sacramental theology. Throughout this, ambiguity is a key theme, breaking down divisions (p.202) and recognising women's inherent 'bilingualism' (p.156). She highlights on several occasions the potentially fraught nature of family as a model, but argues that her 'understanding of the "amplified" family is central' (p.128) and that it is a flexible model; 'families can be biological, adoptive, multigenerational, extended' (p.130). She also believes the 'imperfections of family life also contribute to a richer, more complex, indeed, more ambiguous understanding of sacramentality' (p.135).

The model of family counters the absence of women as symbolic subjects (Ross, 2001, p.156-7) and takes gendered bodies seriously (pp.135-136). Like Russell's view that 'right' celebration requires living justly, Ross (2001, p.229) pays particular attention to ethics, arguing;

the model of 'family' makes more vivid the point that the Christian community calls all its members to a just love for each other that extends beyond kinship and personal affiliation.

However, in terms of reconstructing a view of Eucharist, Ross does not travel far. Through her qualitative research she concludes that women bring a broadening understanding of sacramentality and the gathering of the community as being formative of identity. She describes how the Eucharist is a place of 'continuity' for women, which they continue to hold on to, despite internal tensions which at times can become crippling. This leads to self-conscious 'ambiguity' as women 'refuse to make dualistic choices' between accepting or rejecting Eucharist, remaining in the church or sharing in alternative Eucharistic communities (Ross, 2001, p.217).

This leads Ross (2001, p.226) to redefine 'authentic Eucharist' through asking 'to what extent the Eucharist "effects what it signifies" – that is, unity, community, a sense of radical inclusion, a concern for feeding our many hungers and thirsts, a living out of the real presence of Christ in the midst of human life'. In WomenChurch and other alternative Eucharistic communities, Ross observes that 'the sacraments have slipped out of their institutional and liturgical confines and established themselves in the practices of women and men who seek to celebrate God's presence in the midst of life' (p.230). Returning to the question of how this development and her formation of a sacramental theology in the embodied context of family is transformative of Eucharist within the traditional churches, she concludes 'we have only begun to ask these questions and to push for answers' (p.230).

2.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has surveyed the problems which feminists have suggested women encounter in the Eucharist, namely the use of power and authority, language and imagery and theology, particularly sacrificial atonement theology, in the Eucharist. It has outlined responses made to these difficulties by feminists in both theological and liturgical work. These may be summarized as a renewal of language and imagery with the use of wider biblical resources and a focus on the anamnesis of women; a move towards horizontal space, emphasising equality and embodied participation by all; a reinterpretation of the meaning of Jesus' death and a desire to reflect shared participation with God in the processes of redemption; and the articulation of a present hope which is grounded in the realities of the whole of creation. Implicit to all of these is the assertion of the need for ambiguity, for space for difference and creativity, as women discern more fully their relationship with God in Eucharist.

The next sections of this thesis represent a continuing journey in exploring these questions and looking for routes toward transformation in Eucharistic theology in the Church of England particularly.

Ross' work, along with Dierks', Procter-Smith's and the creators of the feminist liturgies surveyed above, witness to the tenacity with which women hold on to the Eucharist and recognise the value it contains for them, despite internalised tension and ambiguity. It is imperative therefore that the power of the sacraments for women is not lost and so feminist theologians must work to reclaim the Eucharist in a way which honours the value women

place upon it and discovers the routes to transformation so that it feeds and nurtures their well-being.

This is the journey I now embark upon, asking what we can learn from young women's living experience of the Eucharist in the Church of England; what they value, how they understand its meaning and what methods of imagination and transformation they can and do bring to it.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets out the broad principles underlying the choices I made in the research design. It then outlines and explains my research process, from planning the interview format and accessing participants, through the different stages of analysis, to the presentation of my findings.

3.2 BROAD PRINCIPLES

In approaching my research design I concluded that there was no one single feminist method, but a variety of methods which feminists might choose to employ. This is unsurprising given the complexity of feminist theology which has its genesis across so many different genres of life and study, and the acknowledged tensions between academic and feminist principles and models of working (Stanley, 1997; Moore, 2002, p.20-21):

Feminist theo/alogy straddles many different boundaries, spanning the ‘fault lines’ of theory/practice, public/confessional, academic/popular, outsider/insider, reform/rejection (Graham, 1997, p.113).

Far from being a constraint, negotiating these areas of tension affords feminists the opportunity to bring creativity and innovation in developing methods appropriate to the study of women and the feminist practical theology agenda of empowerment and liberation.

I used three guiding principles in formulating my research design in a qualitative feminist standpoint framework: hearing women's voices; empowering women's voices; and awareness of my own voice as researcher.

3.2.1 Hearing women's voices

Women's various experiences of oppression throughout history and in our time is the basic experiential impetus for doing theology from a feminist perspective (Hauge, 1996, p.61-62).

This research is self-consciously committed to the task of liberation. It is based on my own commitment to listening to the voices of the women I interviewed, without any pre-conceived hypothesis about the outcome, beyond the generalised hunch (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.52) that a sacramental system which has arisen and been formed within an institutionally sexist church may not be fully meeting the needs of women.

Part of the oppression women have experienced in the church is simply the absence of their voices in the formation of theology and practice. In foregrounding women's experience, 'taking real life as the starting point, its subjective concreteness as well as its societal entanglements' (Mies, 1991, p.66), I embrace 'a commitment to the naming and disclosing of women's hidden experiences, for, under patriarchy, much of women's experience has remained invisible, unnamed and underground' (Slee, 2004b, p.172). This unearthed resource of women's experience provides both a source and a norm for the formation of theological knowledge. 'It is the substance, material and evidence upon which theory is

developed and built, on the one hand; and it is the norm against which theories and claims are judged on the other' (Slee, 2004b, p.46).

As stated in the introduction, women's experience is not a category to be used uncritically. Central to researching women's experience is sensitivity to its diversity. I ensured my research design would be attentive to and value difference at every stage of the process from seeking a diverse range of participants in terms of race, culture, background and so forth, to the differences in the views and experiences shared with me, through data analysis into the presentation of my findings.

As research grounded in women's own experiences, valuing diverse perspectives rather than seeking unity of voice, sensitive to ambiguity, including within individual voices, and committed to the emancipatory task of women's liberation, the second principle which informed my design was that of empowering voices.

3.2.2 Empowering women's voices

As a 'standpoint' (Brooks, 2007, p.55) study, this research is based in the belief that knowledge from the diverse experience of marginalised women can be used for the purposes of emancipation and transformation. It was therefore important that my methods be consonant with, and provide an opportunity for, the journey towards empowerment for my participants. This meant using ethical and non-oppressive methods that afforded women the freedom to speak and be heard on their own terms.

Given the liminal position I occupied on the boundary of priest (president at the Eucharist) and researcher (of women's experiences of Eucharist), I was acutely aware of the tensions between my (perceived) powerful position as priest and the empowering position I wished to assume as researcher.

Ethical considerations and awareness of power dynamics continued beyond accessing participants, gaining consent and conducting interviews in the data collection stage, into the dilemmas of how to transcribe and analyse interviews in a way which would be faithful to the encounter. There were further dilemmas in transitioning from interviewer to academic writer to present the data in an academic format for a very different audience from those who had shared in creating it, dilemmas discussed in detail by Kay Standing (1998, p.190) in *Writing the Voices of the Less Powerful*:

The issue is not just one of the gaps between the written word and the spoken word but between the spoken word and the academic representation of the spoken word. It is the ways in which we represent and interpret the women's voices which reinforces hierarchies of knowledge and power.

Feminists have moved away from the 'neutral' position of researcher, offering nothing to the exchange beyond encouraging disclosure by the interviewee (Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992), but the question of how the researcher locates themselves in relation to the subject, particularly in with-holding or imparting knowledge, remains. I sought a balance between answering questions and engaging with the struggles as another woman alongside my participants, thereby avoiding withholding knowledge that might be beneficial, but trying to

avoid as far as possible ‘an unhealthy separation between those who know and those who do not’ (Kvale, 1996, p.73).

This is inevitably a subjective process requiring intuition and trust, but maintaining my own consciousness of ethical, non-oppressive working throughout the process guided the decisions I made. There were times within my interviews where I did offer factual information in a gentle and supportive manner, but there were many more where I reassured interviewees that I was not looking for any ‘right’ answer to my question and was interested in their own insight and perspective.

3.2.3 Awareness of my own voice: reflexivity

Since the ground breaking work of Ann Oakley (1981) which challenged the assumptions of distance, objectivity and non-involvement on the part of the researcher, the role of the researcher within feminist qualitative research has developed (Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1992; Letherby, 2003), bringing the practice of reflexivity to the centre of qualitative methods (Letherby, 2003, pp.75-79; Olesen, 2005, pp.250-251). Maintaining reflexivity, ‘the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings’ (Swinton and Mowatt, 2006, p.59), has been critical to every stage of this research, from the research design to my understanding and presentation of the research outcomes.

As an ordained priest in the Church of England, and a young woman undertaking feminist research, I have stood on a liminal boundary between the conflicting tensions of these roles.

In many ways I am an ‘outsider within’ (Collins, 1991, p.49), but feel that this can be a position of strength for both the church which I represent and the feminist struggle for liberation of which I am a part. In this way, I understand my role and aims in undertaking this study as being similar to that of the black feminists described by Collins (1991, p.54):

What many Black feminists appear to be doing is embracing the creative potential of the outsider within status and using it wisely. In doing so, they move themselves and their disciplines closer to the humanist vision implicit in their work – namely the freedom to be different and to be part of the solidarity of humanity.

Many other elements of my identity shape my influence on the outcomes of this research. I am white and bring all of my own cultural assumptions to my engagement with and understanding of the data, which arises from the experience of both black and white women from different parts of the world. I am middle class and educated to post-graduate level, both of which reflect a position of privilege and power.

The fact that I undertook this study from a confessional stance as a committed member of the ecclesial community I was researching, as well as falling within the category of my research group myself, are key factors in determining my position. My position remains an ambiguous one. Before I was ordained I was a young lay women, and at present the majority of my time is spent as a mother caring for young children alongside lay people in the pews rather than in an obviously priestly role leading Eucharistic worship. This means there is much experience I share with participants in my study, as well as much that divides us.

My role as ordained priest brought particular complexity to the situation. In approaching the research with an open mind about the possible outcomes, I created a space for women to question the ‘truths’ of which I am professionally a representative and teacher. I opened up to critical investigation the very thing which it is my role to celebrate, protect and share, the Holy Communion. The complexity of these dynamics meant that without a deeply reflexive approach to the research it was likely that both the research process and the outcomes would be disingenuous.

I found two models from Mies (1991) particularly helpful in shaping my practice. Firstly, ‘partial identification’ whereby the researcher accepts the limitations of difference between herself and those being researched and instead builds upon what is shared. Mies uses the concept of ‘partial identification’ to help address difference and inequality between researcher and researched. While there may be barriers of culture, power, and knowledge, partial identification is in recognising shared experiences of sexism, oppression and marginalisation that bind us together as women; ‘that is to say, not only do the “other” women have a problem, but I do, too’ (p.79). This acknowledgement allows the research process to be one of reciprocal discovery and learning and helps to develop an integrated and reflexive approach.

The second helpful concept was Mies’ (1991, p.68) drive towards a more integrated approach to research.

In calling for an integration of research and science in an emancipatory praxis process, I do not have in mind a particular action or action research model ... It is much more a

matter of the reunification of life and thought, action and knowledge, change and research. I can imagine no freedom for women without this reunification.

This model is exemplified in the experience of Stanley and Wise (1993, p.160) in receiving, and at the same time researching, abusive phone calls.

Our experience of this [receiving calls] affected our lives outside of the research, including our ‘theoretical understandings and perceptions’ of the nature of women’s oppression ... then our experiences of the research, as our theoretical perceptions changed, changed too. All of this had consequences for our consciousness throughout the entire process. Everything fed into everything else.

This model of integration in research greatly informed my method of analysis into a long-term ‘living with the data’ (Green, F., 2009, p.74) as an on-going developmental process of engagement, fully integrated with my own identity and context.

3.3 THE RESEARCH DESIGN

My research design was consonant with both the patterns shaping and forming practical and qualitative theological methods, and the broad principles I have outlined above.

3.3.1 The Research Group

The parameters of my research group were simple. Participants were female, aged less than 35 years and had experience of Communion in the Church of England. I defined ‘young

women', the subject of my research, as being up to the age of 35 years due to the predominantly older age profile of the membership of the Church of England. This allows a picture to emerge from within the generation who will potentially form the female core of the Church of England for the next 40-50 years.

I accessed participants by placing advertisements in local education communities (chaplaincies, religious education departments, an ecumenical training college, student friendly churches etc.), which asked if women under 35 years with experience of Communion in the Church of England who would be willing to participate in a research interview would please make contact. It was important to me that the invitation to participate was an open one, rather than a direct personal request, so that participation was a voluntary choice on the part of the participants, rather than out of a sense of obligation or coercion.

My decision to access participants in a way which required them to make the first contact meant that the response rate was low. It was tempting to compromise on this principle, but I felt that my wish to avoid coercion was paramount. As the research progressed, my frustration over the difficulty finding volunteers gave way to increasing delight as I discovered that, in the holistic engagement which was possible with a small number of voices, I could honour the integrity and authenticity of the individual voices in a way which was impossible with a larger sample. Fonow and Cook (1991, p.13) argue that this ability to engage with the everyday situation even in the face of limited access, "scarce resources" and other obstacles to research is characteristic of the nature of women's research. 'The ability of feminists to transform the situation at hand into a research opportunity may be a survival

mechanism'. Certainly for me, this obstacle became an opportunity which greatly enhanced the richness of my analysis.

I interviewed ten women. Grace was the youngest at 19 years, and Emma and Laura the oldest at 34 years. All were living in England at the time of the interviews, but there was a significant international dimension to the research group. Alice had grown up in the Anglican Church in Switzerland, Ayo in Nigeria. Khadijat had converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church in her 20s having spent much of her early life as a Muslim with her emirate father whilst her Christian mother lived in Nigeria.

The women represented a diversity of church traditions within the Anglican Church. Their levels of commitment to the church varied from occasional to weekly attendance. Alice identified as Church of England but rarely attended church, whilst Claire had been a member of the Church of England all her life but was currently worshipping with her local United Reformed Church and Ann belonged to a 'Fresh Expression' community within the Church of England. It was significant that each woman had multiple experiences of church life in a variety of contexts and this richness and diversity all emphasised the complexity of women's relationships with the church and Holy Communion. In many cases it became apparent that the context of the faith community in early life had a significant impact on the later experiences of the women.

All of the women I interviewed had attained a high level of education, either to undergraduate or, in six cases, postgraduate level. This may be due to my own geographical location close to a number of higher education institutions and that women engaged in the

academic world may have been more likely to respond to the advertisement to participate in research. At the time of interview eight lived in urban contexts and two in a large village; three were black and seven white, four were students and four had children.

3.3.2 The interviews

The principles I have outlined above led me to use semi-structured interviews. Jennifer Mason offers a thorough consideration of the use of qualitative interviews in *Qualitative Researching* (Mason, 2002, Chapter 4) along with Oakley (1981), Reinharz (1992), Kvale (1996) and Letherby (2003). A semi-structured interview lends itself to a more narrative approach, where there is space for creativity and exploration on the part of the interviewee and questions are open rather than closed, enabling a means for women to speak the realities of their experience on their own terms.

I considered this method of data collection to be the most appropriate in honouring the three principles of hearing, empowering and reflexivity. Semi-structured interviews enabled me to access women's experience as a valid source of knowledge and basis for moving towards liberating transformation while allowing the interviewee to maintain a high degree of control over the content, direction and development of the conversation. This both unearths hidden experience and empowers the interviewee because she decides what is important and worthy of inclusion in her narrative and chooses what to disclose. As researcher I am clearly located within the conversations and an active part of the interview process.

The interviews were arranged at a time and location to suit the interviewee and in order to foster the control and autonomy of the interviewee I emphasised that she was free to choose not to answer particular questions or to end the interview at any time. Before each interview I discussed confidentiality, the use of recording and transcription, and in each case the woman chose the name I would use in transcription, analysis and writing up, either her own or a pseudonym. I offered completed interview transcripts to participants, but found it interesting that this offer was only taken up once. There was an evident confidence in what the women had shared and in how they had felt heard during the interview which was demonstrated in their responses of 'not needing' to see the transcript and also reflected in the choice of several women to retain their own name for use in the thesis. A number of women commented that they were happy with all that they had said and saw no reason not to have it attributed personally.

In the early interviews a number of factors quickly became apparent which helped to shape and determine both the development of my interview approach and indeed the limitations of this piece of research. I asked questions to elicit a narrative response which has been extremely successful in other qualitative interview studies in similar areas of feminist theology. Slee (2004b, p.55) and Berry (2006, p.39) both note that such questions prompted long and naturally flowing accounts as women shared and reflected on their experiences. However, it quickly became apparent that the specificity of my area of research meant narrative accounts were not able to 'free' women's speech in the same way. When I asked the women if they could tell me about a particular experience of Communion they remembered, almost without exception they were unable to recall any single significant occasion. In contrast the women were all able to describe 'how' events in a Communion

service unfolded, what was ‘done’ and different contexts in which they had experienced these things, and then to explore their feelings about these things.

By the third interview I had settled on a series of questions which I felt held the boundaries between focusing on the specific area of Communion while also enabling challenge and free-thinking on the part of the women (see appendix 2). The interviews had a natural life span of 35-45 minutes and I always concluded by offering the opportunity for the women to add anything else they wished.

3.3.3 The analysis process

In analysing my interviews I was cognisant of the multi-layered levels of interpretation embedded within the whole research process. Interpretation was inherent, as recognised in Berry’s (2009, p.46) work, ‘before I began any conscious analysis of the data’. I recognised there was no truly ‘raw’ or objective data to begin with; the processes of interpretation began from the first question I asked, as the women translated their lived experiences into speech and offered their own interpretations and meaning.

We cannot study ‘experiencing’ - religious experience in real time and its physical, mental, and emotional constituents - and therefore must study retrospective accounts - linguistic representations - of religious experiences ... and ... how an experience is made meaningful (Yamane, 2000, p.171).

Interpretation continued in my hearing of interviewee's words, my own clarifications and questions during the interviews, and the reflexive elements I brought to the processes of transcription and presentation.

Transcription

To transcribe the interviews I repeatedly listened to the recordings to create a written text (see appendix 3). This was as soon as possible after the interview, while the conversation was fresh in my memory, not just in terms of the verbal content, but also body language, emotional expression and other more intuitive perceptions, recognising that 'this aspect of epistemology involves not only acknowledgement of the affective dimension of research, but also recognition that emotions serve as a source of insight or a signal of rupture in social reality' (Fonow and Cook, 1991, p.9).

In transcribing the recordings myself, I immersed myself in the repetitions, self-corrections, and struggles for expression contrasted with sudden bursts of confident and self-assured speech and engaged once again in an embodied way with the data, prior to the subsequent more distanced readings of the data as a formed 'text'.

Each interview was typed using the same overall format, but allowing punctuation and lay out of prose to reflect the flow and pattern of the woman's speech. It was through the experience of transcription that I decided against a uniform system, such as a single unit of speech per line (Slee, 2004b, p.57; Phillips, 2011, p.71) as I found I needed to respond to the diversity in the speech patterns of my participants. Some spoke in very short broken

segments of speech which were recorded as short lines for each ‘spurt’ of speaking, others in remarkably dense sustained paragraphs which took internal twists and turns but flowed as a whole in the experience of the interview. To have broken these sustained flows into small units would, I felt, have been detrimental to hearing and reading the voices authentically.

Recording the different patterns of speech in transcription helped *me* to remain engaged with the full experience and retain the patterns of thought and indeed hesitation and struggle in the speech of the women in a visual way on paper that I could return to during the later processes of analysis. However, in presenting the data in this thesis, consonant with my aims of empowering the voices, and cognisant of Standing’s (1998) work mentioned above, I have moderated quotations into a more uniform prose format. This avoids visually presenting some voices as less articulate than others (particularly as some interviews took place in the woman’s second or third language). By avoiding unhelpful differences in presentation my intention is to ensure all perspectives are presented as of equal worth and validity, regardless of the ease with which they were expressed. Quotations remain faithful representations of the speech with all its unique patterns and idiosyncrasies. I have simply made the speech more accessible to the reader through a prose format ‘not altering actual words, but sometimes punctuating and selecting in a way that makes for more coherent and familiar sentence structure’ (Berry, 2006, p.51).

Analysis

‘The analysis proper involves developing the meaning of the interviews, bringing the subjects’ own understanding into the light as well as providing new perspectives from the

researcher' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.196). In analysing the data, issues of power are as apparent as in the conduct of the interviews, if not more so. Here the choices of definition, interpretation and representation became exclusively my domain (Acker et al, 1991, p.142). Though I have not followed a strict grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006), there are aspects of the 'ground up' approach which have informed my chosen methods of analysis, allowing themes to emerge in a gradual process of listening and immersion. This was a reflexive process in which themes emerged not only through factors such as statistical frequency and repetition or power of emotion in expression, but also through the context of my identity and experience which will inevitably have caused me to hear some themes more quickly than others.

Feminist action research centres on the interplay of three things: the research experience where data arises, the theoretical framework and the researcher's own feminist awareness and consciousness. This process is described by Stanley and Wise (1991, p.280) as 'seeing reality differently', arguing that a 'transformative shift comes about 'in a symbiotic relationship with our "experiences"' both in their primary experiential research and in their subsequent analysis of it. It is in the symbiotic relationship between the experience of the interview and on-going analysis, the feminist theoretical framework within which I locate my research and my own feminist consciousness that my findings emerged.

My analysis was a 'dynamic and fluid process' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.101). I outline four steps within my analysis which describe the overall trajectory, but rather than a linear progression, there was considerable movement between steps in a continual spiral of analysis. As themes emerged within this process, I tested my interpretations against original

transcripts, between different transcripts and with data from new ones, such that they re-emerged in a more developed form to be tested once again. Within this ‘free-flowing dialogue’ (Slee, 2004b, p.57) were inherent questions at every step about the interpretation of meaning in the data, what the women intended to express, what meanings were latent or hidden in their accounts, and how the voices came into dialogue with one another and with other perspectives external to the data.

Firstly, in the context of growing familiarity with the content of the transcripts through immersion in the tapes and re-readings of transcripts, I annotated the transcripts to note a large number of categories of data content. This enabled a second step of horizontal reading between the transcripts as I gathered data together within categories to examine in greater detail the relationships between the different voices and the perspectives and meanings within them (see appendix 4). Throughout this process I repeatedly read original transcripts to check for consistency and integrity in the interpretations I made as well as seeking out omissions from my thinking or unexpected connections or contradictions. This helped authenticate my reading of the data and to check for further data that may have been missed on earlier readings.

Thirdly, I used spider diagrams to explore patterns and relationships within the data, allowing the minor categories to coalesce into themes. This was an extended process which was attentive to diversity as well as coherence and the importance of creating space for difference within the emerging themes (see appendix 5).

Finally, I brought these themes into dialogue with one another as well as with insights from the background of feminist literature and feminist liturgical work surveyed earlier, and my continuing reading and theological reflection, as I identified connections and relationships between the themes (see appendix 6). This process led to the shaping of the three analysis chapters which follow on the themes of exclusion and alienation, horizontal relationships and community, and understandings of Communion.

3.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the principles and processes by which I have collected and analysed the data presented in the following three chapters. It has demonstrated how the research design fulfils the three principles of hearing women's voices in a way which foreground women's experience and values difference, empowering women through non-oppressive methodology and working reflexively as a researcher.

The transparent and rigorous process of analysis outlined above demonstrates how my findings have been internally validated through testing within and between the interviews, and against wider literature, recognising the importance of both convergence and disagreement as sources of learning and growth.

The process outlined has elicited rich and valuable data which offers new insight and perspective on this hidden area of women's experience and understanding. It has enabled the voices of the women I interviewed to dialogue with one another's differing perspectives, and

to both affirm and critique existing feminist literature and the Eucharistic tradition of the church.

I do not claim the findings I present in this thesis to be universal truths, indeed to do so would be wholly contrary to the aims and nature of the research. The findings I present are valuable in their particularity as fragments of new knowledge, ‘in keeping with the postmodern spirit of “bricolage” – enquiry which proceeds by piecing together fragments, eschewing elevated theoretical schemes, aware of the provisionality and fragility of knowledge’ (Graham, 2009, p.154). Like Phillips (2011, p.72), I believe the ‘authority’ of the research findings comes through the ‘the integrity of its methodology and data gathering, and transparency of analysis’ and the value of the new insights and knowledge gained about women’s experience of the Eucharist. It is these findings which I now present.

4. CLAIMING OUR PLACE

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter surveys the themes which emerged in women's experiences of exclusion from Communion. It begins with the boundaries women encounter in accessing Communion and the power dynamics at work in Eucharistic celebration.

This leads to the second section which looks at the implications of the sense of separation experienced, both as women and as laity, from Communion, which can make Communion feel a place of threat and fear and lead to feelings of unworthiness.

The final section considers women's responses to these aspects of their experience and sets the scene for my conclusions about how Eucharistic theology might begin to address this picture of alienation and exclusion amongst young women.

4.2 ENCOUNTERING THE BOUNDARIES

The church has many boundaries, of different types, serving differing purposes. The women I interviewed identified both explicit and implicit boundaries, marked in a whole range of different ways including specific rites, church rules and teaching, dress, physical space and language. These marked the distinction between those included and those excluded. It is important from the outset to recognise the ambiguity of women's relationship with these boundaries. Many aspects, experienced as exclusive, also have the potential to create the

experience of inclusion and belonging, something which was deeply important to the women.

4.2.1 Initiation rites

The event which most demonstrably marked the transition from exclusion to inclusion at Communion was Confirmation. Experiencing Confirmation or adult baptism as a significant boundary featured in seven of the ten interviews. The prominence of this in so many of the interviews, without me initiating the subject, is revealing. Confirmation has traditionally been the means of becoming a communicant member of the Church of England and the women viewed Confirmation as a gateway, or alternatively as a barrier, to Communion. There was an overarching theme of permission which revealed how the women understood power and authority over admission to Communion as residing outside their control. This perception had usually formed at a relatively early age, as was the case in Grace's experience.

... the church that I went to when we were growing up would only let you be confirmed at fourteen ... cos I kind of you know made this big decision when I was about six that I was going to be Jesus' best friend, and always do this and be really, by the time I was eleven I was really quite miffed that we couldn't be confirmed you know and we couldn't be confirmed till like year nine which was years away ... so when I first got confirmed it was partly 'yeah real Christian', and 'yeah we can actually do Communion properly'.

Claire experienced this period of waiting for Confirmation very differently because of her mother's views.

I had to be confirmed at my church before I could start taking Communion, but ... because I was very inquisitive about these things before I was confirmed (*laughter*), my mum used to give me well a half or a quarter of her little bit of bread ... I can't remember when I got confirmed but I s'pose I must have been eleven, twelve, into secondary school, Cos I'm, my mum didn't really agree with, you know, that you had to wait that long until you would be able to take Communion ...

I used to think it was really silly that I couldn't get, that I could only have a blessing.

Confirmation nonetheless remained a significant point in her journey to feeling fully included and later in the interview Claire returned to reflect on the impact of Confirmation for her own sense of belonging,

I remember when I was confirmed and started getting the Communion that I did feel very included in the church then and I think the church really tried to make me feel more included.

Alice saw the choice about whether to be confirmed as a very significant moment in her relationship with the church and in her own sense of personal agency. It was the first life event which she raised in interview, during the first two minutes, and she spontaneously identified it as a key moment of transition. She had decided, as a 12year old, that she did not want to be confirmed.

I was very conscious of the fact that my parents made us go to church every Sunday, and we didn't have a choice, and as soon as I had that choice, that was the first time I was ever given a choice.

Alice's repetition of the word choice and the importance of having choice for the first time is revealing and the significance of this is explored further later in this chapter.

Ayo saw the Confirmation process, including classes beforehand and the practice of confession, as a necessary transition to receiving Communion because of her fears about receiving Communion in an unprepared way.

Confirmation classes are like three months, six months! Then you can go to Communion because they have made you understand the implications, you now become responsible for yourself as regards that.

Again, though from a very different perspective, Ayo recognised the point of Confirmation and admission to Communion as a point at which individual choice and responsibility is acquired and the balance of power between church and individual is altered.

It was through adult baptism that Khadijat felt *allowed* to receive Holy Communion, although she had received it previously. 'Recently when I got baptised, my first like official Communion, I felt like it was the time like I was actually allowed to go for Communion'. When I asked her if the baptism changed her thoughts or feelings about Communion she responded, 'Not really no, I always felt the same after and before. Now I just felt like now

I'm really allowed to go'. Feeling fully incorporated and accepted into the Eucharistic fellowship was very important for Khadijat who explained; 'I like to be part of the group, I just feel like I'm doing something with everyone else'. The initiation rite affirmed the belonging and togetherness she sought. 'It felt like, em, like whole, you know, knowing that I'm now especially part of it'.

Many of the women had felt excluded by having to wait for Confirmation. Grace was held back on her Christian journey for much of her youth because she was unable to take that 'next step' until a fixed age. Some had found interim responses to this sense of exclusion, Claire by sharing her mother's wafer, Khadijat by receiving Communion prior to her adult baptism. But it was in moving through the initiation rite that the boundary was crossed and women found what they described as 'permission' or 'being allowed' and feeling 'included'. This highlights the ambiguity of boundaries such as Confirmation, which caused feeling of exclusion, frustration and alienation, and also provided the means of becoming 'taken in' and feeling fully included within the church.

4.2.2 Being refused Communion

The women recounted many experiences of being refused Communion themselves, and of close family members having Communion withheld from them. In the majority of cases the reaction to these experiences was to argue for more radical inclusion. There was a deep and instinctive sense that, regardless of the teaching of the church, this exclusion was wrong, unjust and damaging.

As Ayo grew up her mother was unable to share in Communion as she had been excommunicated because she was not married in the Catholic Church. Ayo accepted the situation and it did not appear to have had any obviously negative impact on her. This reflects Ayo's description of her strict Nigerian Christian background and it is important to her that rules and boundaries are upheld.

My mum was ok. We go there and she did not have issues with not having Communion. She did not mind she's still with God, and in a way it's your heart and God really, it's not just about the Catholic Church. It doesn't matter.

Immediately after the end of Ann's interview she remarked that having struggled to recall a specific memory of Communion she could now remember one very well. Significantly this was an instance of being *refused* Communion, an experience Ann had suffered twice. I noted her words as accurately as I could immediately afterwards.

One was at my home church when a visiting minister was giving Communion. The other church I visited once and I never went back. They didn't recognise me. I am short and people often think I look younger than I am and they didn't give me Communion and it made me feel really upset inside. I felt powerfully upset, possibly, probably angry.

Like Ann, Laura had been deeply affected by the impact of having access to Communion denied. In her case her father had been excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church as he had been previously married and divorced.

... he was about to die before having an operation ... my mother called a priest and they gave him Communion after many many years because my father was divorced and so he was completely marginalized from the church.

And I all the time I've had Communion, and it makes me cry even remembering, I remember the time was in hospital ... and he was so joyful, he was intimately so, I don't know, so moved by the fact that he had received Communion after so many years. He felt like being loved again and it was so, I will never forget the face and when he told me like this, and crying, oh really I can remember this ... so every time I receive Communion I remember his face and it's really important.

For Laura the emotional impact of exclusion had affirmed her theological position of inclusion. She followed this moving account by describing what she liked about Communion and the juxtaposition of the two perspectives (the Church's and her own) is revealing of how her thinking has developed. She talked of 'a food that is available for everybody',

Something there that is endless and that it's really open to everybody who wants to receive it ... this gift which is open to everybody. And I guess that probably there's a little bit of contrast with people who are, because they don't deserve it, like my father didn't deserve it for so many years.

I asked Laura to clarify whether this was her own belief, and her response was adamant:

No, no, no, no, I think that the church ... he was seen as somebody who didn't deserve ... what I feel about Communion is that it's something that should be open to all, to everybody.

The debate around access to Communion resonates through the history of the churches and an 'open table' is a particular mark of many of the Free Churches. As inclusive theologies continue to develop, placing limits on access to Communion continues to come under criticism.

Jesus, it seems, did not wait for those whom he touched, healed and ate with to confess to an elaborate body of doctrinal information. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes – not *reformed* tax collectors and prostitutes. He even said they would enter the kingdom of God first (along, we read, with children, also considered 'nobodies' in Jesus' day) (Shakespeare and Rayment-Pickard, 2006, p.94).

Claire tried to make sense for herself of the complex situation of participating in Communion on a pilgrimage she joined, where both Anglicans and Roman Catholics were present.

It's a Catholic pilgrimage so they have the Catholic Mass, so I don't take part obviously in that part of the Eucharist, but they also have an Anglican priest who says some, so it's kind of separate Communion. They don't call it that. They call it something else that sounds more inclusive than separate (*Laughter*)
But for me I really do feel that the table should be open to all people.

And it really stands out when we stand there going to separate priests ...

I spoke to another friend of mine, and she's Catholic, and she said 'well I don't know whether I'm allowed to take Anglican Eucharist because the Catholic Church says you're only supposed to take it from a Catholic Church'. So it's difficult to know isn't it, what's right and what's wrong and when a doctorate says something?

In her description of 'a doctorate', which seemed to mean a church authority, perhaps related to doctrine, Claire again expresses her awareness that authority is located elsewhere, and outside her control. Although her experiences leave her with some degree of confusion, and a feeling that the power to determine 'what's right and what's wrong' lies in external church authority, Claire is still able to assert her own belief, clear in her personal conclusion that 'the table should be open to all people'.

4.2.3 Power dynamics

Being denied access to Communion was one aspect of oppressive power dynamics experienced by women. Khadijat described the distinction between herself and those who had authority within the church community as helpful in her experience of worship and Communion, but it also brought with it an ambiguous effect upon her self-understanding, which will be considered in section 4.3.2. In her interview she placed great importance on the distinction between those who worked in the church and those who did not. Reflecting on her experiences in various countries and cultures she observed how this was symbolized in dress and ritual:

I like the fact that they wear, in em Hungary the priest ... he wore like shorts and trainers ... I don't think it helps. Here you wear the clothes, very serious and very calm. There they had rock, when they played the songs; it was like proper rock, singing God song and all that ... I didn't feel the holiness ...

I went to a Nigerian church here a couple of times and when you get in there the pastor just started talking from the top of his head (*laughter*) ... They don't have the whole procession everyone walking down with the candles, don't have so many things. I think if they had it gives it more meaning.

Like Khadijat, Alice saw wearing robes as a powerful symbol of authority, but she described how breaking down distinctions was important in helping her feel at ease. She contrasted her early memories of 'all the robes and I think maybe the formality of it is quite ... I mean not off-putting but, I don't know' with her current church context which she felt was very good at making people feel welcome. When I asked her what made it welcoming, her response was revealing.

They also have lay, I don't know what you call them, is it lay people?

Who aren't dressed in sort of robes and everything and they'll be giving out the...

So there's no kind of clear authority ...

It's kind of, making it less strange you know.

Laura too had a keen awareness of the division between the laity and priests and was sensitised to this separation in celebrating Communion. With her 'anthropologist eyes' she

was critical of the physical structuring of the ritual, questioning the role of the priest and how the 'protagonists' are 'somewhere else'.

I don't feel that the mass itself is a nice, is an attractive rite. So yes, and I feel that actually a lot of people don't feel attracted in the mass because it's not, because it's too hierarchical and er it is not cheerful enough, and the organisation of space is ... d'you know what it feels like you are in front of a kind of performance but that, and the audience participates a lot in that performance, but finally the main act is elsewhere, is in front of them.

This problem has been considered in Shakespeare and Rayment-Pickard's (2006, p.95) critique of non-inclusive aspects of the Eucharist.

As a spectator sport, the Eucharist falls prey to the besetting sins of the age: first, to turn religion into a ready-made object or teaching which we have to contemplate from afar or understanding intellectually in order to be a part of; and second, making Communion into an essentially individualistic act between me and my God. To put it strongly, the Church was not shaped by Jesus' kingdom banquet. It administered it in the name of its own authority to control the life of the believer.

Ultimately Laura's views led to a place where she imagined ways of everyone participating together in the act of remembering the final meal of Jesus and his disciples. She was the most radical of the interviewees in directly confronting the dilemma of the alienation caused

by the hierarchical separation of power in Communion between the priests and laity and seeking solutions.

Tina Beattie (2008, p.247) argues that the role of women priests can be pivotal in bridging the gap between ‘them’ and ‘us’, bringing a woman’s body into the interplay between people and God in the Eucharist, ‘and called as priest of God and of creation to consecrate the creation to its creator, in whose womb we are nurtured and brought to the fullness of life’. However, I found no evidence that the experience of women’s priestly and Eucharistic ministry amongst lay women was impacting on their internalised experience of exclusion and alienation. I was genuinely surprised at the paucity of reference to receiving women’s ministry, which was mentioned only once throughout all the interviews. The lack of almost any evidence that women’s presidency at the Eucharist was impacting on the negative experiences the women shared strongly suggests that this on its own is unable to adequately ‘bridge the gap’ for lay women.

4.3 FACING THREATS AND FEARS

The boundaries and power dynamics explored above are part of a wider context which fosters alienating experiences of separation for the woman, and these were often expressed in the language of threat and fearfulness

4.3.1 Receiving Communion

Alice described early experiences of kneeling at 'like a wooden gate and the altar behind it, sort of looking up at the table and everything' as feeling 'kind of other worldly'. For Grace a transcendent or 'other-worldly' quality in worship was a positive and valuable experience,

you come out of church feeling really like empowered, kind of being almost on a different plane, yeah it's kind of like a different plane of happiness, it's not grounded but you know it's almost something else completely different.

More commonly however, the women described the sense of otherworldliness as negative and contributing to feelings of discomfort and alienation. Alice described,

I remember as a child going up to the sort of altar bit where you take Communion and just thinking, you know, being told this is the blood of Christ and everything and just thinking wow this is very strange you know, very weird ... almost like a taboo thing that I need to kind of overcome to have access.

She reflected how, when she was younger, the idea of bread and wine being 'body' and 'blood', 'did freak me out a bit'. In a contrasting experience Alice described sharing a loaf of bread on a parish walk which felt more normal. 'It's a piece of bread, it's not someone's body or you can see what it is and it's not something strange'. The informal, outdoor Communion or sharing of bread (it is not clear from Alice's description the exact nature of the act she participated in) 'was very nice actually and I think also the threat was removed,

you don't have to be confirmed, you're just free to partake yeah'. Finding this context where the taboo was removed and there was 'a normal piece of bread' and it 'just felt very natural' was the only way in which Alice was able to actually share in the Communion alongside others and 'to have access'. Without this she felt compelled to maintain her 'no' of resistance.

There is fear latent in Alice's descriptions of Communion. She explained that going forward for a blessing, 'I don't feel you know, I don't feel as threatened by it in a strange sort of sense. And I do like that, you know, receiving a blessing. I like the ritual, I like it you know'. Her identification of 'threat', along with the use of descriptions such as 'freaked out', 'very strange', 'very weird', 'a taboo thing', paints a picture of deep discomfort and alienation. This sense of fear was echoed by Claire as she talked about an experience of Mass at her Catholic secondary school.

I got the wafer stuck straight in my mouth and it absolutely scared me to death ... I was worried about transubstantiation as it was ... and I'd been kind of told, it was drilled into us 'you're not a Catholic and it's the Catholics who take the Eucharist and you don't' ... it still stays with me now, horrible *horrible* experience, and I was so worried that something awful, like you know God would be very cross with me because I'd taken the Communion, and it was a complete accident, you know ...

The power of this experience was so great that despite the reassurances of her mother and another lay minister, she still felt afraid. She reflected on her internal response to their

reassurances, explaining ‘But I had a nun as a form tutor as well and I knew at the time that “she wouldn’t have the same opinion as you”’.

While many women expressed a general sense of fear, for Ayo this was focussed in her views about confession. Ayo felt that the boundaries which excluded or included were very important as a means of ensuring safety from the ‘dangerous’ consequences of participation in Communion. She spoke with passion as she recalled an instance when,

Everyone was invited to take Communion, and when he said everyone, that’s where confession comes in. Confession tells you sometimes as a communicant you really don’t take Communion ... Now if I’d stopped, I didn’t, but if I’d stopped one person, probably the person next to me, and if like, ‘What is the significance of the Communion, what are the dangerous sides to this?’ they didn’t know ...

Before the Communion is passed,
please explain to these people what it is, what it’s about.

Make them confess their sins.

Ayo saw confession as a pre-requisite to participation in Communion and believed that sin or the absence of confession should exclude individuals from participating. The catechetical instruction she received as a young woman had evidently given her a focus on spiritual preparation for receiving Communion and her repetition of this point throughout her interview demonstrated how overriding this concern was to her. She spoke for three sustained periods about the importance of confession and repeatedly referred to it, using the words ‘confession’, ‘confess’ or ‘confessing’ twenty-four times during the course of the

interview. Her references to the ‘dangerous side’ of Communion demonstrated her fear and she cited the passage from 1 Corinthians 11⁴ explaining this in her own words; ‘some people for the reason of abusing the Communion fall asleep. That sleep actually refers to death’.

It became very clear that the church was communicating threat to the women, both implicitly in its practices, and more explicitly in its teachings and prohibitions. In celebrating Communion, the church must recognise the need for women to renew and re-create self-understanding, to practice faith and religious ritual in a way which nurtures our ability to conceptualize ourselves and God, which is so vital to a healthy relationship with God. My research data confirms that in a Eucharistic context women ‘....desperately need primary communities that nurture their journey into wholeness, rather than constantly negating and thwarting it’ (Ruether, 1985, p.5).

4.3.2 Being worthy

My analysis also revealed a theme of unworthiness which left women feeling they were outside the boundaries of purity and holiness. This was often latent in the women’s voices and highlights what women absorb and internalise about gender, value and self-worth from the history and culture of the church. There is much in the tradition and life of the church to leave women with a pervasive sense of their unworthiness. Historically there are examples of young women driven to severe asceticism by the ‘unbearable inadequacy that she

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11.27-30: Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (NRSV)

experiences in society and Church by virtue of being female' (Loades 1987, p.44) and church teaching and racism 'have inculcated destructive feelings of unworthiness in black women' (Kamitsuka, 2007, p.120). It has been argued that Communion is particularly problematic for sufferers of eating disorders as its focus on eating and drinking 'can reinforce their sense of guilt, shame and unworthiness' (Carson and Slee, 2008, p.140) and that 'the worship of Christ's blood ... has crippled women through guilt and unworthiness' (Isherwood, 2001, p.65).

Khadijat identified those who had authority within her church as being 'holy enough'. In talking about lay assistants giving out the Communion, she observed 'I wouldn't mind doing it but somehow I feel as if I don't have the authority to do it you know. Like I'm not holy enough or something'. The result of her perception was to leave her feeling that she was *not* 'holy enough', and was somehow different from those who were able to carry out certain roles and tasks in a way which lessened her own sense of equality and worthiness. I asked Alice, 'How do you feel? At that point when you're making that choice to refuse, how do you feel?' After a long silence she responded, 'I don't know ... I think there's something about kind of not, not, almost not feeling worthy enough'.

These feelings can be reinforced by the Communion liturgy. At the invitation to Communion one of the responses begins 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you' (Common Worship, 2000, p.180), and this may be followed by the Prayer of Humble Access, used immediately before receiving Communion, which includes the words 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table' and continues with the plea 'that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his Body, and our souls washed through his most

precious Blood' (Common Worship, 2000, p.181) . Though this prayer is used by women and men, Miller's (1986, p.58-9) early work on the psychological effects of women's position as a subordinate group argues this often results in women being

left with a global, undefined sense that she must be wrong ... one builds up a store of angry negative emotions, feeling not only wrong, but – much more frighteningly – bad and evil.

This provides the context where such liturgical material has a far more detrimental impact upon women, already receptive to conceiving themselves as wrong and unworthy.

It is unsurprising then that women experience such feelings and fears in relation to Communion. Women have experienced a double negation through their exclusion on the ground of their bodiliness; firstly, in its difference to Christ's (male) body which has made them unable to represent Christ at the altar, and secondly in the rejection and repulsion of their bodily functions in menstruation and childbirth. Green (2009b, p.17) refers to Nancy Jay's work on male blood sacrifice to argue that sacrifice is something which purifies the defilement of the woman after blood loss and therefore sacrifice stands in 'symbolic opposition' to childbirth. I would argue that this impacts women not only in relation to childbirth, but more universally, in its symbolic opposition to the very nature of woman which means to be one who loses blood for a period of her life, whether bearing children or not. However, concepts of cleanliness extend far beyond issues of menstruation and bodily functions and are often caught up with concepts of sinfulness, as was clear in Ayo's reflection.

I see confession before Communion as important because then you are stopping the old you. You are taking in the body and blood of Christ, you are asking him to make you new, clean ... and I think if you want God to answer you I think you should honestly be clean yourself and why I would stress confession before Communion.

Ann identified how concepts of sinfulness had been detrimental to her self-image, but she and Laura had both responded by rejecting theology and rules which were damaging to their wellbeing and wanted to create new, more healthy understandings for themselves, demonstrating 'the potential for the experience of alienation to become a generating force for transformation' (Slee, 2004b, p.107). Ann explained,

My understanding of God as saving us from our sin and of God as male I think made me not feel very good about myself. I think it made me feel that I was very sinful ... sometimes prayer to God was very much confessional and it was confessional in the sense of recognising God's goodness and our great sinfulness and kind of almost being like a little ball on the floor in prayer and I think it didn't give me a very good self-image and I think that not linking God to saving us from our sins and not linking God to a heavenly father who needs to save us from our sins and otherwise needs to punish us, I think there's all kind of theology in there that actually I'm in the process of rejecting and that is incredibly healthy for my self-image, for who I am, and allows me to be a lot happier.

Laura offers a redefinition of worthiness to receive Communion. She views Communion as the generous gift of God who is like the father of the prodigal son. Her perspective contrasts

Ayo's emphasis on the need to be 'clean' and again had been shaped by her experience of her father's exclusion.

My kind of own re-interpretation of what I've learned from church and from catechism,

I don't feel that you really need to be prepared somehow to receive Communion, like your soul should be clean or something ...

I think that er many times in which I had doubt, it finally prevailed in me to decide to receive Communion and so many times I feel it's 'I haven't made confession for a long time' but finally said 'ok if I have an attitude of humility' I still feel that is, you know, feel the forgiveness of God and I think that he's saying magnanimity, his generosity...

(English failed us here and Laura explained what she was saying about the nature of God in terms of the parable of the Prodigal Son)

So I feel that your own attitude makes a difference. Otherwise we are never really prepared to receive Communion ... like my father's story I feel he really deserved to have, because at the end he was really marginalised from the church for this time and it wasn't good for him either.

By asserting a fundamental equality of humans in relation to preparedness for receiving, Laura rejects the church's marginalisation of people on this basis, and reflects Russell's (1993, p.145) belief that

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

In contrast to inherited understandings of cleanliness and worthiness, Letty Russell argues for a Communion where all are considered clean and all are worthy, a place of transformative welcome and equality.

The sacraments are the foretaste of God's future. The table rightly prepared is a table that belongs to God, where all things are clean ... Coming to the table we discern Christ's body not only in the broken bread but also in the broken people of the world. And if we welcome them with us we may receive the gift of a renewed church, a church that makes outsiders welcome (Russell, 1993, p.147).

4.4 WOMEN TAKING CONTROL

Ann's choice to reject certain theology, and Laura's choice to reconstruct her understanding of what it means to be worthy to receive Communion, are indicative of women's desire and ability to take control of situations in Communion which they find oppressive, alienating and unhealthy. A variety of different ways women found to take control were reflected through the interview data.

4.4.1 Self-exclusion

Alice had grown up with a strong family church background in the Anglican church in Switzerland, and later at boarding school in the UK where chapel was a routine part of life. She was unique amongst the interviewees in describing herself as never having received Communion (in the form of bread and wine).

I still go and get the blessing, which often is quite strange I think because people assume, you know, that I'm happy to sort of be a full part of it and I don't feel like I am ...

And I will get up and sort of go through the whole ritual process except when it comes to kind of receiving the bread and wine I refuse it and its odd I know it's just odd but I just don't feel comfortable with it.

Her decision to self-exclude was a means of taking control of a situation where she felt that things were 'weird' and often 'forced' and therefore her autonomy was under threat. By excluding herself of her own volition she took control rather than allowing these powerful feelings to exclude her.

It's important to me to be making my own choice about going. I still feel uncomfortable if I go with my parents because it was a very forced thing.

She picked this theme up again later in the interview, reflecting on what had made Communion feel uncomfortable for her and echoing her earlier words:

For me it's very much a thing of being forced, and again that might be something to do with it, you know, being forced to take something, you know, and perhaps that's a part of the reason why I don't, I don't want it.

In the light of this repetition of the idea of being 'forced', I asked Alice about what she thought was right terminology for what happens at Communion.

I'd call it receiving, but I wouldn't see it in a passive sense because you've got to be willing to receive something, you've got to be willing to receive that gift you know, because you have the right to refuse, everyone has the right to refuse a gift and so receiving something is also an active thing.

Alice's response to the Communion ritual and her decision to participate on her own terms offers an interesting reflection on Procter-Smith's (1995a, p.41-2) argument that 'Univocal prayer creates a coercive space in which consent is assumed and *yes* is the only possible response ... our practices of prayer and ritual presume the agreement of the participants, and assume that the participants are capable of consent'. Rather than articulating her position as being excluded *by* the ritual of the church, Alice is confident in her self-exclusion. This is an assertive response to the 'coercive space' in which she has found herself. Whilst it is true that consent is assumed in the ritual practice of Communion, Alice's practice states a clear, self-chosen 'no'. The choice and ability to dissent that Alice demonstrated in her relationship to Communion and in her initial decision not to be confirmed, were reflected as key themes in several other interviews.

4.4.2 The ability to dissent and freedom to choose

Unlike Alice, many of the other women I interviewed chose to remain living within the tension of participating fully in Communion and at the same time wrestling with experiences of exclusion and alienation, but they shared with Alice an emphasis on the importance of choice and personal autonomy.

The diversity of the women's responses offer insight into three different "moments" of women's reaction to the power of the church in deciding the limits of inclusion; acceptance, resistance and dissent. The different responses of the women to their experiences of exclusion from Communion give a particularly clear demonstration of these three moments of reaction. The first response is acceptance. Ayo accepts and embraces the situation without any evidence of discomfort. She argues that Communion cannot be received without a correct lifestyle and this included her mother being excluded because of divorce. She feels rules and boundaries are important and upholds them strongly. The second response is to resist. Most of the women who had reframed their belief and practice of Communion described having been through times of distress and anger. Ann described being 'powerfully angry' when refused Communion and Laura had been deeply distressed by her father's excommunication. This response is also demonstrated in wider feelings of resistance, including Claire's sense that exclusion was 'silly'. Ultimately the experiences of exclusion and alienation brought many of the women to the third response of choosing to dissent and take ownership of her understanding. Laura's reaction to the control of the church over the individual's access to Communion is to reject the underlying principle of the church's

position, to reconstruct her own understanding of what is right and develop her personal practice accordingly. She uses imagination to reframe her views of what Communion means and how this could be enacted in the Eucharistic community. Alice seeks out contexts which 'normalise' Communion into a world which she recognises and identifies with and maintains her early decision not to conform to the expectations of the church in her own practice. Claire also stands in articulate opposition to coercive space, nurtured by her mother's re-working of the rules to enable Claire to share in Communion as a child and Grace echoes the importance of autonomy in her wish for knowledge in order to choose agreement or dissent for herself.

These different moments of response can be seen in many of the other areas of women's experiences of church. It was possible to discern from the diversity of responses a sense of journey and trajectory through these three stages. Those who had adopted a position of dissent had consciously moved away from acceptance, usually through experiences of resistance and anger, and at times still drawing upon these experiences had formed their own dissenting view.

Claire felt there should be space for individuals to come to their own beliefs about Communion. 'I think everyone comes to these things differently don't they? and I personally probably don't think it's right to force things on people'. Grace too, wanted to maintain her own autonomy against a 'coercive space'. She talked with confidence about being able to hold her own perspectives, challenge established positions and for this to be accepted within her church community regardless of her age and, implicitly, her gender.

I'd actually rather disagree with, like, the church's teachings as a whole rather than not know what they are ... you're actually on an equal level with everybody else ... I've never gone to a house group where I've felt, like, 'oh but you're a student and you're only twenty and oh you can't really give me advice', you know.

Laura was self-aware about how she chose to dissent from doctrine she had received from the church. Not only did she speak of her 'own re-interpretation of what I've learned from church and from catechism', but very early in her interview she wrestled with her desire to find a channel for her own voice and those like her to be heard and to be effective within the church.

There are aspects of the church I go to I don't like ... but at the same time I feel that I don't do anything to change, so as a member of the church I just take but I'm not contributing too. I don't know whether there's really the space to do that but sometimes I feel uncomfortable with this ... I don't know how I could express, sometimes I, maybe you could organize like a kind of movement in which we could just speak out ... I always pray, like, to God to give me some point the chance to do something or to show me the way how to express myself.

4.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter demonstrates how the negative and destructive patterns of experience and self-understanding amongst women in the church are borne out specifically in relation to Eucharistic practice and theology as experienced by lay women in the church. Through

analysing the interviews it was evident that women were *feeling and internalising* exclusion from the Eucharist at a much more fundamental level than simply the individual instances they described. The sense of exclusion and alienation was grounded in an internalised sense of women being ‘other’, while power, authority and holiness were perceived as external to women’s control and identity.

Almost all the women reacted strongly to boundaries which excluded themselves or others, as well as those aspects of Communion which created feelings of alienation or fear. Being refused Communion, the symbolism of wearing vestments and robes, the use of liturgical space, and limiting access to special or holy areas of the church, all marked out distinctions for the women between ‘them’ and ‘us’; those who were in control, enacting the ritual, controlling access, holy and powerful, and those who were passive recipients.

An important aspect of the women’s reaction to exclusion was to seek greater inclusion, for themselves, and for all participants in the celebration of Communion. Their views revealed a desire for transformation in church practice and teaching, epitomised by Laura’s wish that she could find a forum to ‘speak out’ and change things. The experiences of exclusion accentuate the powerful desire for personal inclusion and this is explored in more depth in the next chapter. This indicates the need for a theology of Eucharist which is radically inclusive and transcends the boundaries which cause damaging marginalization.

The women displayed a number of strategies in reaction to exclusion. Most articulated a powerful desire to belong and feel accepted and fully included, which at times was achieved precisely by passing through those boundaries which had excluded, such as Confirmation.

Alice seeks out contexts which ‘normalise’ Communion and takes control of a situation where she feels ‘forced’ by excluding herself. In this she maintains her early decision not to conform to the expectations of the church. Claire also stands in articulate opposition to coercive space, nurtured in her mother’s example of overcoming church control of access to Communion by sharing her own wafer and so enabling Claire to receive Communion as a child. Laura’s reaction to the church’s control over access to Communion is to reject the underlying principle of the church’s position, to reconstruct her own understanding of what is right, and to develop her own personal practice accordingly. Grace echoes the importance of autonomy in her wish for knowledge in order to choose agreement or dissent for herself.

Throughout, women’s ability to assume personal agency in their decisions and practices was central and this leads me to conclude that there is a need to create an understanding of Eucharist which enables women to feel a sense of authority and identification within their gendered selves, both corporately and individually. The advent of women priests in the Church of England in 1994 could be a major step in this process, as argued by Beattie earlier in this chapter. However, the lack of any evidence that women’s Eucharistic ministry was significantly impacting on women’s experiences of Eucharist led me to conclude that, for some women at least, it is unrealistic to expect the role of the woman priest to mediate the full inclusion and integration of women into the life of the Eucharist, or mitigate their negative experiences. Whilst the woman priest may stand as transformative symbol, challenging the established separation and exclusion of women, this transformation evidently needs to be thoroughgoing, permeating every aspect of the Eucharistic life of the church in order to redress the negative and destructive impact of Eucharistic theology and practice upon lay women.

This leads to my second conclusion, that there is a need to form a theology of the Eucharist which places the female body at the centre and recognises the fullness of women's bodies and identities, lay and ordained, as being in the likeness of Christ. Such a theology could creatively engage with the many aspects of alienation expressed by the women in interview and break through the dichotomies brought about by beliefs about worthiness and sinfulness. This could transform the negativity about women's bodies and women's blood which pervades the church, especially around the sacramental actions of the Eucharist. Furthermore, the effect of overcoming this fundamental bias against women's bodies in the theology and Christology of the Eucharist could, I believe, have far reaching consequences, by addressing the many concomitant dualisms identified by the women I interviewed: dualisms of them and us, of the holiness of the priest and robed participants versus the unworthiness of the people 'watching', of the fear of the bread and wine which are other, 'taboo', 'weird', and of the powerlessness and vulnerability expressed in the threat of 'being forced' by those who have power.

The powerlessness and sense of unworthiness experienced by so many women arises from the coming together of multi-layered experiences of threat and fear, of alienation through oppressive external power, through otherness and rejection. These can all be overturned by creating an environment where women's bodies are a locus for worship and Eucharistic liturgy, redressing the women's experiences of 'otherness' and alienation. A Eucharistic theology which locates power in the woman's body, owning its creative power, inherent wisdom and autonomy, has the potential to offer women a theology which is liberational and emancipatory.

5. COMMUNION IN OUR COMMUNITY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The second major theme to emerge from analysis was the women's focus on relationality in Communion. This resonates with the wider awareness of relationality as a key aspect of women's experience in feminist work. This has wider foundations in work such as Gilligan (1982) and the female ethic of care, and is increasingly being borne out in the area of women's faith, as in Slee's (2004b, pp.139-159) examination of the many dimensions of relationality in women's faith development and Grey's (1989, p.47) theology of connectedness as a route towards liberation: 'It is through connectedness, relatedness and faithfulness to the most ordinary of activities that women have built up through the centuries wisdom, strength and possibilities for transformation'.

Researching women's celebrations of Communion outside the church leads Dierks (1997, p.97) to assert, 'I suspect that friendship, genuine, voluntary, non-hierarchical embrace of another, is the core of most Women's Eucharist groups'. Whilst recognising the potential dangers of relationality for women, highlighted by many including Grey (1989, p.27) and Slee (2004b, p.36), the positive effects, and desire for relationality were compelling, and I discerned three particular areas which characterised the relationality the women expressed: connectedness, embodying community and communities of equality.

5.2 HUMAN CONNECTEDNESS

The women's overwhelming focus upon human relationships was first revealed by their understandings of the word 'communion'. Several of the women explored the idea of communion as community rather than the Holy Communion of bread and wine. Laura reflected on her thoughts when we had spoken about participating in the research;

When you said 'communion' the first thing I thought was like being in a community, in a community of faith, so sharing with people the faith in Jesus Christ and the second time you talked about it I thought that you were referring to Communion as the act of receiving body of Christ and ... so I think I would choose the first meaning.

Similarly, Ayo explained how communion might be more widely understood by others as relationship:

actually some people refer to 'communion' as fellowship together and gathering and something very sacred but I don't think they place so much emphasis on the bread and wine.

Khadijat repeated the words 'everyone' and 'altogether' throughout her interview, and although she told me there were no words in the service which stood out for her, she twice used the image of being '*all one body*'. As a relatively new Christian, this metaphor used in the liturgy at the 'Breaking of the Bread' (Common Worship, 2000, p.179), and sometimes

introducing the Peace, had evidently shaped her understanding of the meaning and purpose of Communion significantly. The two negative experiences Khadijat described were in stark contrast to her emphasis on togetherness, physical closeness, being ‘one body’ and ‘a part of something’. In both cases these experiences were defined by the feeling of being alone. At a church she had attended in Hungary, Communion was conducted in a very different way, ‘It was scarier to go up you know because people are not with you, so you’re doing it *alone*’, and again in her baptism service, ‘I didn’t enjoy the fact that I was *alone* there, but it was nice, it was good, but it was quite nerve wracking to be there’.

The centrality of horizontal relationships in church life resonated throughout the interviews, amongst women from smaller rural communities as well as larger urban ones. Grace explained,

you can still go to other churches you know and still find God but it is almost, because of the people who are there as well and because I’m friends with an awful lot of people and it’s a very friendly big family church and stuff it is almost that if you don’t go there for a while it’s like missing a friend.

Her understanding of the meaning of the word sacraments demonstrated a view which was thoroughly relational. She spoke of sacraments as being what the church offers, using the terms ‘services’ and ‘products’, ‘so it offers them prayer or house groups or individual prayer’ and then developed her thoughts to describe sacraments as being,

maybe just like the special things that you can give to other people. So be that kind of like friendship, or ... no we'll leave it at friendship! Be that friendship or other things like that!

These findings contrasted significantly with those of one of the only other empirical studies to consider women's experiences of Communion. Whilst acknowledging the importance of relationships in church to the working class women she interviewed, Clark-King (2004, p.141-2) points out that because they were in strong familial and local communities they were not in need of the experience of community in church; 'Church was shared with the same people who shared the rest of everyday life'. What kept most women attending church, she found,

was a closeness to God that only came when worshipping in Church. This closeness was frequently associated with the Eucharist and, in the Anglo-catholic and Roman Catholic churches, the act of receiving the sacrament.

This, she argues,

is the ultimate moment of closeness between the individual woman and her God – the other members of the congregation are not significant at this high point as the focus is exclusively vertical. It is this vertical relationship that is the point of going to church for many ... Receiving God in 'the body and the blood' reinforces the connection between God and the individual like no other single event and, while it happens in the context of communal worship, is still a deeply personal and private affair.

5.2.1 Family Relationships

The interviews also revealed how, for some women, church membership and sharing in Communion were intimately engaged with familial, social and personal identity. This was particularly true where the women retained contact with the church communities where they had grown up. The majority of the women were living in a city context where they had moved, often to study, but two of the women, Emma and Caroline, worshipped in a village where the community was much smaller and more static. For them participation in church life and more specifically in Communion was deeply linked to their sense of identity and family in a way which was much less evident in the other interviews.

Caroline had moved away but still returned to the village church. She was aware that church was a significant part of her family and social relationships, beyond attending services, and there were similarities here with Khadijat's holistic perspective on involvement in church.

As we were growing up that formed part of our social the things at church formed part of our social life so it was more than just coming on a Sunday and I think it still is more than just coming on a Sunday because of all the other things, mum's very involved in fundraising and things and so by proxy you get involvement in doing all those things.

Emma had moved into the village and now took her daughter to the church, but retained links with the church where she had grown up and which her parents still attended. Her

strong sense of family belonging and continuity in church participation was evident in the way she returned to her parent's church where so many life events had been marked,

Yeah I'd say I go more to mum and dad's church 'cos that's the church that I went to Sunday school, went to church schools, em obviously baptised there, confirmed there, married there, Lucy's christening there,

and also in her desire to pass this on to her daughter in their new context:

and then I tried bringing Lucy to Sunday school here ... If there was a church school I'd want to send her ... but at least I've given her that opportunity to be brought up in that way.

For both women, the tradition of church involvement being a part of family life was very important and was exemplified by their desire to bring their children to church.

I just felt it was quite important for me to bring them to church and kind of have them welcomed into church and sort of taking them up and having them blessed and everything was part of that and part of who I am so made them part of who they are I felt it was important for me for them to have, for that to happen, and I brought them when they were very, quite little really, just a few weeks old. (Caroline)

Initially as Caroline spoke of bringing her children to church, she considered Communion a secondary element of the experience, but in continuing to reflect she concluded that Communion was more significant than she had first realised.

I think just the whole thing about bringing them to church and being blessed while I, and obviously having Communion is part of that ...

and I think if it'd been any other service I don't think it'd have been as important, not important, but significant perhaps. I think being the Communion Service was more significant, because I think they probably had been to church before they came to Communion.

It was also the presence of her child which was one of only two things Emma recounted as positive for her in the experience of receiving Communion, 'it's nice ... I like the fact that Lucy's blessed when I'm there with her'.

5.2.2 Inter-connectedness

The women articulated considerable awareness of how participants impacted upon one another in the context of Communion. It was very evident that the women were not experiencing the event of Communion in isolation, but as a communal creation through a complex set of inter-relationships. The women's awareness of interconnectedness in Communion was revealed through a variety of their reflections on how human relationships affected the experience. There were three particular aspects to this: the effect of the priest or

minister, their perceptions of what others were thinking, and the impact of the self upon others.

a. The effect of the priest or minister

There is some ambiguity about placing the relationship between communicant and priest in the context of writing about horizontal relationships. Whilst on one hand both are human beings and the relationship can therefore be classed as a horizontal one, the nature of clerical authority makes this a hierarchical relationship where the power between the two parties is imbalanced and the woman communicant is at a disadvantage. This dilemma is further compounded in two ways by the role of celebrant or president at the Eucharist. Firstly the role of the priest as celebrant means they have control over what happens during the ritual and over the access of communicants to the Communion bread and wine. Secondly, the representative role of the priest as standing in the role of Christ at the Last Supper confuses the nature of the priest's identity and potentially moves it towards a more vertical relationship between communicant and God, depending upon the perceptions and understandings of the communicant.

It was fascinating therefore that, as with the experience of the Communion queue, the women almost entirely subverted what one might anticipate to be the power dynamics of this interaction. The women treated their relationship with the priest in the giving and receiving of Communion as entirely horizontal. None of the women identified the priest with Christ in any way, but they were aware of the potential for the priest to impact their experience of Communion.

Like Claire who reflected, 'I suppose it's between you and the ministers but if they're almost moving onto the next person as they're giving it to you and if there's a lot of people they've got a lot to get through...', Khadijat's initial comment suggests she sees the moment of Communion as a moment of connectedness with the priest, but she then quickly corrects herself and, as she thinks, confirms that the moment of Communion is something personal and individual but that she perceives the priest as 'helping' her in some way.

No, I'm very serious, then again, bread from the priest and then you know

A moment just for you, you and the priests...

I think probably a moment for me, I feel that you know, it's em something I'm doing personally, and because the priest is helping, praying, as he gives the bread.

Ann begins to explore more fully the impact of the priest upon her own experience of the moment of Communion, alongside other factors which may be influencing her. In some ways, like Khadijat, she views the priest as potentially able to support her in encountering God, but this is not automatic and relates to what the behaviour of the priest is perceived to communicate about his or her own beliefs and intentions in celebrating Communion.

When we share Communion with a priest at the front and we come up and take Communion ... there is sometimes just a sense of God being very much present and and I think that may also have, be partly to do with ... what I think the person taking Communion thinks is going on ...

there have been times that I have felt Communion to be very powerful in terms of me and God and those times were sometimes ... to do with who was leading the service

and if they genuflected and I could see in the way that they took Communion, the way that they administered it and what they were doing as they were proceeding through that rite, I think that could also affect how I felt about what was going on. (Ann)

b. What others are thinking

For most of the women there was a clear awareness of the impact of those around them in a variety of ways; physical closeness, exchanging smiles, and various other social interactions during and around Communion. For Claire and Khadijat there was particular significance in their beliefs about the thoughts of others towards them.

Khadijat reflected on the thoughts of others in church towards her and felt that it was unusual for a young person to be in church, so ‘In the beginning they’ll wonder why a young girl like this doing at church all the time, [it] isn’t something you see every day’ and people would be asking ‘hmmm what’s she doing here?’ and feel ‘pretty proud that she’s coming to church’. Khadijat’s expression suggested that she found this an affirmation of her self-worth and individuality and concluded her reflections with a confident ‘That’s just me I guess!’

When Claire reflects on her memories of kneeling to receive Communion they are wholly centred on the awareness of others. The power of this awareness upon her is made evident in the way that she immediately relates the thoughts she anticipates from others to her own decision making processes. When she reflects back it is not her relationship with God or her own beliefs which led her to make the public commitment of being confirmed, but the horizontal relationships within her church. She locates this reflection firmly within the

context of her experience of Communion, framing her explanation at beginning and end with almost identical words ‘What are the other people around me thinking?’

I suppose *I used to think about what the other people were thinking around me*

I suppose that even though I’ve been brought up with church from a lot of my life

I’ve never really felt such a close relationship with God and I still struggle with that now really

So I’m not sure if when I decided to get confirmed it was more of a ‘I want to do this because I can’ (*laughter*)

or it’s part of what people should do and lots of people in the church say ‘O you can get confirmed in the next lot of people getting confirmed and it’ll be at the cathedral and it’ll be a good thing to do’.

And it was less about what I believed if you see what I mean

now I mightn’t have said that at the time but now I look back on it that’s how I feel,

I suppose *I’ve kind of thought ‘what are the other people around me thinking?’*

As the transcript shows, there is no logical need to place the two thoughts in relation to one another. It would be entirely possible to extract her account of deciding to be confirmed without any reference to her thoughts at Communion, and yet the ‘framing’ in her speech shows how inextricably interlinked the relationship between the two is.

c. How I affect others

The women were also reflective about how their own presence and participation in Communion might impact upon the experience of others, both in terms of their beliefs and their actions. In contrast to Bell's (1997, p.82) view that ritual participants only understand themselves as reacting to external influences, rather than themselves influencing the formation of the ritual and its effects, the women were very aware of how, through their thoughts, behaviour and decisions, they may affect the experience of Communion for those around them.

Ann displayed concern about how her own struggle with faith and belief might affect those around her. Her sensitivity to the community and sense of connectedness at her place of worship seems to evoke for her a sense of the bonds of shared ownership and responsibility which she does not want to break. This is perhaps heightened by the sharing of Communion in small groups seated on the floor, meaning that she administers Communion to the person next to her, and so has a very real sense of doing it *for* the other person.

I think at the moment I find Communion quite uncomfortable, confusing, difficult ...
I don't know quite what's going on for me, what I think is happening and I don't know how what I think is happening, how much that matters to those around me as well, because Communion is something about sharing God's presence together and if I think something completely different is going on from the people that I'm giving 'body and blood' in inverted commas to, then I don't know if that's okay for them.

Khadijat also displays a depth of perception about how her presence, her decisions and behaviour impact upon the corporate experience of Communion. She is able to critique her own behaviour, and contrast her actual behaviour against the experience she desires.

I used to be a Muslim before but I didn't go to the mosque, but I know the way they pray and everyone's always close to each other you know.

It's like you're allowed, you have to put your shoulder to a stranger.

I think here at church people tend to find their own space

I guess it's good that when you pray, you want to [be] by yourself, understandable.

But it would be nicer if everyone comes together.

I know that even when I come I try to look for a place for myself,

I don't know why, I just do it.

But I thought 'no' we should all should sort of like be sitting together, you know, praying together.

In looking for a space for herself Khadijat conforms to the behaviour she sees in others and replicates it. Though at an intellectual level she is able to identify a desire for something different she is not sufficiently empowered in the church context to be able to subvert the norm and bring about change.

5.3 EMBODYING COMMUNITY

The women I interviewed engaged deeply with the physical and embodied aspects of participating in Communion. I asked Caroline what made Communion so significant.

Em the physical-ness of it I think, the actual participation almost in the process I think that's probably it em. Yeah the fact that you're going and receiving something it's more, the interaction is more, is greater than say at any other service I think.

Khadijat repeatedly spoke of finding a sense of belonging and togetherness and wanted to express that even more strongly in a practical way than the conventions at her church allowed. Significantly, she explained this when I asked if there was anything about Communion that made her feel uncomfortable:

I think when we all shake hands, it's better if you hug people, cos shaking hands is what you do when you meet a stranger, you know. I think it's nice if you hug one another. But then I understand people might feel strange cos they don't want to hug a guy, you know, and kind of things, but that's something I would like.

Though she recognised the potential for a diversity of perspectives, the inadequacy of shaking hands as an expression of the Peace was actually a source of discomfort for Khadijat.

There was a marked difference in the way the women related to the physical church contexts. Some found the buildings helpful, feeling that the place was special or holy, but others did not. Khadijat had a very positive relationship with the physical space in her church.

A church has to be built for a church ... I love the drawings, the wall, the pictures, the architecture, the windows, the way it's made and everything, the way the priest stands over there and everyone's sitting and watching.

She was the only woman who identified positively with the idea of specific sacred spaces within the church building. She reflected on her experiences of receiving Communion in the sanctuary as a server, rather than as usual amongst the congregation, explaining,

It is different. I don't have to get up and stand in line, just kind of sitting there, but it's good though, because I feel like I'm, you know, in a very sacred area, you know, so it's even nicer to pray there.

Grace and Alice asserted their belief that spiritual experience could not be confined within church buildings, but both still valued what churches provided. Alice described how

it's incredibly beautiful and I'll still go to empty churches and just sit, and I just love the atmosphere, I do love it. But that's not to say that I don't find spirituality in other places.

It was significant that the only time Alice had felt able to participate in Communion had been outdoors in the countryside where ‘it just felt very natural’. Grace’s similarly explained she was ‘always more acutely aware’ of the presence of Christ in church but immediately asserted ‘when you go out to the countryside ... being open reminds me of the vastness of Jesus and God’ and maintained that ‘very sacred and divine things can be found in the craziest of places’.

The women were highly aware of how the physical church building and the way Communion was conducted affected the ability to form community. Here, their powerful desire for embodied expression of togetherness continued. Laura explained that ‘from an external eye I think that it’s really hard to join in [Communion]’. Her suggestion for addressing this problem directly contrasted with Khadijat’s appreciation of ‘the way the priest stands over there and everyone’s sitting and watching’. Laura argued instead that ‘a round structure would be better, where everybody one can look at each other and we are not just looking somewhere else, where supposedly the protagonists of the act is’. Claire also identified the value of a round structure in her experience as she talked about sharing Communion in the Episcopal Church in Scotland where

the chairs were more circular and em so there was more than one er loaf as it were, sent round that each person would kind of break off a bit for the next person ... I really liked that. I felt more comfortable; it felt more real ... *it just felt like more of a community.*

It was striking that Ann almost echoed Claire’s words in her interview,

At heart level I think the most valuable thing of the Communion part of the service is being with people and passing bread and wine between us *and acknowledging our community*.

5.3.1 The queue

The Communion queue became a curious motif for the profound meaning and significance which the women placed on their experience of social engagement and human relationship in the rite of Communion. Right at the heart of the liturgy, it was not being handed bread and wine, body and blood, which the women repeatedly recounted as being valuable to them, but standing together in the queue. An aspect of practice that might be expected to have negative connotations for women, of queuing in a suppliant or subservient way to receive a ‘gift’ from a powerful male, was subverted by them to make the experience a positive and empowering occasion for social interaction! They talked of being all together, smiling to one another, giving way in place, allowing themselves to wave hello to people. Khadijat described, ‘In the queue, I’m looking out for who I know, “hello!”’. Emma, reflecting on the service as a whole, also homed in on this communal experience. She explained,

I don’t think I’d change anything, I can’t think, to me that’s, that’s lovely, I mean some people might want to experience it on their own, be more private or whatever, but to me *I like that that we all queue up*.

More than this, Laura's experience of horizontal community in queuing for Communion shaped and helped her to communicate her own theology.

Every time I have Communion is the feeling that that there is a food there that is available for everybody that will never finish somehow and eh I always think, for example you know the queue that you have to go to receive Communion, and you see the attitude of the people who go to receive Communion. It's not the attitude of people who are queuing for receiving benefit or receiving ... the post or anything else, you know. People always are very concerned about their place in the queue, especially in England, not like that in Italy, people would be fighting or just ... the fact that everybody is like giving their place to another person and there is no rush and everybody's relaxed and so it really makes me feel there is something there that is endless and that its really open to everybody who wants to receive it.

5.3.2 Sharing Communion

A number of the women spoke about interaction between people at the Communion rail, or queue or circle, and the importance of visual connection was prominent in this. Several of the women spoke of the connection, contact and intimacy which were made possible by being able to communicate through eyes, faces and smiles and this was often through receiving Communion in a circle formation, which it has been argued 'reflects a horizontal orientation in women's spirituality' (Berry, 2009, p.109). Emma appreciated standing in a semi-circle to receive Communion at her church,

cos then you can smile at people across ... Cos I think a church isn't a building, I think it's about the people, I think cos I know people there and they smile ... it's about sharing in something, isn't it?

Ann too spoke movingly of the effect of sharing Communion in a circle facilitating visual interaction. Like most of the interviewees, Ann had great difficulty recalling an individual instance of Communion, but what she chose to recount in answer to my question was her more general memory of experiencing community in Communion.

What I think has, in a sense, stood out most for me, is when Communion has been shared together, either by it being passed on from one person to the next or one person passing it on. But it's what happens afterwards ... *(joyful emotion in her voice)*
I look around this circle of people and I look at their eyes and the smiles and the children and just the sense of community in Communion has been really has been quite a powerful and positive feeling.

Claire compared her experiences of receiving Communion from a priest and sharing bread amongst a group. She preferred the latter, where 'it just felt like more of a community', and explained how it affected her understanding of the purpose of church community.

I s'pose church, it can be somewhere where you just go
and you see those people on Sunday but for the rest of the week it's not about them really ... if you were giving Communion to that person you might think about them

during the week or even pray about them, so it was more about being in touch with the people around you.

Claire identified how the difference in layout and practice could have radical implications for the nature of relationships formed and their impact on the life of the community. 'Being in touch' in Claire's words, through handing the Communion to each other, helps people to care for one another, creating a positive and engaged community which extends its life beyond the moment of celebrating Communion and into the rest of life. This ability of ritual action to permeate wider life is described by Williams (2004, p. xiii).

When we engage in the action of the Eucharist, we show first what Jesus did and does, and then what humanity in Jesus may do: as he makes new meaning out of the bread and wine by his words, so we are enabled to make our world carry the truth of God's sacrificial love.

Some of the women reflected back to the accounts of the last supper, and it was evident that what they wanted to take from the story was the model of friends sharing in a social and mutual act in which all can participate. Claire understood Communion as a symbolic action in the context of a community and directly related this to how she imagined the Last Supper would have been.

so it's not the ministers standing at the front giving out each block of bread, it's about sharing amongst a group and a community and I feel much stronger in that because it's

kind of closer to what I feel maybe the Last Supper would have been, sharing bread with one another, than a minister standing at the front giving out the body of Christ.

When I asked Laura how she would choose to change Communion she spoke of the Last Supper as ‘a very simple social moment’.

Sometimes I wonder if we could like try to experience the moment that Jesus Christ had with his disciples, eh, in a more similar way ... like sitting all together maybe, you know sitting on the floor and just receiving some bread and so to make it more you know, to make it more like, just like sharing some food together and in the name of Christ and yeah I think that would help, that would definitely help.

The interactions which the women described taking place in Communion are illuminated by the framework Mary Hunt (1992, p.151-2) offers in her theology of female friendship. Here she identifies three elements of attention, generativity and community. The women’s awareness of their connectedness, inter-relatedness and the way in which they affected and cared for one another in the Communion through closeness, smiles, and consideration of what others were thinking or feeling demonstrates the ‘attention’ which Hunt identifies as foundational to female friendship. Enacting this connectedness and relationship through the Communion liturgy is ‘generative’. It enthuses women and brings energy and empowerment to them. In contrast, experiencing aloneness, or being apart from the community in the celebration of Communion, even when that is to place special emphasis upon the individual as in the case of Khadijat’s baptismal service, brings discomfort and disempowerment. The

uniting action of Communion and the interplay of these numerous inter-relationships is formative of new community.

It was clear throughout the interviews that the women were deeply aware of how the creation and nature of the Eucharistic community was affected by the physical space in which Communion was held, the practical way in which things were done and the impact of the participants upon one another, and they spoke passionately of their experiences of, and desire for, Eucharistic ritual which enabled horizontal relationship to flourish. Marjorie Procter-Smith draws on the work of Mary Collins (1993), Eileen King (1993), Lesley Northup (1995) and others as she explores how feminists reclaim horizontal space for their prayer and worship through rearranging existing spaces and relocating to new and more familiar ones (Procter-Smith, 1995a, p.56-7). These options were almost entirely unavailable to the women I interviewed in the contexts they spoke about. They had neither sufficient power nor influence to effect such change in established situations. However, the interviews revealed how they claimed space subversively, through appropriating the given spaces to embody community in their own way. This included using the Communion queue and the place where Communion is received as places of social interaction, in order to express relationship, affirming others and receiving experiences of affirmation, warmth and inclusion.

5.4 COMMUNITIES OF EQUALITY

The strong preference for participatory models of receiving Communion reflects the women's recognition that this helped people to engage with one another and form

relationships which created sustained community. For some of the women this was enough. In Emma's interview the experience of sharing, smiling, belonging and togetherness appeared to be the fullness of the meaning she found in the ritual and there was no sense that this was in any way inadequate. Many of the women however expressed a further impulse, a desire for the expression and experience of justice and equality through the shared ritual of Communion.

Interestingly, even where there was significant divergence between the views of the women about the practical conduct of Communion, the emphasis upon the importance of equality remained the same. Both Khadijat and Ayo, from traditional church contexts where Communion was received individually from a priest and lay assistants at the front of the church, argued that the specific act of the sharing of Communion was a means to communicate the equality of the communicants. For Ayo this was in the message conveyed through everyone participating together in the same way,

everyone gets to come to the altar, take Communion, go back to their seats you know. It's not like it was in the Bible just the when just the high and mighty get to finish the whole wine and those behind don't get to have some of it ... and the fact that's its central makes it even better because some people always feel out of place and some people always feel like they've got a superiority complex ... bringing those kind of different people together, taking Communion I mean ... over time it helps people get to understand the concept of bringing them together.

For Khadijat, the symbolism of the shared cup expressed a similar theme.

By kind of everyone drinking from the same cup it kind of makes everyone feel we're all the same, you know no-one's an outcast or whatever, and no one's dirty, but I sometimes feel a bit weird about it, sometimes I don't care.

The sharing of the common cup was not however an unambiguous experience for the women. Both of the women who explicitly identified the sharing of the cup as being of symbolic significance for them, also expressed personal discomfort over participating, one choosing to dip her wafer in the cup when possible and the other stating that the only thing she would change about Communion was to ask the assistants to wipe the cup more carefully! She went on to explain that she was unsure of the hygiene of the shared cup and this small example demonstrates something of the tension present for women between the desire for equality and the personal costliness of achieving this genuine equality.

5.4.1 Holistic communities

The value of the whole of life in a Eucharistic church community was expressed as women recounted deeply valued experiences of equality which arose outside the specific ritual action of Communion. Grace spoke of experiencing equality in the acceptance she found in various aspects of church life, especially in her house group. She described the 'openness and equal-ness' she found here, free from fear of judgement,

you're actually on an equal level with everybody else you know and I think kind of I've never gone to a house group where I've felt like oh but you're a student and you're only twenty and oh you can't really give me advice you know and I think kind

of the very openness and equal-ness of (church name) within its teaching and its house groups and kind of prayer support and everything.

And it's actually alright to go one week and say 'oooh I've not prayed all week, I don't believe in God, aargh I don't want to be a Christian anymore'

And like you won't, kind of, be thrown out for treason or whatever.

Khadijat chose to talk about the relaxed time of fellowship and the sharing of tea and coffee after the service and the forming of relationships as evidence of equality in her church, even though she had also described the significance of the symbolism of the shared cup. This time after the service was a levelling experience, where many of the hierarchical elements of the liturgy were left behind. Here people would be literally standing or sitting on one level, perhaps having removed symbolic vestments and all using the same language of ordinary conversation. In this context the relationships became in a practical sense more equal and it was interesting that Khadijat identified this instinctively, suggesting it has been a powerful experience for her.

It was notable that Khadijat's focus was determinedly holistic. Even where I referred specifically to Communion, 'So all those things about the procession and the ritual give it more meaning?' she would reflect back more generally, 'Communion more meaning and the entire service more meaning'. At the end of the whole interview on the subject of Communion, I asked Khadijat if there was anything else she would like to say. Her words were very revealing.

Oh I also help out with the garden, I did that last Sunday it's very nice, it's fun ... a social thing, very nice. I took out the weeds and also mowed the lawn for a while.

When given the option to say anything she wished about Communion, she chose to speak about helping with the church garden, 'a social thing, very nice'. For Khadijat, this interaction was as worthy and significant of voicing as all that had preceded it. The social aspect of church life was of overriding importance to her, and her enthusiasm about the ways in which she was part of the community was overwhelming. Her response epitomises the way in which social relationships and participation together were defining in the experience of the women through all the interviews. In a very practical and down to earth way, Khadijat embodies the view of Communion as fully integrated into daily living, where

... there is the central mystery of celebration, thanksgiving and adoration in the Eucharist as the bread of life which we break and take together, shared not only in Communion in the church, but quite literally in the labours and rewards of our daily life through the joys and sufferings we experience together (King, 1992, p.156).

The relaxed social and relational contexts within and around the Communion rite which brought women the joy of experiencing community and equality are perhaps a foretaste of Ann Loades' (2004, p.161-2) poetic vision of the Eucharist as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

God's invitation to human beings is that they be caught up with all other creatures into the exchange of love and generosity at the heart of the divine, into the exuberance of

the whole ‘company of heaven’, sharing in the conviviality and the companionship of a re-possessed paradise, encompassing more than we can presently imagine.

Like Grace and Khadijat, Alice also seemed to find a sense of equality more easily outside the specific Communion rite of the church, in the single occasion that she had participated in an act which might be considered Communion.

He had just shared this loaf of bread and we were just stood in a circle.

He said before even if you were not confirmed it doesn’t matter, and that’s, and I did partake in that, yeah ... and again it was handed around in a basket and we could take our own piece, yeah ... it felt very natural, it was actually done outside as well and it just, it just felt very natural.

In this context Alice found a sense of equality and empowerment that enabled her to participate on equal terms with those around her, and unlike her experiences in church where she did not feel able to participate in Communion, in this context ‘it just felt very natural’. Here so many elements of exclusion, disempowerment and inequality had been removed from the event of the sharing. It didn’t matter whether a person was confirmed or not, all were equal and no longer included or excluded by the rules of the church. Alice was able to take her own bread, and so was empowered by a free personal choice, where the priestly control over the access to the bread had been relinquished. This created a more equal distribution of power which seems to have brought Alice a greater degree of freedom in how she felt able to participate.

5.4.2 Ekklesia of justice

The ways in which the women discovered a sense of equality in church contexts differed, but were largely, though not exclusively, experienced in their horizontal relationships, rather than received through church teaching. The strongest and most consistent examples of women experiencing equality and empowerment were found where the disempowering and un-equalising elements of ritual did not apply.

The overwhelming picture, through these very diverse perspectives and experiences, is that experiencing equality in 'doing it all together' is liberating for women as a marginalised group. The experience of being an equal, without distinctions, and encountering acceptance which is demonstrated in practical and physical ways is a movement towards liberation and justice. The women's voices are resonant of Fiorenza's (1995, p.345) call for '*ekklesia* as the discipleship of equals' and clearly articulate the value of a community which nurtures attitudes of justice and so can become transformative of and beyond itself.

This pattern mirrors the trajectory of Hunt's (1992, p.150) theology of friendship as she argues for a concept of Church as 'justice-seeking friends' who create the 'Ekklesia of justice' (p159). Hunt argues that attention, generativity and community point towards justice, and the analysis of my interviews suggested there was a similarly dynamic process in women's highly relational experiences of Communion. The women's awareness of their connectedness and participation in the uniting action of the ritual flowed on towards a community characterised by justice. Here, in contrast to the power dynamics the women reacted so strongly against in their experiences of discomfort and alienation, they placed

great value on being able to experience equality within the Eucharistic community and wished this for themselves and for all people.

It is in the search that the women described for inclusion and equality for all people that the ekklesia of justice can be formed. 'Like Jesus, we are called to a radical activity of love, to a way of being in the world which deepens relation, embodies and extends community, passes on the gift of life ... to right wrong relationship, which is what we call "doing justice"' (Harrison, 1990, p.210-211). The 'doing justice' articulated by the women comes through inclusion and the acceptance of diversity, creating a place without boundaries where everyone is fully welcome, equal and included.

5.5 CONCLUSION

This survey of the significance of horizontal relationships and community in women's experiences of Communion, and the way they reflected theologically on these experiences, highlights a number of key findings which help inform the development of feminist Eucharistic theology.

Firstly, women articulated the value of Communion primarily as a place of relationality. This relationality affirmed self-worth and was what women wished to share and receive in Eucharistic community. The generative action of the Communion liturgy created meaningful community and brought energy and empowerment to the women participating in the shared experience, similarly to what Berry (2009, p.180) found in her exploration of women's rituals, where 'there [was] a sense of support, energy and empowerment in sharing the

experience with others'. The significance of relationality is emphasised by the subversive strategies the women described which enabled them to utilise the given structures of the ritual to heighten the relational element of Communion, for example making the queue a place of friendly interaction, or promoting eye contact with others when receiving Communion as a group. It is important also to recognise that this relationality was inherently communal. No woman spoke of individual friendships, though it might reasonably be assumed these exist for many of the women in their churches. All reflected the significance of the corporate community and the complexity of intertwining relationships, each affecting the other in a variety of ways.

Secondly, their view of Communion is strongly holistic and integrated into their wider lives and that of the church, embracing different aspects of the communities' life together, Eucharistic and non-Eucharistic, as valuable parts of the whole. A significant implication of this holistic view is that it is *process* rather than *moment* orientated. Ross (2001, p.74-75) believes that there is 'a real theological development, if not transformation, taking place in understanding the sacraments' which

involves an extension of the "sacramental moment" beyond the moment of actual canonical reception. It involves a far lessened reliance on clergy for an understanding on what 'sacramental validity' means. It also means a greater continuity between ritual and everyday life.

Caroline described her 'participation ... in the process' and this was reflected in most of the interviews. Women rarely located significance in the moment of receiving Communion, but

maintained a holistic view of the whole experience of the liturgy and its integrated and on-going place in their lives.

Thirdly, the theme of equality resonated through the interviews and was a defining mark of how women valued the ritual. One of the criticisms which has been addressed to feminist assertions of the importance of horizontal relationships is the fear that the Eucharist will become, in Williams' (1996, p.101) words, 'a celebration of achieved local fellowship', or reduced to subjectivism; however the concept of community the women describe and long for goes far beyond this. It is a radical and inclusive community, where every person is recognised as equal, and affirmed through the ritual and social interactions as having full dignity and value. The fact that this desire for equality was inclusive of all people was indicative of an ethic of living justly in community, and as Russell (1993, p.140) argues,

when we seek to understand what it would mean to administer the sacraments rightly ... Certainly that meaning would go beyond proper preparation, administration, and celebration of the words and actions of Jesus. In fact, the word 'rightly' probably would include the need for the community of celebration to live out a life of righteousness or justice.

Hunt's (1992, p.152) assertions that 'attention to friends generates community' is useful in considering the dynamics the women described in the assembled Eucharistic community. The generous interaction they described fosters open inclusion which can welcome and include the stranger.

A meal requires guests, the table fellowship ... around the table each person has his (sic) own place and 'belongs', yet the circle may be widened to draw in friends and strangers ... Guest-friendship is an integral element of the Eucharist (Grey, 1983, p.75).

The examples the women gave of how they embodied community — exchanging smiles, passing bread, giving way to one another in the queue — all communicate with strangers as much as friends; and they are all practices in which strangers can share equally. This is an embracing model of inclusion for all, not exclusive local fellowship.

A simple smile, which was so highly valued and significant amongst the women, can overcome the boundary of the unknown and generate community and inclusion. In this way, the Eucharistic community can indeed live out 'equality in the new, communal identity' (Williams, R., 1996, p.92). It is here that justice can be achieved as 'not only is a fundamental equality established by the indiscriminate regard of God, but, still more significantly, a fundamental compatibility and interdependence in human goals when rightly perceived' (Williams, R., 1996, p.93-94).

My findings suggest that Eucharistic theology needs to reflect, affirm and develop relationality. It must emphasise the equality of the participants in a shared process where every member has a part. It must reflect the celebration of Communion as part of a holistic, on-going and diverse dynamic relationship between participants.

Several of the women revealed a deep ability to imagine how things *could* be, for example in Grace and Laura's descriptions of imagining Communion as being more realistically shared like the Last Supper. Loades (2004, p.163-4) discerns a positive way forward in developing theology in her commitment to the valuing, rather than the destruction of tradition, but argues that this must be done with creativity and imagination.

We will need all the resources of knowledge, imagination, emotion and understanding we can find, from whatever source, exercised with discrimination and sensitivity to be alert to divine presence, and no one is uniquely privileged here.

In a traditional institution such as the Church of England, where change is always likely to be slow, it is vitally important to harness and engage with the power of the imagination in seeking liberating theology for women as a route towards finding freedom and bringing change where the physical realities of church buildings and traditional practices often prove more intransigent. This chapter demonstrates that it is in their practical strategies of subversion, valuing experiences according to their own criteria rather than the church's, and in using their imagination in search of fulfilling Eucharistic experience that the women find freedom and liberation.

In the next chapter I turn to examine in more detail how women encounter or engage with the presence of God in Communion and the theological meanings women derive from, or construct about, Communion.

6. EXPLORING OUR UNDERSTANDINGS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses more disparate themes than the previous two, as the ideas in the women's perspectives were more diffuse in the area of meaning and understanding of Communion. I begin by considering how women encountered God in their experiences of Communion. This is an essential part of understanding how the experience of Communion is significant to women. The second section reflects on how women receive and construct understandings of the purpose and meaning of Communion. Here I look at what they understand Communion to mean and what is important to them, as well as what is difficult and unhelpful. Finally I review how the theme of ambiguity, which has been present in the previous two chapters, is exemplified in the women's understanding of Communion and in their continuing desire to challenge restricting boundaries for themselves and others.

It is significant to note that one of the women, Ann, had undertaken some recent theological study. This gave her a framework and language, as well as confidence, to express her ideas. In contrast many of the women struggled to articulate their thoughts in these areas far more than in the previous chapters' themes. Perhaps because of this time of theological education and reflection in a supportive environment, Ann had made the most obviously feminist journey in her relationship with Communion. At the time of our interview it was very clear that this was an on-going and not altogether comfortable journey, though one that was of immense importance to her. She explained,

... at the moment I find Communion quite uncomfortable, confusing, difficult and I find it uncomfortable because I find it confusing.

Ann's journey is representative of similar strands of questioning, rejection and searching in many of the other interviews. Women questioned whether they personally owned the meanings and theology they had been taught in church, what the practice of Communion actually meant to them, where they found or didn't find God in the experience and what they believed it all meant.

6.2 ENCOUNTERING GOD

Relationship continued to be a dominant theme as the women reflected about relating to God in Communion. They articulated their experiences and thoughts about this in a wide variety of ways.

6.2.1 Communion as personal relationship and communication

Ayo, Andrea and Grace articulated understandings of a direct relationship with God in Communion. For Ayo Communion was very important as a means of relating to God. She explained, 'I really connect with God', and it was a way 'to commune with him'. She was explicit that Communion implies a two way relationship. 'Christ is with me, he's in me and I'm welcoming him again, that partaking, just do your own part of what you would expect God to do for us, to make it two way'. She argued that human existence is for this personal engagement with God, 'You're actually created for God's faith so you have to give back,

and to give back you've got to make that connection'. The main purpose of Communion was to maintain a personal relationship with God, 'my own way of making a pact with God one on one', which seemed almost part of a contractual relationship between God and human beings.

Andrea identified Communion as means of communication, 'a way God ... communicates his grace to us'. She felt that it was God's grace which enables humans to have relationship with God, though she was emphatic that Communion was not the only way. Whilst she felt it was important for Christians because Jesus had instituted it, it was not an imperative if it was not possible; 'if you're in a position where you couldn't take Communion then God would show other ways to show grace to you'.

Grace demonstrated a deep yet relaxed sense of relationality with God when explaining the purpose of Communion. Having described it as a reminder that 'any of us could have been sat at the twelve, you know at the last supper table' she developed this perspective to argue that 'we are friends of Jesus in a very real way', perceiving 'a realism that, it's just as real now as it was two thousand years ago'. This sense of realism and direct personal relationship with God was identified in a different way by Ann who reflected 'I don't know why this is so, but when we share Communion with a priest at the front and we come up and take Communion, sometimes then body and blood, or sorry Communion, the actual act of drinking Communion sometimes has a more powerful direct relationship to God'.

The relationships the women described with God were complex and subtle with multiple layers. When I asked Khadijat where she *thought* God was in the experience of receiving

Communion she answered ‘watching ... just watching, yeah, and following my thoughts and whatever it is I’m thinking...’, but when I reflected this back with the assumption that she *felt* particularly aware of God at that time she quickly corrected me, ‘I’m not aware of it at all, I’m just aware of being very peaceful’. Although Khadijat had a concept of the presence of God at Communion, it was not borne out by her *felt* experience of Communion. It is interesting to compare this with her view of the purpose of Communion.

You do it to remember Jesus and to be a part of him, you know,
so that we feel as if all one body and everything,
that’s what it means to me, when I do go to Communion.

I feel that, you know, I’m not with him but he’s surrounding and protecting and basically being around us that’s important.

Here there is a stronger sense of the presence of Jesus through becoming a ‘part of him ... all one body’ and yet distance is maintained in the ambiguity between acknowledging that he’s ‘basically being around us’ and yet ‘you know I’m not with him’. This reveals the tension between Khadijat’s thought and belief about the presence of God and Jesus and her actual lived experience. She appears to acknowledge both the presence and absence of Jesus in the same sentence.

In both Alice and Grace’s interviews I discerned a close correlation between prayer and Communion, which was less evident in other interviews. Alice didn’t feel the idea of ‘Communion with God’ had meaning for her in the act of taking Communion, and yet in her life as a whole ‘it definitely does ... in my experience I think prayer is a better, more

accessible, way of, kind of, achieving communion'. Although Alice was interested in the significance of ritual, she felt that the articulation of prayer was more meaningful than the symbolic action of Communion. She identified achieving 'communion' in saying grace before meals, 'it makes more sense to me', and explained that she received a prayer of blessing rather than the bread and wine, without any sense of 'missing-out'.

Grace described prayer and Communion as having 'equal power, strength maybe'. This seemed to have been shaped by her experience in her local church where 'a lot of time is taken up by Communion in one week, it'll be taken up by prayer the next'. There was a sense of equality and complementarity between the two activities. Interestingly Khadijat expressed her belief that she will communicate more successfully with God if she prays during Communion:

When I go for Communion and I pray I feel it adds more meaning to it.

Maybe my wishes will come true you know.

The close relationship between Communion and prayer, experienced in various ways by the women, is indicative of the relational nature of Communion. Prayer as a form of communication implies a relationship between the woman and God. Allaying Communion with prayer in such a close relationship, even to the point of interchangeability, indicates that, whether consciously realised or not, Communion is identified as a similar means of relating.

Several women expressed a profound sense of experiencing peace through Communion. For Ayo this arose from feeling she was in the presence of God.

There's a kind of peace that comes with it and it flows through other things ...

It just makes me have inner peace and I just don't worry, I just feel very comfortable.

And even when I step out of [the] place and something reminds me of the fact that we're still living in the world, but I still feel that peace.

Finding peace in the presence of God has a transcendent quality. It is a time and space 'set apart' which she contrasts with stepping out and becoming aware once again of her location in the world. Both Ayo and Grace used the word 'stop' in articulating their sense of Communion being located in a separate time or space. Ayo described how 'taking the holy Communion actually makes me like really really feel like I stop and feel like I really connect with God' and Grace very closely echoed 'I think it kind of like always brings me to stop'. Coming to a 'stop' at the time of Communion is evidently a powerful experience; especially as for Grace it is located within such a sense of busyness in church:

within the busyness of church or, cos generally you know when you got to church and if you're doing the music, or the kids or something else and it's always a bit 'oh do this, do this, do this', so actually when you come to actually take Communion I think it's really, kind of, it's really peaceful as well and, kind of, yeah, peaceful and chilled and stopped ... a moment of stillness.

There is a stark contrast between the busyness of church activity and the ‘peaceful and chilled and stopped’ moment of Communion in Grace’s words. These echo the contrast in Ayo’s experience, of otherworldliness found in the presence of God, and of ‘still living in the world’. Ayo acknowledged that in the symbolic return to the world, something has nonetheless been changed by her experience. She asserts, ‘I still feel that peace’, and so the encounter with God is transformative of her wider experience. Alice echoed this experience of transformation. Although she found it very difficult to describe what Communion meant for her, she reflected that ‘it’s very emotional ... it’s like quite an inner response’ and described ‘feeling transformed’ and ‘feeling that I am ok and that I’m accepted’. The recognition of feeling ‘accepted’ by something other is another indicator of Alice’s sense of a two way relationship.

The concept of transubstantiation, the ‘real presence’ of God in the elements of bread and wine, was raised by two of the women. Claire had attended a Catholic school and described how,

school were saying transubstantiation, it turns into the body and blood of Christ and that was a big, big deal for me. I didn’t think that’s true but, you know, my friends certainly were being taught that and they believed that as far as I could work out.

As a child she had found this very confusing but as an adult came to a view of Communion as a ‘symbolic representation of, em, what Christ did and to bring us back to that helps us’. There was no evidence that experiencing this teaching had brought about a stronger sense of the presence of God at Communion. In contrast, Ann, who had no Catholic background,

described how she held a strong belief in the real presence of God in the elements. It was striking that she identified this more strongly with the wine than the bread.

That used to be a very powerful feeling for me and I had a sense, if not of God's, if not of transubstantiation then consubstantiation or something, God's Spirit being very present in the wine, and so that there was there was a communion, eh, a horizontal (*Ann was making vertical movements with her hands at this point indicating an 'above to below' relationship*) communion with God in the process of taking the bread and wine.

The dissonance between Ann's words and actions here may reveal something of the ambiguity of her experience. An understanding of real presence could potentially facilitate horizontal relationship between the communicant and God as she described verbally, and yet Ann's gestures spoke of a vertical relationship taking place.

As with Ann, wine was very significant in the women's interviews. The words of the Communion liturgy identify wine as a symbol of covenant: 'Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant' (Common Worship, 2000, p.185) and it is interesting that Williams (Williams, R., 1996, p.95) argues the wine is therefore inherently creative of community. In receiving Communion wine together 'we become 'covenanted' ourselves to God and each other (the Book of Common Prayer speaks of our being thus made "living members" of a "holy fellowship")'. This creation of 'holy fellowship' was borne out by Laura who explained how she felt connected both to Jesus and to other believers through the Eucharist.

What I feel is that it's an aspect of my practice, my religious practice, I really need and it's a moment of intimacy with Christ. And, er, I feel that through the body of Christ, I, through the experience of remembering the moment he had he lived just before his cross and, em, I'm connected with him and connected with the rest of the people who believe in him and, er, I receive somehow his strength or his, his energy and as I say it's a moment in which I feel intimately connected with Jesus Christ.

Laura's feeling of connection extended beyond the person of Christ and other believers, to her father who had died. The experience of him being reconciled to the church and receiving Communion from which had had been excluded had affected Laura profoundly, such that in her interview she described how 'I feel connected ... almost every Sunday when I receive Communion I feel connected with him'.

6.2.2 Relationship with God in horizontal relationships

As explored in the previous chapter, the importance of creating connection and community through the Eucharist resonated through the majority of interviews and this had enormous implications for the women's experiences of God. Andrea spoke of a God whose presence to her is very real and immediate in Communion, but is also integrally embedded and mediated through the gathered Christian community.

I think God's Spirit is in us when we take Communion ... by Spirit he's in the prayers we're praying and in the event that we're remembering ... he's in the congregation, in

the family who are gathered together, and I think he should be in the leaders in a way that's sensitive and in a way that's reverent because it is a massively important thing.

She described the act of Communion as a 'focus' because 'he's asked us to do it, it's important, so I think there is something particular we get out of Communion that he gives us in the context of Communion'. She went on to reflect 'I don't know if measurably more or measurably less he's there ... I don't know if that means he's more there than when we're eating together afterwards'.

Slee (2004, p.140), in her study of women's faith development, comments that 'for most of them, the concept of relationality included the horizontal dimension of human relationships as an expression or locus of the divine-human relation'. Ann described eloquently how, as her understanding of God has developed, the way she experiences God in Communion has too. She had moved from finding God located in Communion, to experiencing God mediated through, or made manifest by, the gathered community.

At the moment I don't quite know who God is and therefore I don't know what it means to talk of Communion as a sign of God's presence ...

But if I think about it, then I can definitely see, whatever I think of God as being, I can think of God as being present amongst this group of people in the love, in the community ... where there is love, there is God.

Ann's identification of God being present 'where there is love' in the experience of community, and furthermore connecting this with the identity and nature of God's-self, offers a vision of

God as the source of renewal of loving, life-giving interaction in mutual relations. God is not the power of dominating control from outside, but the matrix or ground of life-giving relations and their ongoing renewal (Ruether, 1998, p.66).

Grace, like Ann, bore out Slee's (2004b, p.143) findings of 'an increasing awareness of the interdependence of relationship with God and relationship with others'. She described what helped her experience nearness to God.

I think when you have like when you're very close to friends you know and sometimes you're in the middle of a conversation and the conversation just goes really wayward or something, and you just end up talking about something really random for a minute, and then you carry on something else and, I think, kind of, just like those moments in normal conversation actually reminds me.

It is in interacting with those with whom she has very close horizontal human relationships that Grace is reminded of the closeness of God.

Ross (2001, p.213) focusses on the centrality of community and relationship in sacramental action as revelatory of the presence of God. She defines 'sacraments as actions *of the community*. What they are not is even clearer: sacraments are not purely priestly actions;

they are not restricted to the actual moment when the sacrament is “conferred”. They are linked to an ongoing process of recognizing God’s presence in all of life, and most particularly, within the community’. This was demonstrated in Ann’s on-going search for meaning in Communion as she described sharing Communion in small groups sitting together on the floor, much as Laura had imagined she would like to experience Communion in her interview.

At heart level I think the most valuable thing of the Communion part of the service is being with people and passing bread and wine between us and acknowledging our community *(Pause)*

And there’s a real sense there of being a community and of treasuring the people around ... in a sense the most meaningful thing about God for me at that point, at this moment, is that I still I have a sense that people are created in the image of God and people are created with a divine spark and so just looking at these people around me and just treasuring them, treasuring this community, treasuring the individual people, treasuring the love that you can see when you look at different families

(Ann had a huge smile as she spoke and warmth in her voice)

and knowing that these are friends and so people that I also treasure, treasure their friendship, and that says something to me about God and about God’s love and about God’s care and compassion.

The creation of community in which people are led to ‘sense that people are created in the image of God and people are created with a divine spark’ is indeed a redemptive place. Here the fullness of humanity made in the image of God is recognised and treasured and a model

of loving community is lived out. Through this God is recognised as present and at work within and amongst the community. As Ruether (1998, p.66) argues,

Redemption does not mean sending the divine ‘down’ from the higher spiritual world in which God is located to a bodily world defined as alien to God, but rather the welling up of authentic life in and through creation, transforming us from death-dealing to life-giving relations.

6.3 FINDING MEANING

The theological understandings the women expressed about Communion were hugely diverse. I believe this was significantly affected by the resources for theological discourse the women had acquired through their church backgrounds and experiences. Many of them had been eloquent in speaking theologically about their experiences of closeness and community with those around them. The language of relationships and what they mean was accessible to them and could be drawn from their everyday lives and applied relatively easily in a faith setting. However, explicitly theological themes about Communion such as ‘sacrament’ brought out the tension in women’s ability to process received teaching and engage with it at a personal level, while also trying to integrate it with their wider experience.

6.3.1 Sacrifice and atonement

Andrea, as might be anticipated from an evangelical church background, though her experience was wider than this, viewed Communion through a theology of substitutionary atonement, explaining:

I think Communion is important because it really reminds me, the service and the words we say and taking the Communion as a group, really reminds me of Jesus' sacrifice and death and what we get because Jesus has died for us and restored our relationship with God.

As at other points during the interview, she had a keen sense of continuity between past, present and future. Rather than seeing Jesus' suffering and sacrifice as a finished past event, she saw it as being something in which the Christian continues to share through following Jesus and she identified with that suffering on a personal level:

I need to be grateful and I need to recognise that if I'm going to be disciple of Jesus then suffering is going to be part, just to remember that his suffering and sacrifice is so much greater than mine, and also to remember that that is how I can have relationship with God.

Her theology is framed within an awareness of the significance of her relationships with other Christians and the corporate nature of her faith. She begins by referring to 'taking the Communion as a group' and concludes that,

as his suffering was so great, I shouldn't take being able to pray to God for granted, being able to serve God and being able to communicate with other Christians for granted.

Grace spoke simply of Jesus' death 'for me', but Emma, Caroline, Ann, and Alice all talked explicitly about the concept of sacrifice, and for each of them it was a very significant factor in their understandings of what Communion meant to them. Emma was very aware of what she felt she ought to be thinking and believing about Communion, but articulated considerable hesitation in owning it personally. I asked Emma and Caroline, who came from the same church, what the word 'sacrament' meant to them. They both used exactly the same words, articulating a view of Jesus' death as 'a sacrifice for us'. It was notable that they both used sacrament and sacrifice almost as interchangeable terms.

It would perhaps be a reminder of that and the body of Christ and how he died for us and everything else, but I wouldn't, that's me telling me you what I think it ought to be ... as I'm walking up and afterwards reflecting, I am thinking and I am saying thank you to God for you know sending Jesus and dying for ... making a sacrifice for us. (Emma)

That it's a sacrifice ... that Jesus made a sacrifice for us and this is his way of showing what his sacrifice was, em, and that it's the fact that they're blessed and all the kind of things that that, I can't think of the right words, but all of that that makes them special and more than just bread and wine, yeah, I think that that they're more than the sum of their parts, they're more than just things. (Caroline)

In contrast, four of the women (Laura, Claire, Khadijat, and Ayo) made no reference at all to sacrifice in their understandings of Communion. The final two women, Alice and Ann, referred to sacrifice in striving for new understandings which reconciled tensions and were more meaningful for them. Like Emma and Caroline, Alice viewed sacrament and sacrifice as being linked, but she was aware that her own thinking was unorthodox in relation to traditional theology.

Maybe it is a food thing to me, maybe it is a food thing, because I see the whole, you know, saying grace before you eat that's almost like the same thing.

Something to do with the way I make sense of it, is something to do with the fact that every time you eat something in fact it is a sacrifice, because you know life comes from life in a way.

So that's kind of how I can make sense of it.

But yeah that's probably not a very orthodox way of thinking. *(laughter)*

Ann had rejected many of her previous perspectives and was seeking an understanding of Communion which was meaningful to her. She was the woman who most clearly critiqued sacrificial atonement theory and described how she had moved away from such an understanding, towards a view of the redemptive power of Communion which symbolised and focussed upon hope and life.

When I take wine I used to think that that related very much to the blood of Christ and bread as the body of Christ and to that to Jesus dying on the cross. And I had a view of Jesus' death which was linked to an idea of Jesus being sacrificed and

somehow saving us from our sin through that sacrifice, so probably some kind of atonement theory.

And recently my understanding of that has changed and my understanding of whether em,

who Jesus was, and what his death meant, has changed quite a lot and at the moment I probably see his death as being much more about a commitment to life and about being prepared to stand up for what he believed in even if that ended up with, even if that meant people killing him for his beliefs.

And I see his resurrection as being something about hope or life overcoming death, life overcoming all evil em but I don't see his death as saving in the same way as I used to em, and that means that when I, when people say the blood of Christ and the body of Christ I no longer know what that means because to me the blood of Christ meant something about Christ's sacrifice and I just don't I don't see it that way so I'm trying to work out what meaning if any actually drinking blood and eating bread has for me.

Both Ann and Alice assumed the right to construct their own meanings of what was taking place. Ann searched for the new meaning she feels is necessary for the 'body' and 'blood' symbolism at the centre of the Eucharist, and Alice discerned her own 'quirky' response to the rite. Both women revealed how they were able to hold these beliefs in tension with the church teaching they were exposed to. Significantly both reinterpretations highlighted life, 'life comes from life' and 'a commitment to life'. In both cases it was the theme of 'life' which defined the new meaning the women were seeking to reclaim and assert.

Ann's developing sense of what redemption means and doesn't mean for her in relation to the life and death of Jesus has led her to seek out new language in the Communion liturgy which is better able to express her beliefs and avoids unhelpful or damaging images.

At the moment I feel much more comfortable when people say the bread of life or the bread of heaven because then Jesus is about life and not about death and not about death being redemptive or suffering being redemptive, which is something I very strongly at the moment want to resist... I would change the language for blood and for body and blood. I would think about what other language I could use that would say something about God in Life.

In Ann's search for imagery to express her belief that 'Jesus is about life', 'God in life', she demonstrates a position consonant with many feminist theologians, in which 'it is not Jesus' suffering and death, but his life as a praxis of protest against injustice and solidarity in defense of life that is redemptive' (Ruether, 1998, p.67). Russell (1993, p.143) relates this directly to the celebration of Communion, asserting that 'it is possible to celebrate at table in memory of the sacrifice made necessary by the injustice of the religious and political authorities of Jesus' day and the victory of God's justice and love over injustice'. This is consonant with Ann's explanation that Jesus was willing to stand up for what he believed even if it meant people killing him.

As Grey (2000, p.354) points out in the Eucharist as well as our wider theology 'sacrifice still carries the overtones of passive victim offered up, reinforcing categories of silent and unjust suffering' and Berry (2009, p.211) asserts that 'a feminist sacramental theology needs

to develop alternative understandings of atonement, salvation and sacrifice'. The yearning for the focus of liberational faith to be on life rather than death, found in the interviews, affirms the importance of feminist reconstructions which seek to liberate the traditional Christian message of redemption through suffering and death, into a life-affirming and emancipatory truth.

6.3.2 Remembrance

Almost all the women saw remembering as central to their understanding of the meaning of Communion. This theme resonates throughout feminist reconstructions of biblical, theological and liturgical traditions, as vital to reclamation and reconstruction. Andrea used the term 'remember' on fifteen occasions throughout her interview, and when I asked her to imagine what the bread of Communion might say if it was able to speak to her, she articulated the significance of remembrance, and what it means for her as an on-going reality:

it might say 'Remember'. Does that sound really epic and cheesy saying 'Remember'? Just, or, and not just kind of remember as in 'think back to' but more kind of remembrance as in 'be aware of' and be 'in continual awareness of' of what this symbolises, because this symbol is something that happened, but it's something that will happen as well. I know I'm going to giggle next time there's a Communion Service, 'Remember!'

Claire and Alice both saw the remembrance as a straightforward recalling or ‘re-enactment’ (Alice) of what Jesus did at the end of his life. Emma also saw Communion as being a straightforward reminder of Christ’s sacrifice. Khadijat, however, articulated this idea of recalling the past differently, describing the service as a whole as being like ‘telling a story’. For other women, there was, as with Andrea, a strong sense of the remembrance being about an act of engagement in the present which had meaning for their lives beyond simply recalling the past. Andrea thought Communion helped to ‘pray and say things that we might not automatically remember’. Ayo laid out four elements of how remembrance in Communion went beyond recalling a past event, to remind her of things relevant to her present life and faith: the seriousness of the act, the need for preparation, the presence of Christ with her and her two-way relationship with God. Grace viewed remembrance as a personal engagement with the story, almost imagining the possibility of her own participation,

quite obviously it’s the reminder that Jesus actually did die for me, as, like Jesus dies for the world, and we hear it all the time, and every day, but that Jesus did really die for me, so kind of a reminder that any of us could have been sat at the twelve, you know at the last supper table.

Here Grace echoes Andrea’s sense of continuity between past, present and future, in which the Christian becomes part of the on-going story in and through their contemporary life. Beattie (2008, p.235) points out that there is ‘a rich resource in sacramental theology for exploring the performative and narrative dimensions of the Christian life, in which

experience and language are woven together in a conscious quest to incarnate one's own life story within the story of Christ and the church'.

There are, then, a number of significant elements to the women's remembering. Firstly the remembrance becomes a means of incarnation in which we become an embodied and active part of that story and its meaning and effect in the world. Johnson (2009, p.225) argues that,

Christ is only significant as the gospel message continues to be proclaimed by Christians who identify themselves with Christ's redemptive purpose and become that body in the world presently, the Body of Christ. Therefore the ascension event may be seen to be the climax moment in the Christ story, the moment when others' participation in the story moves from possibility to reality. At this moment those who have identified themselves with Christ and have participated in the story thus far, albeit from a distance, other-body perspective, are compelled to continue to live that story in their own lives, even in their own bodies.

Secondly, this embodiment of remembrance is both communal and personal. Watson (2002, pp.116-120) reflects on how communities can 'embody the story of God'. At a personal level, the Eucharist is incarnated in the individual both through the absorption of bread and wine into our bodies, and in our minds as physical memories in the memory pathways of our brains,

since memory is a function of the brain, and the brain is a physical entity ... what has been committed to memory is physically with us, and has become as much part of us

as the physical reception of the host at the eucharist. It is indeed the Word made flesh tabernacling among us (Sykes, 1996, p.159).

Thirdly, this embodied remembering has the power to be transformative for women.

Memory is itself subversive and can bring transformation and overthrow power.

Metz, in explicating the Eucharist as *memoria passionis*, the memory of the passion and death of Christ, establishes that the suffering of Christ was due to the religious, social and political powers of his day. When that suffering is remembered and recalled in the Eucharist, the contemporary power structures that allow continued suffering, oppression, injustice are called into question (Cummings, 1999, p.105).

The transformative remembering the women are undertaking in their engagement with the theology of the Eucharist, brought into dialogue with the various sources for the construction of theology, can become a locus for the creation of new and life-giving understandings of this central rite.

6.4 SPACE FOR AMBIGUITY

Overarching the women's explorations of the meaning of Communion, as in the themes of the previous two chapters, was the desire for space. In their theological understanding and in their experiences of relationship with God in Communion, the women sought freedom for their own interpretations and experiences to have validity, and space for others to bring their own meanings and find inclusion and acceptance. Alice, Claire, Laura and Ann, each

differently and powerfully articulated their desire for the space for ambiguity and personal interpretation in the meaning of Communion, free from the control or censure of the church institution. Laura particularly argued for the importance of recognising these individual perspectives as arising validly from an individual's life of faith.

Alice, like Khadijat, described Communion in terms of 'story'. Acknowledging her own 'quirky response to the whole ritual thing, the actual what it's saying, what it's trying to communicate', she nevertheless affirmed that

it's still very important and it does, it almost in a way that's not,

I mean it's not a "this is what it's about",

it's very sort of emotive and very deep and I think that's so important

and 'everyone makes a different meaning from it'. Alice did not interpret the Communion ritual as having any given meaning, in the way that some views of Communion as a straightforward reminder of Jesus' last supper, death and sacrifice did. Instead she spoke of Communion in terms of experience, 'emotive' and 'deep', in which meaning is individual and open to interpretation and diversity. Claire also articulated the importance of allowing for ambiguity in meaning and difference in interpretation, so that meaning is not 'forced' onto people.

I think if I was explaining it to someone

I think I have so many I s'pose issues in a way built up from Communion before that

I would try to leave it as open as possible so they could understand themselves ...

I think everyone comes to these things differently don't they and I personally probably don't think it's right to force things on people.

Laura recognised and defended the value of different understandings or opinions about Communion as she spoke of the possibility of lay people taking the lead in celebrating the Communion rather than priests:

I think that this, you know like, changing the focus and allowing more people to participate. Of course I think it would be problematic for the church as well because definitely there is an official version which is given to the priest and of course other people might not be entitled to give their yeah their opinion or, but even so they are part of the church, they are the body, finally they are the body of the church, finally of Christ, so even if there are different, even if many are not orthodox or even if they are questionable they are still experienced in faith. I think that to share the experiences of faith would be something really meaningful.

Here, and at other points in her interview, Laura argued for the validity and the importance of the faith experiences of the ordinary, diverse membership of the Christian community in creating theology and meaning for the whole community. She wholly rejected the traditional model of confining the ownership and definition of meaning to received orthodoxy or a function of priests and institution.

This offers a challenge to Beattie's (2008, p.247) perspective that the woman priest should be seen as a means of creating space for others, most especially women. 'She is as

threatening as Christ himself was to established traditions, to religious authorities, to rules and regulations, bursting the wineskins and breaking open the jars that release an anointing fragrance within the Church'. In the light of my research I would contend that the women of the laity are engaged in the same process Beattie describes, with or without the visible and symbolic image of the woman priest, or the sanction or support of the church as an institution.

It was the women themselves, as lay members, who were creating the space for one another in community, and who desired space for one another in meaning and understanding too. This is important, not only because it arises from the experiences of lay women themselves, but further, because it is able to address the very many contexts of Communion where there are no women priests to be a transformative presence.

In sharing Communion they are seeking and exploring their own understandings. They subvert, create and imagine what could and can be. Laura's perspective, with her Roman Catholic background, is demonstrative of the desire for a real embracing of what the Roman Catholic Church terms the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful people.

The Spirit will not let us take refuge in a ghetto-discourse, a dialect, or a private language. Within the Church however, we may locate three ways in which the Spirit consistently works to renew the discourse of the community: tradition, prophecy, and the *sensus fidelium* (Hanvey, 2000, p.216).

This should ideally enable truth to be discerned within and by the laity rather than dictated by church leaders. It is women without power or position in the church in my interviews, who had not assumed access to the sacraments through ‘achieving’ ordination, who amply demonstrated the ‘commitment to tradition and to liturgy as means of opening up possibility of discerning the sacramental throughout our life and world’ (Loades, 2004, p.164-169).

Women I interviewed argued potently for a need for space for interpretation. They recognised the ambiguity which Ross (2001, p.78) identifies as inherent in the meaning of sacraments for women. As in the last chapter, they displayed in their own thinking, reflection and interpretation the creativity and imagination which Loades (2004, p.163) identifies as essential to seeking the value of tradition, rather than its destruction. They demonstrated a clear desire to allow for space, exploration, diversity and, as in Chapter 4, reacted against constructs of validity and narrow definitions, whilst continuing to assert the importance of Communion and affirming the meaning and significance it has for their lives.

Parsons (2000, p.2) recognises the rich potential of the position of women for the rediscovery and reinterpretation of faith afresh in our current context. She contends ‘May it not be that women of faith find themselves already poised with the treasures of a tradition borne into their lives, that now comes to be voiced in new ways in the muddle of our time?’ Beattie agrees (2008, p.246), pointing to the work of Hill and Green who,

both show how the language of sacramentality functions as a prism through which women’s experience can be mediated in a way that is mutually transformative ... the

symbols are reactivated and become life-giving signs of hope and redemption to those who had previously been untouched by their promise.

The women's desire for space and ambiguity, their own willingness to explore new concepts, images and practices in Communion are the grass roots evidence that this process of reactivation of symbols for mutual transformation is already taking place within our church communities, as well as in external contexts such as woman-church.

6.5 CONCLUSION

There was considerable diversity in how the women experienced relationship with God, in how they understood God as being present or active, and in what they found to be transformative in their experiences of Communion. Within this rich diversity there were elements of common ground which point towards means of deepening and enriching our understanding of Eucharist.

The women in my study did not relinquish their practice of the Eucharist, despite experiencing discomfort. Instead they either accepted the incongruity between what they were expected to believe and the meanings they actually derived from their experience, or were finding new and imaginative ways to understand and create meanings from their Eucharistic experience. These patterns resonate with the findings in the qualitative research of both Ross and Dierks, the former consonant with Ross' (2001, p.217) conclusion that, 'these women refuse to make dualistic choices: either WomenChurch or the Roman Catholic Church, either feminism or the patriarchalism of the parish clergy, either in or out', and the

latter with Dierks' (1997, p.17) observations that 'in this age of options, so many who find little joy in the institution do not just walk away, but instead remain, seeking new ways to celebrate and explore the spirit of Jesus present in themselves and their communities through the expression of Eucharist'. Within these different patterns some key strands emerge which must be recognised and upheld in developing feminist Eucharistic theology.

The first of these is that women's relationship with God was mediated in diverse ways, but particularly through horizontal relationship. The focus of the previous chapter, on the centrality of mutuality and horizontal relationship, was also experienced as being revelatory of the presence and nature of God, and a means of encounter with God.

The second strand is the importance of embodied anamnesis. The women repeatedly referred to the importance of remembering the *story* of Jesus for their own lives. This story had personal relevance, carrying the possibility of their own embodied participation in it, as well as providing a connection between past, present and future. A Eucharistic theology must then be about a 're-membling' in which our own human lives are incarnations of the Christological story which binds present and future and centres on motifs of life and justice. The Eucharist is a place of remembrance and embodiment through our on-going participation in enacting the story, and in relating to one another and to God.

The final theme is the importance of ambiguity for the women. Their desire for fully inclusive Communion extended not only to the practicalities in liturgical terms, but also to the creation of space for all people in the interpretation and theological meanings of

Communion. But, as Edmondson (2009, p.229) asks in his examination of open table theology,

does this leave the church without any sense of clear boundary and definition? How can a church that will allow all to enter and participate provide itself the necessary sense of integrity that would allow communal life to thrive?

The beliefs and desires of the women I interviewed bear out his conclusions that it is the strength of relationships which can maintain the integrity of the church in recognising ambiguity and relinquishing the boundaries which define belonging.

The community of Christ's body has integrity in the midst of these open boundaries because it is defined and held together by its bonds, not its boundaries. It is the commitment and connection of the members of the church to the heart of the church – Christ's embracing love – and to each other that holds the church together.

In summary, Eucharistic theology must be about dynamic relationship with God, both vertical and horizontal, which is rooted in universal and mutual experience and meaning. It must recognise the embodied nature of women's remembering, as a means of incarnating the story of Christ which transcends barriers of times and space. It must embrace ambiguity and diversity as inherent, emphasising that everyone in the horizontal relationship where God is revealed has their part to play in the bringing of life and the opposition of injustice.

In the next chapter I turn to consider what a feminist reconstruction of the theology of the Eucharist might look like in the light of these findings and those of the previous chapters.

7. TOWARDS A FEMINIST THEOLOGY OF THE EUCHARIST: A METAPHOR OF BIRTHING

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to this thesis I set out my intention to focus on what the reflected experiences of women may mean for our understandings of Eucharist in the church. While the women in my study certainly cannot be considered representative of women universally, the validity of their insights, in interaction with existing feminist scholarship, other research, and the feminist liturgical responses surveyed in the literature review provide fertile ground for theological reflection. This can offer insight into the needs and concerns of women for developing Eucharistic theology.

This chapter is intended to be indicative of how the attentive listening to women's experience of the Eucharist may inform the transformation of Eucharistic theology to become wholesome and liberational for women. I endeavour to show how, as a piece of theological reflection, this reconstruction arises from the emergent themes in the previous three chapters, and, as such, forms part of the *response* within the research cycle described in the introduction.

In this chapter I suggest a metaphor of 'birthing' as a model of understanding Eucharist and explain why and how this metaphor responds to my findings from women's experiences. The metaphor is derived from my own pastoral engagement with the themes which arose from my empirical research as outlined in the previous three chapters. These are brought

into relationship with the resources of wider feminist theological thought in order to see how a creative and pastoral response may emerge from the research process.

Given the women's rejection of the exclusion of themselves or others, it is important that the image of Eucharist as a place of birthing be an inclusive symbol, and not one which adds further to the alienation felt by so many women. In using this image which engages creatively with many of the diverse aspects of women's experiences of Eucharist, it is also important to recognise its limitations. Birth as an image is itself deeply ambiguous. Birth is not a romanticised event, without pain or cost. It can be an ambiguous or painful image for women for whom experiences of birth do not come because of infertility, miscarriage, singleness or sexual orientation; or for whom birth is a traumatic and frightening experience; or for whom birth does not bring life, but the grief and loss of bearing a still-born child. The complexities of birth as an image will bear further exploration and theological reflection beyond the work of this thesis. This will mean exploring how the ambiguous nature of the image may provide an opportunity to engage further with the pain and struggle of the women I spoke with in relation to Communion. It will also mean considering how the image might embrace those it could appear to exclude, as in Kroll's (1987, p.93) use of 'womb' as metaphor:

using it to describe an amalgam of elements in a woman's life which give her the ability to describe herself as a woman even if she is either born without a uterus or loses it during her lifetime

The use of an image of birthing will not appeal to, or be appropriate for, all people or even all women. I do not argue that it is 'the answer', but rather a demonstration of one potential outworking of the process of attentive listening which can bring new and diverse imagery into our dialogue about the Eucharist in the Church of England. Part of the transformative potential of such imaginative work is as a means of blurring boundaries and bringing to the fore the ambiguity in meaning which the women sought. So the image of birth which I offer is not premised on gender complementarity, as is the case in so much of the birth imagery used in theologies of women's priesthood such as Green's (2009a, pp.164-171). It is a calling to recognise the nurturing, life-giving and birthing aspects of all humans through the shared action of the gathered community, men and children as well as women. This has the potential to challenge gender binaries in views of Eucharist, particularly those of men as sacrificial ritual agents and women as bodily and 'other'.

The image of birthing I offer provides just one example of how a new metaphor can respond to the needs identified in this research for new and diverse imagery and language to bring about liberation and transformation. This is necessary to enable women to speak about their theological understanding with the same ease that they were able to talk about their experiences of communion in interview and to help create the fluidity and ambiguity which they sought for themselves and for others in contrast to the rigid and confining models they perceived themselves as being offered by the church.

Nonetheless, the value of this metaphor is that it offers a means of talking positively about the desires and yearnings expressed through this research in a new and imaginative framework which transcends the confines of traditional Eucharistic theology, and

demonstrates how it is possible to draw on new imagery to reflect growing theological understanding from attentive listening to the experiences of young lay women.

The chapter proceeds in three main sections corresponding to the three core areas, though there is inevitably, and rightly, much overlap and interrelation in how the sections of this chapter addresses the material from the analysis chapters:

- Eucharistic birthing: re-membering the story. This section focusses on the conclusions of Chapter 6. It embraces the need to remember the story of Jesus, expressing dynamic relationship with God both directly and through community with others, and at the same time affirming a message of life and opposition to injustice.
- Eucharistic birthing: creative relationality. This section draws on the central themes of Chapter 5, and builds upon the need for a theology which places mutuality and community at the centre of the sacrament as a place of nurture, joy, affirmation and growing wholeness and where values of equality and inclusion are inherent, so that boundaries are broken down in a process-orientated journey of relationship and interaction rather than a single moment of sacrament.
- Eucharistic birthing: a shared process with God. This section addresses the women's experiences of exclusion and alienation in Chapter 4. It centres on the need to put women and women's bodies at the heart of the imagery and meaning of the Eucharist, to counteract alienation and separation. It claims authority for women through identification with God's identity and activity. In embodied sharing in the activity of God, women gain power, personal agency and validity whilst retaining autonomy and recognising the need for diversity and ambiguity.

7.2 EUCHARISTIC BIRTHING: RE-MEMBERING THE STORY

Remembrance was a core theme in how the women expressed their understanding of Eucharist. Whatever their struggles, the women continued to assert the importance of the story of God in Christ remembered in Communion, and their belief that this continued to have relevance to their lives. The ‘story’ which was so important to the women in the Eucharist is the retelling of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. A process of feminist anamnesis can be seen in women finding new ways of remembering this story which lies at the heart of the Eucharist. To do this, the voices of contemporary women must be heard in harmony with the insights of scripture and historical tradition in an anamnesis which is about discovery and retrieval of their silenced testimony, excavating and reconstructing new understandings.

The desire for images of life rather than death was very significant for those who had moved away from received understandings of Communion and begun forming their own interpretations. This wish to move from images of death to life is a prominent theme in feminist theology, a key proponent being Grace Jantzen (2001) who called for a shift from focusing upon death and mortality to natality, believing that images of birth and not death are important in seeking human flourishing. Changing the focus of Communion towards birth and bringing new life, and away from death and sacrifice is one way to do this.

The patterns of feminist liturgical response in the literature review highlighted the benefit of drawing on wider biblical resources. There is considerable evidence in scripture and tradition which provides a foundation for the identification of a God who is intimately

engaged in mothering, labouring, and birthing and an understanding of the on-going mission and life of God as one in which these distinctively female aspects of life can enter fully into our understanding of Eucharist.

Grey (2000, p.29) discusses the redolence of images of birth and motherhood as a dimension of the nature of God in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in Isaiah. Young (1982, p.48) agrees and, looking specifically at Isaiah 42.14-16 and Deuteronomy 32.18, suggests that

this labour of God's is a labour to bring forth a new people, restoration, new life, new hope. It is interesting that elsewhere the Hebrew verb for a woman giving birth, and travailing in the process, is used of God bearing Israel and giving birth to his own people.

Reid (2007, pp.155-180) provides a strong argument for discovering rich birthing imagery throughout John's Gospel, in relation to creation, Jesus' life and ministry and his own discourse (especially John 16: 20-22), as well as in the crucifixion imagery.

Rorem (1997, p.49-50) surveys the plentiful resources in Christian tradition for supporting procreative and mothering aspects of the divinity, particularly from medieval sources, including St Bernard and Julian of Norwich, and also points to the writings of St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (1093 - 1109) who addressed Jesus as 'the great mother':

It is by your death that they have been born,
for if you had not been in labour

you could not have borne death;
and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth (Anselm, (trans.)Ward,
1973, p.153-154).

These images provide a basis in both scripture and tradition for constructing an understanding of the Eucharistic community as sharing in the on-going birthing processes of God, exemplified in the story of Christ, who as Word is central to God's birthing of creation, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1.1 NRSV). The church, as the body of Christ, can be seen as an embodiment of the creative God who brings forth life. Just as the psalmist described the experiences of relationship with a God who knit us together in womb (Psalm 139), so we can continue to be wonderfully and marvellously made in the womb of the church, in which God continues to work through the life of Christ and the action of the spirit.

Re-membering the story of Communion as Christ's birthing fullness of life which is part of the eternal story of divine creation and life-giving, and celebrating our participation in it, addresses many of the experiences and beliefs of the women I interviewed.

Women's relationship with God was experienced in diverse ways, but particularly through horizontal relationship. An understanding of Communion that emphasises God's presence in the gathered people who are the body of Christ is consonant with women's experiences of encounter with God within horizontal relationships. In Eucharist the people of God are re-membered, so that the Eucharistic assembly becomes the living presence of God, Christic communities where the story is re-membered and the reality of God is ever becoming

incarnate. In this way the Eucharist is a place of Christ's on-going birth and incarnation in the world. In celebrating the Eucharist therefore, we can enter into that shared act of birthing, and of bringing life to the world. This is explored in more detail in the following section on relationality.

Re-telling the story in this way responds to the women's concern for remembering the significance of Jesus, while focussing on images of life rather than death. Ann expressed articulately her heartfelt desire to replace images of death and suffering in the Eucharist, with images of life, 'Jesus is about life and not about death'. There is a strong and growing theology consonant with this view which provides the foundation for a reconstruction of a theology of Eucharist which responds to the many experiences and deeply held desires of the women I interviewed. Grey (2009, p.351) speaks of 'overturning the logic of sacrifice' from 'redemptive violence' to symbols of 'flourishing' and of 'birth-giving as model of at-one-ment' (Grey, 1989, p.170). These views resonate with Watson's (2008, p.21) reappraisal of the cross, where she argues for an inversion of the image so that death is at the same time birth:

The death of Christ is the moment of birth of the church. Christ enters into the reality of human suffering and thereby makes life and love possible. This is the inversion, the overcoming of violence and death in the place where love is possible. John speaks of the fifth wound being the pierced side from which flow water and blood. This is an image of birth, of new creation and new life amidst suffering.

If the church, the body of Christ in Eucharistic community, originates in Jesus' act of giving birth, this transforms the impact of the last supper and passion narrative for understanding what the church continues to celebrate in Communion.

In a Eucharistic theology of birthing, then, the sacrament becomes a means by which the church is continually coming to birth in the creation and nurturing interaction of community. It can be a place of nourishment and feeding in the widest sense. This retains the understanding of the Eucharist as instituted by Jesus, and provides a specific locus for on-going interplay between divine and human action in this birthing process.

Understanding the Eucharist as a place of birth is an opportunity for women to remember the story as concerned with life rather than death. While it acknowledges the significance of the cross to the story of Jesus, it is no longer necessary for the suffering and sacrifice of the cross to define Eucharistic theology. Instead the Eucharist may be understood as a place of birthing into ever fuller life, the life which is Christ's gift, with symbols of food for flourishing and manifest relationships of justice. This builds themes of life and justice without the damaging implications of a sacrificial atonement theory of redemption.

In this way, the metaphor enables a change in the understanding of the redemptive work of Jesus from a transactional model of once-for-all payment for sin through suffering and death, to an understanding which embraces the women's perspectives of Jesus' whole life as being redemptive. It also re-patterns the Eucharist away from models of traditional patrilineal male blood-sacrifice, transforming the image to mutual engagement in the feminine-identified action of bringing life.

Jesus is recorded as saying that he ‘came that they might have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10.10 NRSV), also often translated ‘in all its fullness’, so birthing people to this fullness in Eucharistic community may be considered a redemptive process which fulfils the purposes of Christ. As Green (2009a, p.76) writes, ‘A community of redemption is one where the full humanity of all people is upheld and respected’. Redemption can be seen as a process of birthing towards fullness of life for all people, which is inherently inclusive and justice orientated.

If this metaphor which has the potential to transform the view of redemption and overturn damaging models of sacrifice and sinfulness is to be healthy for women’s flourishing, it is also important to differentiate it from theologies of *re-birth* which are inadequate for addressing the issues raised by this research. A number of feminist theologians have seen the theology of rebirth as an opportunity to connect with the role of women as birth-givers, including Young (1982, p.104) who argues for

rediscovering the fact that at the heart of it all is a message about rebirth, a message of hope and atonement, about the possibility of new creation. Of course the birth pangs go on ... One way or another it is in the church that people are born again and are adopted as heirs of the kingdom through Christ. It is God who agonizes in bringing the new creation to birth, yet we are called to participate and to bear the agony with joy and hope because he is at work in us and through us.

Green (2009a, p.53) draws on similar ideas, but still returns women to the restrictive and life-denying pattern of necessity for re-birth, or ‘new birth in Christ’. The image of rebirth

retains the problems of an institutional church act which supersedes or replaces the birth which a mother gives to her child, thus negating a woman's role in birth as inadequate or unspiritual and needing to be replaced by the superior birth offered by the church. 'Women give physical birth, but spiritual birth – "real" birth – is given by male clerics in baptism' (Ross, 2001, p.193). It is precisely this idea of re-birth which I want to resist in a Eucharistic theology of birthing which engages women's lives fully in the on-going, agential, co-operative mission of God in Christ.

7.3 EUCHARISTIC BIRTHING: CREATIVE RELATIONALITY

In Chapter 5, I argued that Eucharistic theology needs to reflect, affirm and develop relationality. It must emphasise the equality of the participants in a shared process where every member has a part. It must reflect the celebration of Communion as part of holistic, on-going and diverse dynamic relationships. A theology of Eucharist as locus of birthing engages constructively with the relational nature of the women's experiences of Communion, embracing their desire for inclusive community which transcends boundaries and allows space for diversity and difference. There are a number of key elements to this.

The image is firmly grounded in mutuality. The Eucharist is the shared work of the whole people of God without boundaries and exclusions. The gathered Eucharistic community can be viewed as a womb-like place, within which and from which birthing takes place. The celebration of the Eucharist then becomes a place of two-fold birthing: firstly the continual 'birthing' of Christ, being embodied in the Eucharistic community which becomes the body of Christ; and secondly, in birthing individuals into full personhood in relationship with God

and with others. As Green (2009a, p.53) argues, ‘all church members, priest and people alike, are “mothers” in nurturing others to new life in Christ’.

The symbol of the gathered church as being womb-like and active in giving birth encourages everyone to see themselves as sharing in the mutual action of embodying and birthing Christ and birthing one another to the fullness of life promised in Christ. Phillips (2011, p.144) has proposed the metaphor of ‘wombing’ to describe the creation of a nurturing environment for girls to support them in their personal growth as they transition to adulthood in the Christian community. ‘A girl’s “wombing” enables the growth of her identity symbiotically with the holding environment ... this is a relationship which oscillates between autonomy and connection’. It is an environment like this, nurturing individual growth, which can be seen in the relational community the women described. The shared mutual action, with and for one another, is an opportunity to rediscover the ‘doing it together’ that Khadijat, Claire and Laura valued so highly and longed to express more fully in Eucharistic practice. ‘In the end, Jesus did not say “believe this” or “know this” or “submit to this in memory of me”. He said “do this in memory of me”. And then he fed his friends’ (Shakespeare 2006: 99). The ritual practice of Eucharist, the ‘doing’ together is valued and celebrated in a theology of birthing to wholeness, because as Collins (1999, p.57) argues ‘symbolic bodily practice announces and reaffirms identity, not only who we are but who we aspire to be’.

Because of its focus on equality and mutuality, the metaphor of birthing does not emphasise the role of the priest. From the various ways in which women emphasised the centrality of communal experience in what they valued about Eucharist, it is possible to argue for ‘an understanding of ministry as originating from the community and continually based in it,

instead of “hierarchical clericalism” (Ruether, 1985, p.75). The women I interviewed did not need a woman to stand at the altar in order to find women representing the divine, nor did they need the priest to facilitate their understandings of Eucharist. Consistently in interview they demonstrated the ability to subvert the representative power structure of the church and locate their own meaning within their own lay frame of reference. Their rejections, questions, reconstructions and explorations arose from their own grounded experience of living faith in sharing Eucharist. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the voices of the women I interviewed was the virtual insignificance of the priest in their experience.

Interestingly, Green (2009a, p.98) explores themes of birth in relation to the Eucharistic ministry of women priests, but though she argues that the representative nature of women priests offers emancipation by creating space for others to find voice and acceptance, she retains the traditional frameworks of clerical power and authority. Similarly, in asserting that ‘the woman priest brings to the notion of sacrifice some very powerful and transformative symbolism connected with the maternal, with birthing, nurture, flourishing and sensuality’ (p.21), she retains the identity and nature of women as sacrificial, and complements the existing symbolism of sacrificial death in Eucharist with birth as a further form of ‘sacrificial-giving’ (p.53). In placing such emphasis on the clerical role and on sacrificial imagery, Green’s work fails to address the desire amongst the lay women I interviewed for mutuality and equality, for the removal of boundaries which divide, and for transformation into liberative community, where symbols of life and flourishing, rather than sacrifice and suffering, guide theology.

The image of Communion as act of birthing addresses more fully the need for a feminist emancipatory reinterpretation of Eucharistic theology for women, lay and ordained, and has the potential to transform the understanding of the Eucharist itself rather than being reliant on the presence or significance of women priests. This in turn offers an opportunity to continue the development in theologies of priesthood away from clerical power and sacrificial roles, particularly towards models such as priest as midwife, helping and enabling the process of birthing with skill, yet focusing on empowerment rather than control.

The image of birthing creates the space for diverse practice which the women valued. It is more holistic in that it does not place the sole emphasis on reception of the bread and wine. It continues to relate well to the strong Eucharistic themes of feeding and nurture and maintains the significance of sharing bread and wine, which retains the significance of Jesus' Last Supper narrative. However, it also values the diversity of ways we feed and nurture ourselves and one another, not exclusively through eating and drinking, but also through myriad other nurturing interactions. The variety of ways women located value in the practice of Eucharist was strongly reflected in my data, in the smiles exchanged, in the togetherness of the Communion queue. In this way the life-giving nature of God may be seen as incarnated, or made present, through the 'dynamic generative relationality' (Hanvey, 2000, p.213) of community in Eucharistic celebration, rather than in the consecration of bread and wine alone. This is important because an image which can embrace the value of the diversity of feeding which takes place in Communion allows the space which the majority of the women so emphatically called for in the interviews: space for different understandings, beliefs, and even levels of participation. Alice's choice to participate in the

ritual of Communion, but not to receive bread and wine, is as valuable a part of the womb-like community as any other part played by the participants.

This also responds to other feminist critiques which resonate with the women's concern for full inclusion. It allows space for others, for example those who suffer from eating disorders and cannot consume bread and are thus excluded from the Eucharist (see Carson and Slee 2008: 134), who adopt differing levels of engagements or means of participating to find a full, equal and valued place within the community. It responds to the challenges of a context deprived of bread and wine, considered by Wansbrough (1997, p.28) particularly in relation to political prisoners, imprisoned for their faith and 'challenging injustice in their society' who are deprived of the elements to celebrate Eucharist. She is certain that it must be possible to celebrate Communion authentically, recognising the presence of God in Christian community, even without access to bread and wine.

The metaphor of birthing can foster a more holistic view of Communion, rather than confining it to a transactional moment controlled by the church, as in the case of receiving the bread and wine. The holistic image of building a womb-like community which acts together through Communion, the liturgy and the wider life of the Eucharistic community allows for greater integration of other non-traditional elements of service such as Laura's desire to sit on the floor and share some food and the remarkable value Khadijat placed upon joining in cutting the church grass. It is a way of removing the boundaries placed by the church on how our Eucharistic community is lived out and what is, and is not, determined to be of sacramental value. The women's experience of ambiguity which questions the church's delineations of the sacramental was also a significant finding in Ross' (2001,

p.211) qualitative study. By constructing the meaning of the Eucharist in an embracing and holistic symbol of community which brings about birth through its sacramental life together, women are able to find their own 'moments' of grace, feeding and divine encounter in many diverse ways. An additional implication of moving away from a single moment of reception is the removal of a need to be in a state of grace before receiving which evoked such fear and unworthiness.

Coming to birth is a process. It is not a moment, it is a transition which takes time, which happens in interaction between the child and the mother, which is brought about by the action of the womb in labour. At the same time, however, the metaphor of birthing avoids the dangers of reducing the Eucharist to a sociological phenomenon of interpersonal relationship warned of by Williams (Williams, R., 1996, p.101), and maintains a coherent view of the divinely inspired nature of the Eucharist in which God continues to be engaged with humanity collaboratively in live-giving and creative action. The birthing which takes place through the experience of Eucharist can be understood as a continual process of becoming and flourishing through nurturing relationship, with others, with God, in momentary stillness and peace, and in the acceptance and inclusion which acknowledge dignity, worth and personhood.

Birthing offers a theological image of equality because all people who participate in the Eucharistic community, in whatever way, according to their unique abilities and empowered personal choices, are a part of the womb-space of Eucharistic community through which birth occurs. Each individual is of unique value in building up and creating that community which becomes Christ's body and embodies Christ's work and purpose of bringing life,

becoming the divine womb in which and through which Christ's on-going work of redemption for each human in the birthing of full life can take place. 'A theology which sees redemption as linking relational energy with a passion for justice sees social justice as the heart of the Eucharist' (Grey, 1989, p.171).

A metaphor of birth communicates equality. It affirms that all should be birthed equally, and all participate in birthing with equal value, regardless of the presence of ambiguity and difference. This leads to a just valuing of all human life and strives towards the wholeness to each person and, because of that equality, to the community as a whole.

God is, therefore, from the first, conceived of as dynamic, as the safeguarder of freedom and possibility; but that dynamism is framed not as the willed exchange between the individual believer and the divine monarch, but as the active summons to human being into fuller and more participative being within and for the cosmos. We are immersed in the grace of being; but the grace of being demands our responsible and resolute agency to bring ourselves and the cosmos into full possibility (Morley, 2000, p.189).

God here may be understood as a mother on a cosmic scale, nurturing her children in being and becoming, drawing them onwards into greater growth and fulfilment, calling them to be a part of the family in which the good of all in mutuality is the goal.

As ekklesia of justice, Eucharistic communities can become the place of birthing into the promise of redemption, into the fullness of life which is characterised by justice, equality

and flourishing for all people. The liberational implications of this understanding of Communion are not limited to women, though it is perhaps for them that the greatest transformation could occur because of its distinctively feminist construction and focus on women's bodies. Constructing Eucharistic celebration as a place of birthing is an opportunity to embrace a message of full self-hood for all people, most especially those who are marginalised and disempowered by traditional theologies of Eucharist. It is motivated towards the birthing of all humanity in full personhood.

7.4 EUCHARISTIC BIRTHING: A SHARED PROCESS WITH GOD

Chapter Four explored the many ways in which women experienced exclusion and alienation from Communion, and their responses to this. I concluded that these insights revealed the need for a theology of the Eucharist which places the female body at the centre and recognises the fullness of women's bodies and identities as being in the likeness of Christ. There is a need to create an understanding of Eucharist which enables women to feel a sense of authority and identification within their gendered selves, both corporately and individually. A Eucharistic theology which utilises a metaphor of birthing through Communion addresses this need and the reasons for it, in a number of ways.

It places women's bodies at the centre of Eucharistic imagery, specifically their capacity for giving birth and nurturing life, in their likeness to God's life-giving nature and Christ's birth-giving on the cross. It is a way in which the title 'mother church' can be given new meaning for women, so that the church as a gathered community becomes a mother, birthing new life through Communion, thus focusing on an image which raises up the capabilities of

women's bodies and their gendered lives. The opportunity for women to identify themselves with Christ giving birth on the cross blurs gender boundaries and 'opens the way for women disciples to identify themselves with Christ in a profound way' (Reid, 2007, p.167-168). The desire for female embodied identification with Christ is exemplified by Slee who explained in an interview about the ritual she created when facing a hysterectomy; 'So I suppose there is something about wanting to evoke, claim, very overtly Christ's presence in my womb, in my blood' (Berry, 2009, p.191). It was a Eucharistic framework using the refrain 'This is my body, this is my blood' (Slee, 2004a, pp.90-92) which Slee chose for this task demonstrating, along with the texts considered in my literature review, how apt the Eucharist is as a locus for this process of feminist anamnesis. The need to recognise and celebrate women's ability to embody God was reflected in how the women repeatedly referred to the importance of remembering the story of Jesus for their own lives. Explicitly identifying women's bodies with Christ's body in this way is an act of embodied anamnesis which again was reflected in the liturgical work reviewed in Chapter 2.

By celebrating women's bodies and their life-giving ability, this imagery works creatively to address the profound experiences of 'otherness' expressed by the women, removing the sense of threat and fear of something which is other, 'weird' and 'taboo' to enable women to identify more with the theology and ritual of Eucharist. Focussing on divine-human partnership in sharing the life-giving nature of God means that it is also possible to retain a view of God as separate, but which, through identification with women's bodies, becomes a source of empowerment rather than alienation. Morley (2000, p.179) considers the difficulties for women in engaging with the otherness of God and argues that Macquarrie's view of God as a grace-giving 'power from beyond us' provides a way forward:

it is directed to our *possibilities*, to our becoming who we are (it actively encourages self-transcendence); it is *integrative* of our facticity (it actively encourages self-integration in the context of our lived circumstances); it shows that the question of God arises from the constitution of human being not at some weak point but precisely at the point of our search for freedom and growth; and it suggests that grace can come from beyond us without demeaning or alienating us.

God's otherness from women then becomes not a negation of them but an opportunity for relationship and gift of space for coming to birth and fullness, and negative aspects of 'otherness' are remedied by close association between the life giving nature of God and of women in partnership.

The impact of these two aspects, the centrality of women's bodies and the removal of symbolic opposition or incompatibility between women and God, helps to counter the feelings of unworthiness, as well as disempowerment, expressed by the women, as well as address their need for choice and autonomy. Feelings of unworthiness are redressed by raising women's status to that of partners with the divine in the life-giving action of the Eucharist. This transforms women's relationship with God, the Church and the priest, and provides a basis for confidence and self-value. This in turn creates the sense of autonomy, control and choice which can overcome fear and threat and so responds to those women who spoke of longing for personal agency, for a voice in the church, for a valuing of difference, and for space and autonomy. The ramifications of this for the status of women in the church are more far-reaching than the confines of the Eucharistic rite. It has implications for

women's status and worth in every aspect of their lives. By concentrating on an aspect of women's bodies, their sexuality and physical gendered-ness which has often been denigrated and their nature as creative, life-bearing and identified with the divine nature, it becomes much more difficult for men and male dominated institutions to justify violence towards women in attitude and action.

A place of birthing is a place where women's dissent and reinterpretations are given space. The metaphor can affirm women's individual autonomy and identity rather than their conformity or subjugation. This recognises the importance of ambiguity. The desire for fully inclusive Communion extends not only to the practicalities in liturgical terms, but also to the creation of space for all people in the interpretation and theological meanings of Communion. Maintaining a distinct but closely identified and embodied relationship between women and God in Communion offers a model where, as Morley suggests above, the otherness of God can become a place for women to find wholeness, 'freedom and growth'. This wholeness embraces difference and individuality and enables the ambiguity and freedom to dissent that the women saw as essential. Hanvey (2000, p.213) similarly understands the transcendence of God as, not a boundary of otherness, but 'the place where difference is given both the space and the call to become individuality and uniqueness'. The creation of a life-bearing womb-space of divine-human partnership in celebrating Communion is a vision in which women may find full-personhood through the celebration of the Eucharist as a life-giving place, in which the gathering community shares in the Christic action of giving birth and bringing life. It offers a model for continually birthing individuals and communities into fullness of life, retaining space for ambiguity and celebrating of diversity and difference. In giving birth, the mother and her womb do not look

for the submission of the infant coming to birth, seeking to conform it to the identity of the other (see the words of the Baptism service, 'Do you submit to Christ?', Common Worship, 2000, p.353). Instead the mother, through birth, brings the infant to its differentiated identity, willing fullness of personhood for the child, in difference and individuality.

This leads on from individual inclusion, to a communal vision of inclusion in diversity. The transformation of Eucharistic community away from a coercive space into one where there is space for diversity of participation and response is creative of the inclusive environment the women desired for all people. By affirming the value of the individual, and their right to choice and freedom, rather than an expectation of conformity and enforcement of boundaries, diversity becomes a cherished aspect of human-being. In fact the birthing of individual selves within the whole emphasises the importance of difference and inclusiveness that is the very nature of the Godhead. Hess (1998, pp.60-61) affirms the significance of difference within the unity of a Trinitarian God, 'recognising, affirming, and understanding differentness is central to the God who created the world, was incarnate in a human being, and is present through the power of the Spirit', and argues that 'The Hebrew understanding of a dynamic God in relationship with humanity, and the Christian understanding of a God whose unity embraces diversity, call forth a communion of others that overcomes alienation while preserving particularity' (p.62). It is this Communion, a place of inclusion which calls forth the full potential of 'particularity' to be realised in community which I believe a metaphor of birthing has the capacity to symbolise and develop in Eucharistic theology.

7.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter demonstrates how the metaphor of birth provides a powerful means of drawing out many of the themes arising from this qualitative study of women's experiences of Communion and taking them forward in a creative engagement with Eucharistic theology. This reconstructive work offers a direction for further development beyond this thesis as the metaphor of birth opens up new horizons of possibility. It provides an opportunity to draw more fully upon images which are increasingly emerging in feminist theology such as midwife, friend, doula, sister, in finding helpful understandings of the Eucharist for women. This chapter offers a qualitative research framework as a foundation to see how this imaginative and creative work may be developed as a means of transformation and liberation.

8. THESIS CONCLUSION

This thesis represents a considerable learning journey for me as researcher. I began the process with no background in feminist theology or research methodology and the choices I have made during the research and writing are part of that learning journey. However, in reflecting on the process, I remain committed to the decisions I have made and the methodological reasons for them.

The whole journey has been grounded in my commitment to listen attentively and openly and to enable, as far as is possible, the women's voices to speak for themselves. While analysing the accounts of experiencing Communion in the Church of England, I made a conscious decision not to place my discussion of the women's voices in the context of Anglican or wider Eucharistic theology. To have done so would have overlaid the voices of the women with the institutionally defined meanings and patriarchal constructs from which I was trying to offer a space of freedom for exploration. It would have been contrary to the stated methodological aims of this research and denied the opportunity for their nascent understandings, which were self-evidently distinct from the understandings they had been taught by the church, to be heard and explored.

My recognition of the fragility and provisionality of their use of language in seeking to express their theological ideas about Eucharist has remained paramount. I did not wish to imbue the discussion with theological meaning which is not present in the interview data. This was particularly significant in relation to their use of theological terminology such as 'sacrament' or 'transubstantiation'. For the same reason, the terms 'Communion' and

‘Eucharist’ are used without distinction or imposed meaning; they are used just as used by the women who also referred to ‘supper with Jesus’ and the Last Supper, as narrative descriptions of an event or experience rather than a confession of a particular theological standpoint.

These same reasons led me to shape the thesis as a discreet piece of qualitative research within a framework of feminist practical theology. I believe this safeguards the integrity and validity of the women’s insight and contribution to knowledge in a way that is appropriate to the emancipatory aims of the research. From this secure methodological basis, the findings and outcomes I have presented can subsequently be brought into dialogue with other aspects of theology for the purposes of transformation. These could include Anglican and wider Eucharistic theology, theologies of personhood, faith development and ecclesiology.

At the beginning of this thesis I set out my aim of listening to young lay women’s experiences of Eucharist in the Church of England, with the explicit intention of considering how their insights might contribute to our understanding of Eucharist. Within this overarching agenda, I identified five more discreet aims which shaped my research as follows.

Firstly, the methodology chapter outlined my use of non-oppressive methods in accessing participants, gathering and analysing data, and presenting my findings. The thesis is directed towards finding emancipatory understandings of the Eucharist for women. It identifies where problems lie and what is positive in these women’s experience. Chapter seven offers one model of how these features of women’s experience can be used to formulate an

emancipatory framework for understanding Eucharist. Bringing the hidden voices of lay women into theological dialogue is an empowering act.

Secondly, the analysis of the qualitative interviews with a diverse group of women has revealed key themes about their experiences of the Eucharist. Neither the women, nor the themes identified are intended to be representative. However the thesis offers insight into the thoughts and feelings of young lay women as they engage with the Eucharistic life of the church. Sensitivity to difference characterised my analysis and the presentation of my findings. Areas of convergence and areas of diversity were formative in my theological reflection. The significance of ambiguity is highlighted throughout and this is reflected in my response to the findings.

Thirdly, I have brought the data into dialogue with feminist literature and feminist liturgy. I have considered how the insights from the women resonate with existing perspectives in the literature, particularly relating to the Eucharist, as documented in the literature. I have also highlighted contradictions. This inter-relationship is present throughout the thesis. For example, the suggested metaphor of birthing engages with the patterns identified in the Eucharistic rites surveyed in the literature review. It recognises the centrality of equal and embodied participation by all present; it draws on wider biblical resources; it foregrounds change in the present, valuing life and creation; and it focuses on a mutual sharing with God in the processes of redemption.

Fourthly, I have identified elements which the research reveals are important in developing understandings of Eucharist which are liberational for women: being included; relationality in Eucharistic community; and ambiguity in understandings and practice of Communion. Within these three areas, I have identified, in the conclusions of chapters four to six, a variety of requirements for creating emancipatory understandings of Eucharist.

- The need to place the female body at the centre and recognise the fullness of women's bodies and identities, lay and ordained, as being in the likeness of Christ.
- The need to reflect, affirm and develop relationality, and emphasise the equality of the participants in the celebration of Communion as part of holistic, on-going and dynamic human relationships.
- Eucharist must be about dynamic relationship with God, must recognise the embodied nature of women's remembering, and must embrace ambiguity and diversity as inherent.

In response to these themes I have proposed an understanding of the Eucharist as an act of birthing. It is an attempt, through the experiences of the women I interviewed, to re-vision how Eucharist could be understood in mainstream church life. This builds on the first aim of using non-oppressive methodology for the purposes of emancipation. Listening attentively to the experiences of those who are marginalised generates new understandings. These insights can help shape new theology and the images to express it. By enriching the imagery we use to talk about Eucharist, the church is challenged to recognise that different understandings of the Eucharist are possible, and to address areas of difficulty for women in existing theology. This points the way for a practical feminist method of revivifying and

reclaiming previously patriarchal constructs within the church for those who have been excluded by them.

The final aim of the research is to draw conclusions about how the findings of the study can be used and taken forwards beyond the scope of this study. In considering where this journey leads next it is important to acknowledge that this research is a contribution to the wider work of feminist theology and should be seen in that context. It is striking that in the last two years there have been two conferences concerning Ministry and Motherhood (Ely, May 2011) and Priesthood and Motherhood (Ripon College, Cuddesdon, September 2011). Many of those involved in these conferences gave papers which considered, in various ways, the significance of birth as a metaphor. These themes were again explored in a Symposium on the Faith Lives of Women and Girls at The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham (November 2011). Now is a time when it is becoming possible to reclaim aspects of women's lives, such as birth and motherhood, which feminists have been reluctant to use as metaphor because of the way they have often been used to marginalize women. Birth and motherhood are being transformed into models for understanding women's co-work in the creative action of God in ways which liberate and empower, rather than limit and oppress.

The metaphor of birth is just one possible image which might be offered. Other work in this area will bring forward differing imagery, as can be seen in Phillip's (2011, pp.166-171) vision of the church as midwife for the holistic faith development of adolescent girls. As a result of this research I believe that the enrichment and diversification of imagery will strengthen the ability of the church to engage meaningfully with women's experiences of faith. It will also strengthen the church's ability to communicate a faith which is wholesome

and liberating for women, and to hear the valid theological insights of those within who are marginalised by existing theological imagery.

This thesis is not the end of the journey. In fact it is my hope that it represents the beginning of one, not only within feminist theology, but within the church. There are two elements to this. Firstly, I hope that the findings of this thesis, and the metaphor I have suggested in response, can be offered as a resource to lay women within the church. At the outset I explained my location within the ministry of the church and my commitment to affirming the value of lay women's committed sacramental participation in the Eucharist. It is from them that this research arises, and it is for them that it exists.

Whilst the women I interviewed were articulate in telling me what was important to them in sharing in the Eucharist, what distressed or alienated them, what nurtured and fed them, I was surprised by the great difficulty many of the women had in framing theological meaning for their participation in Eucharist. Their struggle to explain how they understood its meaning or purpose was striking. It often seemed they were simply repeating the very limited vocabulary and imagery they had been offered by the church through Sunday school and sermons and which resonate through Eucharistic prayers. They recognised the dissonance between repeating received church teaching and questioning whether they owned that understanding in any meaningful way for themselves.

It is for these women, who in spite of the difficulties of remaining practising Anglicans, assert the importance of holding on to their Eucharistic practice, that I hope this study will be helpful. I hope my findings will strengthen their ability to articulate their fears and

frustrations, as well as their joys in Eucharist; and may help validate their subversive practices and affirm their assertion of personal agency. I have modelled a new way of thinking and talking about the purpose of Eucharist, using metaphor which is familiar to women's language and experience. I hope this example will give women confidence to express their faith in creative ways appropriate to their experience, and will help the church to recognise the validity and worth of lay women's theological voices.

Secondly, I was explicit in my intention to focus on the *meaning* of Eucharist in this thesis. Yet, development in understanding must have practical implications for the celebration of Eucharist. The findings and conclusions contained in chapters four to six offer a challenge to those working in the church to find ways of making the Eucharist a more wholesome and life-giving place for women. It is my hope that the issues raised in this thesis, and the suggestion of one possible metaphor of birthing to enrich our understanding of Eucharist, will provide stimulus for those who are skilled in creating and leading liturgy. The findings of this thesis have implications for the pastoral care of young women within the Eucharistic community too. They reveal the importance of supporting young women to express their faith, particularly in relation to the Eucharist, in innovative ways; to encourage the use of wider imagery which engages with their lived experience; and to value their voices in a mutual journey of discovery which recognises their autonomy and the validity of their perspectives.

This research already impacts upon my own Eucharistic ministry and teaching, and has begun to do so for some of those around me with whom I have shared the journey. It is my hope that through wider dissemination, including the forthcoming publication of a paper

based on my research (Wasey, forthcoming), it will continue to stimulate openness to the different perspectives of lay women and the transformative potential of hearing their voices.

The scope of this study is limited, but it provides a significant contribution as a tool and as a resource for development. It is an example of how attentive listening can enrich imagery and enhance our ability to explore theology and construct new and liberational understandings.

This research is a call for fuller and richer Eucharistic imagery, so that

the symbols are reactivated and become life-giving signs of hope and redemption to those who had previously been untouched by their promise (Beattie, 2008, p.246).

APPENDIX 1. TABLE OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Name (or pseudonym chosen by participant)	Age In years	Participants description of ethnic background	Main Occupation	Most recent level of academic study	Current church membership, context and additional information
Alice	27	White other	Student	Undergraduate	Occasional attender - Anglican central to high; suburban
Andrea	23	Black British (Jamaican)	Youth Worker	Postgraduate	Anglican- evangelical; City
Ann	30	White British	Administrator	Postgraduate	Anglican- fresh expression; city
Ayo	24	Nigerian	Student	Postgraduate	Anglican - high church; city
Caroline	33	White British	Mother	Undergraduate	Anglican - central traditional; rural
Claire	24	White British	Social Work	Undergraduate	United Reformed Church member; suburban
Emma	34	White British	Teacher	Postgraduate	Anglican - central traditional; rural
Grace	19	White British	Student	Undergraduate	Anglican - low church; city
Khadijat	23	Black/African	Work in finance	Postgraduate	Anglican - high church; city Formally Muslim
Laura	34	Italian	Anthropology Student	Postgraduate	Roman Catholic – attending high Anglican; city

APPENDIX 2. QUESTIONS USED AS A GUIDE IN SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Could you start by telling me a little bit about yourself?

As you know, I'd like to talk with you today about your experiences of Communion. I'd like to start by asking you to think back to an experience of Communion which really stands out in your memory. It might be recently or a long time ago, but a time that you can remember well.

Just spend a moment recollecting that experience and then could you tell me about it?

- Can you tell me where you were?
- How did that make you feel?
- What did that make you think?
- Do you think that experience changed you at all?
- Why do you think that experience sticks in your memory?

How regularly do you go to a Communion service? And what does the Communion mean to you week by week / month by month (as appropriate).

Why is it important to you?

How does Communion make you feel about yourself and who you are?

You've described experiences of Communion as (positive / life-changing / negative etc.), have you ever had a (different e.g. positive/negative) experience of Communion?

What one thing would you change about Communion in your church if you could?

What does it mean to you to say that Communion is a "sacrament"?
(*follow up*) Do you think that is different to what the church teaches? / is that your own understanding?

Are there any words or phrases or actions in the Communion service which stand out for you?

Can you describe to me how people go to Communion in your church?
(*follow up*) What do you think about this?

Is there anything about Communion in church which has ever made you feel uncomfortable?

This is an imagination question! If the physical Communion, the wafer or the bread or the wine, could suddenly speak to you at Communion, what do you think it would say to you?

Is there anything else you would like to say to me about your experience of Communion in church as a young woman?

APPENDIX 3. EXAMPLE PAGE OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

Interview 6: Ann: Final Page

Is there anything else that you would like to say to me about your experience of Communion in the church as a young woman?

(Long, long pause)

I'd like the church to think about

(Sigh)

(Long, long, long pause)

(Sigh)

What it thinks people are hearing when they do Communion,
when they take part in Communion.

Why Communion has to be, em, using a particular liturgy,

Uhum

With a male God.

How Communion affects eh people who are suffering, whether it encourages suffering and sacrifice amongst people who are already victims, of whatever form of abuse.

(Sigh)

(Very heavy feeling emotionally – emotion so great by this point that I felt it almost eliciting tears in me)

That'll probably do *(very low, almost dejected voice)*

Ok?

Umm.

Thank you.

APPENDIX 4. EXAMPLE PAGE: COLLATING DATA IN CATEGORIES FOR CLOSER INTERROGATION BETWEEN TRANSCRIPTS

Prayer and Communion notes to self: Correlation and interrelationship between prayer and Communion. Particularly evident in Grace and Alice. May be to do with different interpretations of the terminology I'm using in questions? But seems something deeper is going on – especially as I explore it further with Grace. In Grace there is a connection and sense of equality between Communion and Prayer – no evidence of hierarchy.

Grace (Prayer and Communion section)

I think that they're both seen as, Simon the vicar will probably disagree with me, but

Fair enough

I think that they're both seen certainly to have equal power, strength maybe, within,

Sorry, I'm not asking you to account for the whole church!

Well yeah.

No, definitely.

But what you perceive

I think the importance of prayer,

Prayer is as important as receiving Communion.

Okay

In *(place name)* so where a lot of time is taken up by Communion in one week, it'll be taken up by prayer the next.

Okay

And I, but they're seen as two things that you can either do together or separately, but they both complement each other.

Alice (Prayer and Communion section)

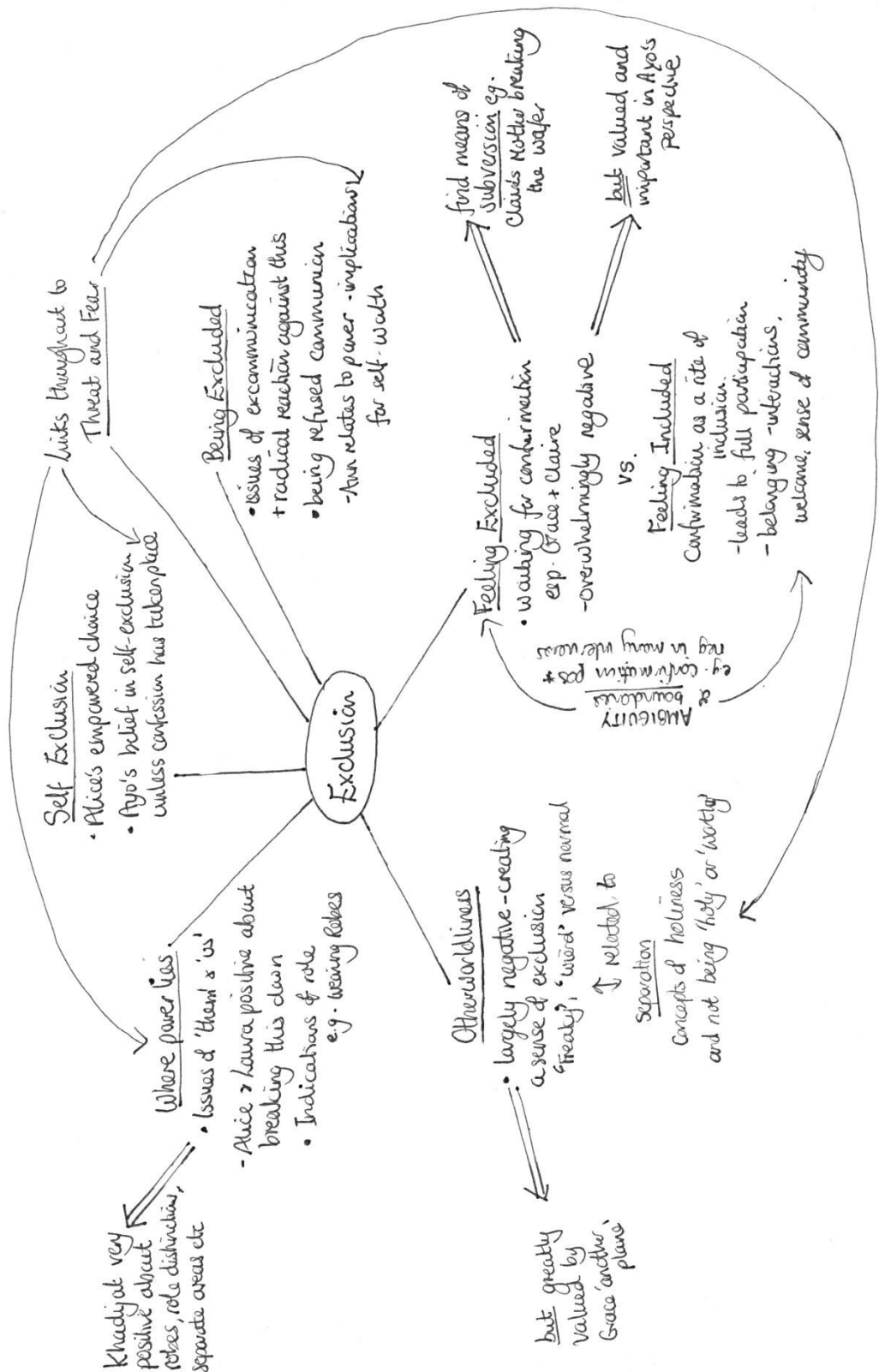
The concept or idea of communion with God, would you say that has meaning for you?

I don't think in terms of, I don't think it does, not in terms of taking Communion or not taking Communion, to me

In your life?

Yeah, yeah. It definitely does. And I think, I think that's more to me, in my experience I think prayer is a better, more accessible, em way of, way of, kind of, achieving communion and also if I, if I think, yeah, we used to say grace and I think that blessing before you eat and just that I think it makes more sense to me, It makes more sense, yeah.

APPENDIX 5. EXAMPLE OF A SPIDER DIAGRAM EXPLORING PATTERNS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE INTERVIEW DATA



APPENDIX 6. EXAMPLE OF A DIAGRAM EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN THE DATA AND WIDER LITERATURE



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