

# **Community, Connection, and Caring**

## **Towards a Christian Feminist Practical Theology of Older Women**

**Janet Barbara Eldred**

*Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy*

**The University of Leeds  
School of Theology and Religious Studies**

**May 2002**

*The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate  
credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.*

For my mother, Barbara Lee Chisholm Eldred (remembered with love)  
and my father, Robert Duncan Eldred.

You believed in me, always.

*Courage! What you have to say is more important than your inadequacy at saying it.*

—Peter Davison

## **Acknowledgements**

I have received various kinds of support from numerous individuals and organisations along the journey that has been this research project. I wish to thank them here—they have all helped more than they know.

For help with the research subject itself: Ruth and Raymond Clarke; Gaynor Hammond; Rev. Phil Hoar; Rev. Albert Jewell; Pam Kent; the gatekeepers, who helped me locate the interviewees; and, most importantly, the interviewees themselves, several of whom have since become friends.

For financial assistance, both in the form of grants and in-kind material support: Methodist Homes for the Aged; the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds; the British Sociological Association Support Fund; Robert Eldred; Angela Merkert; and Adelaide and Jonathan Morley.

For various technical assistance: library staff at the University of Leeds, the University of York, the College of York St. John, the Minster Library, and the City of York Reference Library; the staff of the School of Theology and Religious Studies; and my proof-reader, Margaret Bradley.

For personal support: so many interested, tolerant, and loving friends in the US and in the UK. To Susan Pearson: you are dearly missed.

For invaluable guidance and feedback, and for unflagging encouragement at every stage: my supervisors, Prof. Kim Knott and Dr. Linda Hogan.

Finally, for support, assistance, and encouragement of every kind, without which this would not have come to be: my partner, John Heath. The adventure continues.

## Abstract

Christian feminist theologians state that community, connection, and caring are the means by which women live their lives and through which women understand and express their faith. These theologians also claim that their theologies are based on women's experiences. In this thesis I ask, are the ideas of community, connection, and caring proposed by these theologians relevant to older women in Britain today? Are older women's experiences reflected in Christian feminist theologies? Should there be a separate theology of older women based on these concepts? I explore these questions first by considering ideas of community, connection, and caring put forward by feminists and Christian feminist theologians and then by comparing these ideas with the lived experiences of older women themselves. These experiences are gathered from the field of social gerontology as well as from new empirical research: semi-structured interviews with 40 churchgoing Methodist and Anglican women in York, aged 65 and over.

Data analysis indicates that community, connection, and caring are important and desirable aspects of older women's lives, and that the family and the local church are significant sources of these entities and processes. In this respect, older women's experiences *are* reflected in Christian feminist theologies, although this appears to be more by default than by design. In addition, their experiences (for example, of being a newcomer to a church congregation or of working to maintain an identity as a carer in a society that views them as recipients of care only) are not universally positive, adding dissenting voices to the largely enthusiastic assertions of the theologians. Consequently, I propose a move towards a Christian feminist practical theology of older women—a theology based on older women's experiences of community, connection, and caring and calling for informed, committed praxis by the churches, suggestions for which are offered. Such a feminist theology would complement other developing theologies and spiritualities of older women. At the same time, it would be flexible and provisional, taking on board new developments and data as they arise—particularly as succeeding generations of women age—and intentionally incorporating them.



## Contents

<b>Chapter 1—Older Women in Britain Today: Introduction to the Social Context of the Thesis</b> .....	1
1.1 General introduction: the research topic and questions.....	1
1.2 Why study older women? .....	2
1.2.1 “Old age” as a category.....	2
1.2.2 Ageism, awareness, and response .....	3
1.3 Ageism, awareness, and response among Christian churches in Britain.....	8
1.3.1 Ageism .....	9
1.3.2 Awareness and response .....	10
1.3.3 Older churchgoing women.....	12
1.4 Summary.....	14
<b>Chapter 2—Feminist Theology: Introduction to the Critical Tools of the Thesis.....</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	15
2.2 Feminist theology and feminist spirituality .....	15
2.2.1 Christian feminist theology.....	15
2.2.2 Feminist spirituality .....	18
2.2.3 Difference and diversity.....	20
2.3 Feminist theology, feminist spirituality, and older women .....	21
2.3.1 Existing research and practice.....	21
2.3.2 A survey of developing theologies and spiritualities .....	23
2.3.3 Forerunners and opportunities in this area .....	26
2.3.4 Practical theology.....	27
2.4 This project.....	29
2.4.1 Methodologies and methods, interdisciplinarity, and standpoint.....	30
2.4.2 Avenues not pursued.....	30
2.4.3 Structure of the thesis.....	32
2.5 Summary.....	33
<b>Chapter 3—Community: features, realities, and ideals.....</b>	<b>34</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	34
3.2 What is “community”? .....	34
3.2.1 Characteristics of community.....	37
3.2.2 Ideas of “place” as related to community.....	40
3.3 Social gerontologists on community .....	42
3.3.1 Community and older people .....	42
3.4 Feminists and Christian feminist theologians on community.....	45
3.4.1 Feminist theories of community.....	46
3.4.2 Christian feminist theologians on community .....	48

3.5 Community and this project .....	51
3.5.1 Questions to be answered.....	51
3.6 Summary.....	52
<b>Chapter 4—Connection: relationship in community .....</b>	<b>54</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	54
4.2 What is connection? .....	54
4.3 Social gerontologists on connection.....	55
4.3.1 Belonging.....	57
4.3.2 Identity .....	58
4.3.3 Other issues associated with connection.....	62
4.3.4 Local churches and connection .....	63
4.4 Feminist theories of connection.....	65
4.4.1 Identity and moral development: the self-in-relation.....	65
4.4.2 Autonomy and dependency.....	67
4.5 Feminist theology, feminist spirituality, and interconnection .....	70
4.5.1 God-in-relation.....	72
4.6 Connection and this project .....	75
4.6.1 Questions to be answered.....	76
4.7 Summary.....	76
<b>Chapter 5—Caring: The Active Realisation of Connection .....</b>	<b>78</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	78
5.2 What is “caring”? .....	78
5.2.1 Givers and receivers of caring .....	79
5.3 Social gerontologists on caring.....	83
5.3.1 Caring and older women .....	84
5.3.2 Christian churches, caring, and older people .....	88
5.4 Feminists and Christian feminist theologians on caring.....	90
5.4.1 Essentialism of women .....	90
5.4.2 Power .....	93
5.4.3 A (Christian) feminist ethic of caring?.....	94
5.5 Caring and this project.....	96
5.5.1 Questions to be answered.....	96
5.5.2 Community, connection, and caring brought together .....	97
5.6 Summary.....	99

<b>Chapter 6—Methodologies and Methods: The Project as a Journey .....</b>	<b>101</b>
6.1 Introduction .....	101
6.2 Getting ready to depart: background and preparation .....	101
6.2.1 The researcher’s background and position.....	101
6.2.2 Preparing to investigate.....	104
6.3 Setting off and travelling: piloting and fieldwork .....	112
6.3.1 Piloting .....	112
6.3.2 Fieldwork .....	115
6.4 Arriving and unpacking: transcript analysis and reflection .....	122
6.4.1 Transcript analysis .....	122
6.4.2 Reflection.....	126
6.5 Summary.....	130
<b>Chapter 7—Community: A social place where meaningful things happen .....</b>	<b>131</b>
7.1 Introduction .....	131
7.2 The interviewees’ key communities .....	132
7.3 Membership within key communities .....	137
7.3.1 What is membership?.....	137
7.3.2 Problems and challenges within key communities .....	139
7.4 Local churches and other Christian-based groups .....	142
7.4.1 The local church as a satisfactory community .....	142
7.4.2 Problems with local churches.....	145
7.5 Discussion.....	148
7.6 Summary.....	149
<b>Chapter 8—Connection: Coming together in relationship.....</b>	<b>150</b>
8.1 Introduction .....	150
8.2 Types of connections older women have.....	150
8.2.1 What are the purposes of connections and how do connections “work”?.....	155
8.3 Benefits of connection for older women .....	160
8.4 Maintaining connections as a woman ages.....	163
8.4.1 Older women and problems with connection.....	164
8.4.2 Identity and old(er) age .....	167
8.5 Local churches, connection, and older women.....	169
8.5.1 Belonging, identity, and self worth .....	170
8.5.2 Negative experiences at church.....	171
8.6 Summary.....	174



<b>Chapter 9—Caring: The Active Realisation of Connection in Community.....</b>	<b>175</b>
9.1 Introduction .....	175
9.2 The interviewees' examples and meanings of caring .....	175
9.2.1 Older women as givers of caring.....	176
9.2.2 Older women as recipients of caring.....	180
9.3 The pluses and minuses of caring.....	182
9.4 Changes to caring with age.....	186
9.4.1 Challenges to identity.....	186
9.4.2 Lack of recognition of ongoing caring role.....	187
9.5 Care in the community .....	190
9.5.1 The family .....	191
9.5.2 The local church.....	193
9.6 Summary.....	194
<b>Chapter 10—Towards a Christian Feminist Practical Theology of Older Women .....</b>	<b>196</b>
10.1 Introduction .....	196
10.2 Older women and community, connection, and caring .....	196
10.2.1 Key findings .....	196
10.2.2 Relation to previous studies .....	202
10.3 The local church as a particular community of connection and caring .....	205
10.3.1 The importance of local churches to older women .....	206
10.3.2 The importance of older women to local churches .....	208
10.3.3 A different set of practices for local churches.....	211
10.4 A Christian feminist practical theology of older women.....	217
10.4.1 Why have such a theology?.....	218
10.4.2 Important elements of the theology.....	221
10.5 Summary.....	223
<b>Chapter 11—Conclusion and looking to the future.....</b>	<b>225</b>
11.1 Introduction .....	225
11.2 Review of the project.....	225
11.2.1 The research questions and key findings.....	225
11.2.2 Contributions to the fields of study .....	227
11.2.3 Evaluation of the project's limitations .....	228
11.3 Areas for future research and thought .....	231
11.3.1 Future generations of older women.....	232
11.3.2 Next steps for this practical theology .....	237

<b>Appendix I—Interview Schedule .....</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>Appendix II—Interviewee Profile .....</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Appendix III—Diagram of Florence’s connections.....</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>Appendix IV—Aims of two Christian organisations working with older persons .....</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>248</b>

## Chapter 1—Older Women in Britain Today: Introduction to the Social Context of the Thesis

The hell of women is old age.  
—La Rochefoucauld

A society that, in the way it is run, gives honour and respect to its older and more vulnerable members will be blessed.  
—The Right Reverend Mark Santer, Bishop of Birmingham<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 General introduction: the research topic and questions

Community. Connection. Caring. These words are familiar and, for most of us, evocative. They are layered with personal understandings for both those who use them and those who encounter them. They are simple, everyday words used to express common experiences—and yet they are also charged with political meanings. Feminists and feminist theologians, in particular, have appropriated these words to express what they see as essential truths and aspirations, both for women and for all humanity. As people of various backgrounds, experiences, and persuasions struggle to make their voices heard and to reach their goals, our society must acknowledge that the days of universal agreement about community, connection, and caring (if those days indeed ever existed) are gone. This has important implications for all people, but in this thesis I will focus on one group in particular: older churchgoing women.

In a globalised, mobile world where notions of community, connection, and caring are being re-considered and re-defined, people of all ages ought to be interested in how older women are negotiating these changes and adapting (or not) to new definitions—and creating definitions of their own. This is because in Britain and around the world, older women are the fastest growing demographic group in society, a group having not only various needs (as the social welfare debate about “care in the community” shows) but also having a range of desires, resources, and abilities. While social structures will have much to respond to in coming decades, they will also have extensive potential to draw on, should western society choose to view older women as valuable members.

In a country where church membership of the traditional denominations is now largely made up of older women (see below), Christians need to learn what these stalwarts expect of their churches, why church affiliation and attendance are still important to them, and what they are telling us about how “church” can be made relevant and meaningful to persons of all ages, especially in an increasingly multicultural and multiethnic—and some would say secularised—society. How can society in general and Christian churches in particular view older women as a resource for their renewal, for the “good practice” of building community, maintaining

---

<sup>1</sup> Santer (2001:13).



connections, and enacting caring? It is critical that public and private organisations partner with older people, especially older women, to create the best society possible for all.

In this thesis, I draw together these three key themes from feminism and feminist theology—community, connection, and caring—with the experiences of older churchgoing women to address the following questions: What do Anglo-American Christian feminist theologians have to say about older women? Are the theologians’ ideas of community, connection, and caring relevant to older churchgoing women in Britain today? What is distinctive about older women’s experiences and insights of these processes? Do older women see continuity or discontinuity between their experiences of community, connection, and caring and their Christian faith? Finally, should there be a unique Christian feminist theology of older women, based on these three dimensions, and if so, what shape would it take?

In the first two chapters of this thesis, I will introduce the research project from two perspectives. In this chapter, I will provide the social context of older women in Britain today, considering the statistical growth of older persons as a proportion of the population, ageism in various segments of society, and how these segments of society have responded to an awareness of their ageism. In particular, I will highlight the situation of older persons with respect to the institutional churches. Throughout the chapter, I will focus on older women. In Chapter 2, I will present the critical tools by which I will later evaluate the empirical data of this project: ideas of community, connection, and caring as proposed by feminists and Christian feminist theologians. At the end of the chapter, I will present the structure of this thesis, the intent of which is to argue that there should be a separate Christian feminist practical theology of older women. Such a theology would, I propose, have the potential to shift our society from being a “hell” for older women to one that values them and is “blessed” in return.

## **1.2 Why study older women?**

In this section, I will begin by discussing “old age” as a category, referring to statistics about older people in this country and worldwide. Then I will introduce the concept of ageism, followed by a look at how ageism functions in society in general, in the research community, and in feminism and the women’s movement.

### **1.2.1 “Old age” as a category**

Current statistics<sup>2</sup> about older people in the UK show that in 1999, 10.7 million people were of pensionable age (men 65 and over, women 60 and over), or 18 per cent of the total population. Of these, 6.9 million were women. Also, in Great Britain in 1998, around two-thirds of the population over 75 were women, and of these 59 per cent lived alone. The number of

---

<sup>2</sup> Source: Age Concern England (2000a, 2000b).

pensionable-age persons in the UK (taking into account the change in women's retirement age from 60 to 65) 'is projected to increase...to 11.9 million in 2011, and will rise to 12.2 million by 2021' (Age Concern England, 2000b). Within the York Unitary Authority,<sup>3</sup> in 1998 the portion of persons of pensionable age or over was 19.6 per cent, or slightly higher than that of the UK as a whole. The proportionate increase in numbers of older persons in Yorkshire in coming years is expected to match national trends (Age Concern England, n.d.:6).<sup>4</sup> Worldwide, population experts are predicting a "granny and granddad boom" as people live longer and as birth-rates decline.<sup>5</sup> This 'demographic time-bomb' (UNESCO, 1999) is viewed as a threat to younger people who will have to shoulder the economic burden of providing resources and services for their older fellow citizens.<sup>6</sup> It is also a threat to older people, who may suffer the effects of social breakdown, ageism, and even 'a kind of apartheid' (UNESCO, 1999). Already in Britain today, '[o]lder women are over twice as likely as men to live in poverty' (Ginn and Arber, 1999:75).<sup>7</sup>

Old age is not a monolithic category, however. There are generally recognised at least two and as many as four subgroups within old age, based on chronological age. Even within these subgroups, however, not everyone is the same because of differences in physical ability and health. Nevertheless, for ease of discussion we can consider the "young-old" (or Third Age) as being those who are active, socially involved, and largely independent in their post-retirement years and the "old-old" (Fourth Age) as those who are less active and more frail and dependent.<sup>8</sup> But, is there such a thing as "old age"?

### 1.2.2 Ageism, awareness, and response

Is there a difference between "old age" and "being older"? "Old age" implies that there is a specific point at which a person becomes old, and that this stage of life is readily distinguishable from other stages such as "infancy", "childhood", "adolescence", "youth", and "middle age". On the other hand, "being older" is a relative term, implying comparison and a degree of fluidity rather than certainty (Bytheway, 1995). In recent years, it has become preferable to use the latter

<sup>3</sup> Source: Matheson and Edwards (2000:185).

<sup>4</sup> However, another statistic forecasts a growth in the numbers of older persons in the county which will surpass national trends: today, 45 per cent of the North Yorkshire population is aged 45 and over, compared to a national (English) average of just 18 per cent. (Source: 'N Yorks going grey', *Yorkshire Evening Press*, October 5, 2001.)

<sup>5</sup> One set of statistics shows that '[w]orldwide, the number of persons aged 65 and over will have increased fourfold between 1955 and 2025, and their percentage of the total population will have doubled (from 5.3 per cent in 1965 to 10 per cent in 2025)' (UNESCO, 1999). The percentage is expected to be even higher in developed countries, by as much as 20 per cent (UNESCO, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> A counterpoint to this view is offered by Phil Mullan in *The Imaginary Time Bomb: Why an Ageing Population is not a Social Problem* (book review by Vincent, 2000). See also Maynard (1999:65).

<sup>7</sup> There are many reasons for this. A fuller discussion is available from many sources, including Glendinning and Millar (1987), Arber and Ginn (1991), Ginn and Arber (1999), and Maynard (1999).

<sup>8</sup> The terms "young-old" and "old-old" were coined by Neugarten (P Brown, 1982:19). Citation: Neugarten, B L, 1978, 'The rise of the young-old' in Gross, R. Gross, B, and Seidman, S, eds, *The New Old—Struggling for Decent Aging*, Anchor Books, New York, 47-49.



term, as “old” and “older” can mean different things to different people, and because “older” is used less pejoratively (and, surprisingly, less ambiguously) than “old” (Bytheway, et al., 1989; Bytheway, 2000).

Changes in society’s expectations of older people mean that a woman’s former role models for how to be “old” or “older” (e.g. her parents) are no longer relevant. For example, today older people are expected to be active and involved well into their retirement years. Many people are able to enjoy the benefits of older age, such as better health, increased longevity, concessionary rates for various services and entertainments, and more. Yet ageist stereotypes of older people as unproductive, frail, helpless, and unattractive persist, and no matter how vital a woman may feel and be, others may treat her as “old”. And, this treatment not only comes from younger people but can also come from her peer group. Older people are often guilty of ageism themselves (M Andrews, 1999:306). Even self-applied terms such as “chronologically gifted” and “recycled teenager”, while intended to be humorous and positive, subtly reinforce the notion that “old” is not a good thing to be.

Competing images of older age raise frustrations and concerns for everyone about how to respond. Older age is not a universal category, and it is misleading as well as ageist to essentialise about people of a certain age—especially because they have lived long and *diverse* lives. As we shall see later in this thesis,<sup>9</sup> whether a woman considers herself or others to be “old” depends on many factors, including others’ perceptions, societal messages, physical and health changes, social circumstances, and mental attitude. Rarely is “old age” linked to chronological age only, but rather reflects changes in needs, contributions, and self-image.

Forty to fifty years ago, disengagement theory was widely accepted by gerontologists (Troll, 1984). This theory, now largely discredited, proposed that as a person ages, there is a mutual withdrawal of involvement between society and that older person.<sup>10</sup> Current thinking supports “activity theory”, which ‘posits that there is nothing normal about doing less in old age and that it is good for people to replace one set of activities with another as they age, if some activities become too strenuous’ (Maxwell, 1988:89).<sup>11</sup> Subsequent studies have shown that most older people continue to be involved in life around them. However, they are often caught in a trap between two very different external expectations: a benign ageism that says they should “slow

---

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 4, subsection on ‘identity’.

<sup>10</sup> Cummings and Henry, the authors of the theory, held that disengagement was a natural process that prepared a person for her death (Troll, 1984:27-28, citing Cummings, E, and Henry, W. 1961, *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement*, Basic Books, New York).

<sup>11</sup> Maxwell goes on to detail the history of activity theory, discussing how its original meaning of ‘continuing socialization through the life cycle’ (1988:89) has been distorted by social welfare agencies and others.

down, sit back, and enjoy letting others carry the workload” and, at the same time, “keep busy, take care of yourself, and don’t be a drain on social resources”.<sup>12</sup>

Ageism continues to exist in society in general and within its various institutions. I will now attempt to define ageism and to illustrate how it is manifested in society in general, in the research community, and in feminism and the women’s movement. I will also sketch out how these groups have worked to acknowledge and to overcome their ageism.

#### i. Society in general

Ageism generally refers to prejudice or discrimination against or stereotyping of a person or persons because of their chronological age, and the term is almost universally applied to older rather than to younger people.<sup>13</sup> The stereotyping and prejudice may be based on a range of (not always accurate) ideas and the resulting discrimination may take many forms. For example, older people are typically viewed as ‘passive recipients of welfare policy and provision...and as indulging in private reminiscence and nostalgia’ (Bray, 1991:3) and as people ‘for whom nothing significant happens any more’ (Crampsey, 1999:56). Ageism exists because old age itself is seen as ‘synonymous with physical and mental deterioration’ (Fennell, et al., 1988:105), states which people of any age seek to avoid. The “five myths” of ageing, as enumerated by Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Grey Panthers movement in the US, are as follows: ‘old age is a *disease* which no one admits to having; old age is *mindless*; old age is *sexless*; old age seeks to *disengage from society*; and old age is a *personal and social disaster*’ (Tidmarsh, 1998:A5; author’s emphasis). Here is one example of how ageism harms society: estimates of the cost to the British economy of workplace discrimination against older workers range from £19 billion to £26 billion annually.<sup>14</sup>

Ageism incorporates the unspoken belief that older people are somehow different from “us” and that “we” (who are not “old”) will never be like “them” (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1978). Even within our two categories of older age, there lurks the unspoken subtext that the “old-old” have a less meaningful existence than the “young-old”:

The danger of the idea of the Third Age...is that the Fourth Age, when an ageing person’s independence does indeed slip away, can be made to appear all the more dreadful. The elements which make the leisure and capacity of the Third Age so attractive are perceived as eventually fading leaving only, it

---

<sup>12</sup> This second expectation has resulted in an interesting new variant on ageism: ‘the possibility that older people can be decried not simply for being “old”, but for failing to “be old positively”’ (D Gibson, 2000:291).

<sup>13</sup> Bytheway challenges this definition, claiming that ‘[i]n the 1990s...it is inadequate and arguably ageist itself’ (1995:115). A full discussion of ageism is beyond the scope of this thesis; I refer the interested reader to Bytheway (1995, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Let’s tackle this age-old problem: skills and experience have no sell-by date’, *The Mirror*, October 25, 2001 (four-page supplement, no page number).



seems, a miserable period of unproductive dependence leading to death (Chester and Smith, 1996:28).

Along with sexism, ageism is a form of discrimination to which women in western patriarchal societies are subject. Indeed, there is a “double standard” in western society whereby older women are viewed and treated much more harshly than are older men, resulting in older women internalising negative, limiting messages about themselves (Sontag, 1978). Gee and Kimball clarify:

In contemporary society, older women are devalued and powerless as a direct result of a wider society that oppresses all women, regardless of age, in the interests of preserving a male-dominated social order. The low status of older women represents an extension and intensification of the negative impact of sexist society, due to the added factors of age stigmatization and physical frailty (1987:9-10).

When used pejoratively, the phrase “granny boom”, which we encountered above, highlights this double discrimination against older women. For this (and possibly other) reasons, ‘old women remain one of society’s most marginalized groups’ (Ramsey and Blieszner, 2000:42). This is true even though more and more older women are making their voices heard. As Jerome notes, ‘[t]he expansive and powerful face of old age is unfamiliar and unrecorded, partly because it occurs in private...[and partly because] this new assertiveness is *more typical of old women than old men*’ (1992:198; emphasis mine). Because of the bias against women and older people in general, Jerome says, older women’s lives and experiences are largely ignored.<sup>15</sup>

In the past decade or so, the British government and various social institutions have begun to put the needs and desires of older people on their agendas. In 1997, the UK government set up the Better Government for Older People programme, having as its stated aim “to improve public services for older people by better meeting their needs, listening to their views and encouraging and recognising their contribution” (Shreeve, 2001:8).<sup>16</sup> The New Deal 50 Plus, launched in 2000, helps older people seeking employment, and the Age Positive Campaign is an employer-awareness initiative aiming to reduce prejudice.<sup>17</sup> In 2001, the Department of Health (2001) published the National Service Framework for Older People, ‘which sets new national standards of care for all older people, whether they live at home, in residential care or are being cared for in hospital’. As I began this project, the United Nations designated 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, with the intent to ‘[encompass ageing] in a broader

---

<sup>15</sup> A dissenting voice is Kathleen Woodward, who claims that ‘[o]lder women are making it [in contemporary culture], *if we only know where to look*’ (1995:90; emphasis mine). She may be right that there are increasing numbers of positive images of older women in our culture—such as consumer-based images in the media (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995b:10)—yet somehow we as a society still manage not to see them. This is indeed sexism and ageism combined.

<sup>16</sup> Some quarters have questioned whether initiatives such as this are genuine examples of the government taking action on the “issue” of older people, or whether they are merely rhetoric. As Shreeve himself says, ‘it is too soon to gauge the impact or indeed real outcomes of the Government’s commitment’ (2001:7).

consideration of the experience of life as a whole' (G R Andrews, 1999:6). In that year, Age Concern England facilitated the "Debate of the Age" (Hunt, 1999), a series of seven seminars held around the country. The aim of the series was 'to raise awareness of the ageing population and to ensure that national and regional policy developed [sic] in response' (Age Concern England, n.d.:1). In addition, the 'Voices of Experience strand sought the views of older people' (Age Concern England, n.d.:7).

The increasing awareness of ageing as a matter of public interest is further reflected in the number of public, private, charitable, advocacy, and research organisations which focus on ageing and older people: Age Concern, the Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA), Counsel and Care, the Christian Counsel on Ageing (CCOA), the British Society of Gerontology (BSG), Help the Aged, the Association of Retired and Persons Over 50 (ARP/O50), the Centre for Research on Ageing and Gender (CRAG), and the University of the Third Age (U3A),<sup>18</sup> to name a few. Older people have regularly figured in literature and popular culture (albeit not in large numbers and often negatively), and today there are serious studies of age, ageing, and ageism in these fields (e.g. Featherstone and Wernick, 1995a; Hepworth, 2000), undertaken with a view towards increasing understanding and correcting prejudices.<sup>19</sup> Whether as a result of older persons being more vocal about their issues, because we are aware of more older people in our own lives, because of the activities of these organisations, or simply because we realise that we are all growing older at every moment (Jewell, 1999a), there is a greater awareness of older people and of ageism than ever before.

Because the Christian churches will feature prominently in this thesis, I will consider their own ageism and response to that ageism in detail further on in this chapter.

## ii. The research community

There is a dispute about the amount of gendered research in gerontology and of older age research in feminism. While some say that there is little attention given to issues such as the combined effect of ageism and sexism (Ginn and Arber, 1998), others argue the opposite (e.g. Garner, 1999).<sup>20</sup> In fact, it is no longer true, as it was 15-20 years ago, that feminism neglects older women's issues and that gerontology neglects to study women. The number of publications in the UK and internationally in the past decade or so supports this (Arber, 2000; D

---

<sup>17</sup> Source: 'Let's tackle this age-old problem', *The Mirror*, as above.

<sup>18</sup> The idea of a University of the Third Age (U3A) originated in France in 1972 and came to the UK in 1982, where there are now more than 400 local groups and a total membership of about 85,000. In the U3A, older persons organise and provide teaching and learning opportunities for each other. The goals are activity and pleasure, rather than formal qualifications (Third Age Trust, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> See Blaikie (1999) for information about the cultural phenomena of ageing, and the Fall 2001 issue of *Generations* (vol. 25, no. 3—the journal of the American Society on Aging), "Images of Aging in Media and Marketing".

<sup>20</sup> It may be safe to say that the levels of both are increasing, but that much remains to be done.



Gibson, 2000). There is a growth in academic journals about ageing in both the US and the UK, journals that study every aspect—medical, psychological, social, etc.—of growing older.<sup>21</sup> There is even the emergence of the new field of literary gerontology, wherein those interested in literature and literary criticism draw on gerontological resources to analyse texts (Hepworth, 2000:4). There is the danger, however, of reinforcing ageism when I, as a mid-life researcher, choose to study “older” women. That danger is ever present in the tendency to think in terms—however well intentioned—of “them”, as in “these women that I am not (yet) one of” (Bytheway, 1995:97-98). The key word in that phrase is “yet”. While I may not today be a member of the population I am studying, there is a very good chance that I will one day be included.

### iii. Feminists and the women’s movement

In its early stages, second-wave feminism was open to charges of ageism (e.g. Macdonald and Rich, 1984; Macdonald, 1986). The issues of older women were not on the feminist agenda and older women themselves were not the face of the women’s movement. Latterly, as leading feminists began to age into their 50s and 60s, this started to change (e.g. Greer, 1992; Friedan, 1993; Steinem, 1996<sup>22</sup>), and feminists began to confront seriously their own ageist attitudes and practices. In the UK, the Older Feminists Network was formed in 1982 (Peace, 1986), and texts on the subject of older women in Britain began to appear about this time.<sup>23</sup> In the past decade, the pace has quickened and there has been considerable interest in older women within feminism, and, in turn, feminist theory and methodology have had an impact on gerontology (Garner, 1999; Ray, 1999).

### **1.3 Ageism, awareness, and response among Christian churches in Britain**

Judeo-Christian teaching holds up older people and enjoins younger members of society to honour them.<sup>24</sup> Further, Jesus’ bias towards the poor and other marginalised and silenced persons (Haight, 1999), as well as his charging his followers to do likewise, give the church an imperative to counter ageism by listening to and empowering older people.<sup>25</sup> There is a traditional view that ‘the church accords the old status as principal actors. They are not peripheral, nor tourists or spectators, but crucially involved in helping to promote the interests

<sup>21</sup> Two examples are *Ageing and Society* (UK) and the *Journal of Women and Aging* (US).

<sup>22</sup> Steinem’s article was first published in 1984.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Harrison (1983), Lesnoff-Caravaglia (1984), Hemmings (1985), Phillipson and Walker (1986), Ford and Sinclair (1987), Allen (1988), Arber and Ginn (1991), and Bernard and Meade (1993).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you’ (Exodus 20:12). [NB: All scripture citations and quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the bible.]

<sup>25</sup> See texts about *justice for the poor*: Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 6:17-26; *justice for women*: Mark 14:3-9, Luke 10:38-42, John 4:5-26, Galatians 3:28; and *justice for the “other”*: Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 10:25-37, John 4:5-26, Acts 10:44-11:18. See also the parables of the Good Shepherd (Luke 15:1-7) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) for the message of rejoicing over the recovery of those who were “lost”. In

of the organisation' (Jerrome, 1992:71).<sup>26</sup> Yet, while older people *are* involved in their churches, whether they indeed have 'status as principal actors' is less certain.

Older people are a substantial (and growing) proportion of the churchgoing population. For example, the ageing of two key denominational church congregations can be seen in the following statistics. During the past twenty years, persons 65 and over have increased in proportion from 19 percent to 29 percent of all Anglican churchgoers and from 25 to 38 percent of Methodist churchgoers (Bruce, 2001:196). Older women constitute a majority of the membership of many churches in western society (Davie and Vincent, 1998; Walter and Davie, 1998), including the UK. Even so, we must ask, is there ageism in the churches and are older women especially affected?

### 1.3.1 Ageism

Despite the scriptural injunctions and examples cited, ageism exists in structures and attitudes in Christian churches in Britain today (Church of England General Synod Board for Social Responsibility, 1990a; Webber, 1990; Bray, 1991; John Williams, 1992). Two common and prevalent examples will suffice. First, church leaders are vocal about the need to attract young people to the faith in order to guarantee the Church's future. Yet, quite rightly, '[o]lder people have just as much right to be thought of as the Church of the future. They are preparing for the world to come' (Santer, 2001:14). There is a corresponding silence when it comes to encouraging older people to join because to do so would 'give an undesirable and negative image' to the Church (Pulling, 1987:79). Second, there is a tendency for many clergy (and some churchgoers—including older people themselves) to apologise for the "disproportionately" large numbers of older people in their congregations.<sup>27</sup> These and other experiences support the statement that 'rather more often [than not] older people find themselves unaffirmed and to one degree or another marginalised in church communities' (Jewell, 2001:3). In the case of the church, where expectations that members will be valued are perhaps higher than they would be in other communities, ageism might therefore be particularly devastating. A basic tenet of the Christian faith is overlooked: 'As we age we are not incorporated by the charity of younger members, but by our own standing in Christ are inextricably part of the whole' (Bray, 1991:16). There is, therefore, nothing about ageing that can or should separate any member from the Christian community.

---

all of these instances, followers of Christ are instructed to incorporate excluded persons into society and to ensure they receive justice and mercy.

<sup>26</sup> It is unclear from the text whether Jerrome is here re-iterating Unruh's views or expressing her own. (She cites Unruh, D, 1983, *Invisible Lives*, Sage, California, in the previous sentence.) Later in her text, Jerrome notes the discrepancy between the "official" church position that 'age is not an organising principle or criterion for distinction in the church' and the unofficial prevalence of 'popular stereotypes and theories of ageing' (1992:133).



Unfortunately, in dozens of small ways, this separation, this discrimination, happens to older Christians every day, perhaps most noticeably in corporate worship services. Here, older people often (though by no means always) have difficulty accepting new forms and words in worship and new hymns and songs (Webber, 1990; Bright, 1997), leading to annoyance, frustration—or worse:

Behind all this [change] is the inference that what happened and what was taught in the past is all wrong. It is not surprising that some older people are confused; others feel their faith threatened and react accordingly; and others feel they are unwanted and their experience of God worthless. Although many react with incredible maturity, some can only cope by clinging tightly to what is left of the past; others through experiencing this crisis of faith reject God; others just retreat into the background. The church as a result is the poorer (Webber, 1990:25).

Older members who can only attend services infrequently or not at all struggle with isolation, even with a sense of rejection by the church community. This decrease in participation is often the result of poor health, problems of mobility, lack of transportation, and the like (Moberg, 1968; Ainlay, et al., 1992) rather than disinterest. As noted earlier, contemporary western society values activity, not inactivity. Therefore, the contributions of older people—many of whom tend to be less active or to be seen less frequently—are often overlooked, downplayed, or negated, even among their fellow Christians.<sup>28</sup>

### **1.3.2 Awareness and response**

Howse (1999) provides an overview of the last fifty years' evidence of British churches' response to the needs of older people. His view is that the Christian churches have been largely reactive rather than proactive: 'When they have taken up the situation of older people in various official and semi-official reports and surveys, more often than not it has been because of a need to reconsider the kind of practical response that is demanded from them' (1999:30). Howse classifies this response into three periods of activity: the 1940s and 1950s, which focused on providing housing and companionship; the 1960s and 1970s, when churches joined with social welfare groups for 'community-building and neighbourhood care' (1999:41); and, most recently, a period of emphasis on alleviating loneliness and meeting spiritual needs.

Corporately, and in the past decade or so, the churches have begun to take on board older people's unique status (e.g. Church of England General Synod Board for Social Responsibility,

---

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Clarke, past moderator, United Reformed Church (1992-1993), and currently working internationally and ecumenically, mainly on social justice issues of importance to women; private correspondence.

<sup>28</sup> Ageism can work in reverse, however. Some older churchgoers may be more inclined to share their concerns with a vicar or minister of a similar age than with someone considerably younger, whom they see as lacking experience (e.g. interviewee Nancy). This does not help younger clergy grow in understanding and appreciation of older persons.

1990a; Appleton, 1998) and to be more proactive. Strides are being made to address the churches' ageism and to tap the resources of older members. There is a movement away from stereotyping older people as persons with problems towards a more rounded view of older people as having gifts to offer. For example, some Christian churches have recently introduced special services to celebrate the gifts of old age and to honour the older women and men of their congregations, for instance at times of retirement from paid or voluntary work. As Ainlay, Singleton, and Swigert (1992) rightly point out, the churches need their older members as much as older members need their churches. At the level of the local church, for example, the contributions of older, retired people are relied on in order to keep the church running (Howse, 1999:14).

As a result of the Church of England's 1990 report, *Ageing*, the General Synod of the Church carried the following motion that November:

That this Synod:

- a. request each diocese, through its Board for Social Responsibility and other local agencies to give attention to this Report and to commend it to Church members and, in particular, to encourage parishes to use the study guide *Happy Birthday Anyway!*;<sup>29</sup>
  - b. recognise the enormous contribution made by older people in the life of the Church in its prayer, work and witness and urge the Church of England to consider how this can be further developed;
  - c. encourage local churches to improve where possible the support they offer to those who care for frail and dependent people;
  - d. call for wider debate on the part that elderly people play in society, and their particular needs, and for action to be taken by the public and voluntary sectors and by individuals;
  - e. request the Board for Social Responsibility to make representations to HM Government to ensure better provision for and support of carers.
- (Church of England, 2000).

Unfortunately, this verbal support is largely all that the Anglican Church has given: neither money, nor staff, nor other resources have been allocated to make things happen.<sup>30</sup> For example, Johnson (2001) reports that only a few of the Anglican dioceses have (unpaid) Older Persons Officers,<sup>31</sup> compared to many which have Youth Officers. A notable exception to this disappointing picture is the Faith in Elderly People, Leeds, Project, which was formed as a result of the *Ageing* report and which has done considerable work with older persons of various faiths and with persons with dementia.

<sup>29</sup> Church of England General Synod Board For Social Responsibility, 1990b.

<sup>30</sup> Raymond Clarke, former chair of Age Concern Greater London and chair of the group that produced *Ageing* for the Church of England Board of Social Responsibility; private correspondence. It should be noted that the Anglican Church is a devolved organisation, leaving it up to the various dioceses to set their own priorities and to determine how they will (or will not) carry out such motions as this one. (Thanks to David Skidmore, Board of Social Responsibility, Church of England, for this information.) Howse (1999) adds a caveat that while pronouncements about older people at the corporate, institutional level of churches and denominations may have been few and far between, at the local level concern may be more readily expressed.

<sup>31</sup> The Diocese of York has no such position at the time of writing.



The Methodist Church, in the past few years and with the support of the Sir Halley Stewart Age Awareness Project,<sup>32</sup> has undertaken research projects (both quantitative and qualitative) on older people (Brierley, 2000, and Sanger, 1999, respectively). It has also produced a number of resources for older people themselves as well as for the churches to use alongside older people (e.g. Age Awareness Project, 1998; Jewell, 1998 and 2001). The ongoing neglect within clergy training of older people's concerns has recently been addressed by the Methodist Church's introduction of a training module for this group (Age Awareness Project, 1998).<sup>33</sup> And, in 1999, Methodist Homes for the Aged (MHA) established The Centre for the Spirituality of Ageing in Leeds.

Other related projects and organisations have come into being. The Christian Council on Ageing (CCOA), an ecumenical charity, was formed in 1982, and the independent Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy was launched in 2001 (see Appendix IV).<sup>34</sup>

We have reviewed the institutional ageism within UK churches and read of some responses that have been made both denominationally and ecumenically. But, are older women particularly harmed by ageism in the churches? What are their experiences?

### **1.3.3 Older churchgoing women**

Notwithstanding their numerical strength, older women are frequently invisible to their fellow congregants, the clergy, and church hierarchies. This benign neglect of older women's roles in and expectations of their local churches also exists among researchers, including feminist researchers, who study church life. For example, a British study by Hubbert (1991) revealed that churches had neglected the practical and spiritual contributions older women make.<sup>35</sup> We should be asking, among other things, why older women are loyal to traditional modes of religious observance, such as regular attendance at worship services, when the churches do so little, corporately or locally, to validate their experience and to affirm them as persons and as Christians.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, feminists have focused on scriptural hermeneutics, exceptional women in church history, and political issues such as women's ordination, rather than ordinary women in local congregations.

---

<sup>32</sup> The purpose of the Sir Halley Stewart Age Awareness Project (funded by the Cambridge-based Sir Halley Stewart Trust and now concluded) was 'to raise awareness of the spiritual needs of older people and encourage interest in the spirituality of ageing' (Jewell, 1999b:7).

<sup>33</sup> However, this module does not take into account gender differences among older people, a need cited by Hubbert several years earlier (1991:84).

<sup>34</sup> In 2002, the CCOA is celebrating its twentieth anniversary. Despite its (comparatively) long existence, it 'has yet to develop into an influential body. It hasn't made a major impact. The sum of all their activities hasn't yet enabled them to achieve a deserved national recognition'. (Raymond Clarke, private correspondence.)

<sup>35</sup> I will take a closer look at Hubbert in the next chapter.

<sup>36</sup> Thanks to Linda Hogan for this observation.



Finally, much ageing research has focused on social policy and various gerontological (medical, psychological, and social) concerns. When religion or religious belief or practice is brought in, it is usually as one of several variables with a causal effect on older people's health and mental adjustment. For example, existing studies show a positive link between religious involvement (e.g. church attendance) and physical and psychological well being, particularly for older people (Ellison and Levin, 1998). I believe that religion—faith, spirituality, practice, and experience—can have a more central role in research into ageing. In 1987, for example, an American researcher noted that few studies had ‘investigate[d] the place of the elderly in the church, and almost [none] look[ed] at the church as a part of the networks of the aged’ (Huber, 1987:59). (Huber undertook just such a project.)

A notable exception to this negative picture of older women in churches can be seen in Black-majority churches here and in the US. In Britain, in some cases, older women have particular authority and power:

The Church Mother [a post for aged, loyal women] wields enormous influence over matters such as the maintenance of moral codes of dress and behaviour. She upholds the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting and spirit-filled worship. Church Mothers are well respected, often having the last word in official church business as well as in the personal matters of people they counsel (Foster, 1992:65).

A similar role exists for older women in Black-majority churches in the US:

The wisdom and experience held by older women in the church [in the African-American community] brings a heightened sense of responsibility for providing guidance in troubling situations. Moreover, it affords them an elevated status among their peers...sometimes formally recognized by a special title [such as] “mothers of the church” (Krause, et al., 2000:527).

Perhaps white-majority and mainline denominations could learn from this—and even develop rituals to acknowledge such women.

In response to the question, “why study older women?”, which we have expanded to “why study older women in churches?”, there are two answers. First, there continues to be a need for information about older women's lives, particularly in view of the fact that older women are an increasingly significant part of the population. Second, there is very little known about older women in churches, despite their majority presence and many years of involvement. What little information we do have is mostly about older persons as a group and not distinguished by gender.

Women who have lived seven or more decades should be able to draw comparisons between past and present. They have seen how certain aspects of their lives have either carried through



unchanged or have altered over the life course. Many, though by no means all, have the desire and the capacity to reflect, to take advantage of hindsight, to draw conclusions about the structure of their lives. This information, if gathered and shared, can be helpful for clergy, carers, family, and friends of older women and can provide useful material for younger and middle-aged persons who will eventually face many of the same issues.

As Brierley discovered, ‘for a majority of the elderly population [there is] a considerable experience of churchgoing, and a broad knowledge of Christianity’ (2000:8). Indeed, for most of their lives, it has been a *de facto* part of daily living.<sup>37</sup> Whereas western society today tends to regard churchgoing as a religious or spiritual activity, for today’s older women churchgoing always included a social aspect. Sunday schools, youth clubs, young wives groups, and ladies fellowships provided opportunities to meet with people when there were fewer options for young people and women of those generations to socialise outside the family. Churchgoing was thus a large part of life, and not restricted to Sundays. In fact, older people, in contrast to the population as a whole, are actually attending church in greater numbers now than in 1989 (Brierley, 2000). And, as Davie notes, ‘churchgoing has, quite clearly, a particular appeal for...older women’ (1994:119). Does this appeal have anything to do with community, connection, and caring?

#### **1.4 Summary**

In this chapter, I have given an overview of the present situation of older women in British society in general and within the institutional church in particular. I have taken a look at what ageism is, how it functions, and its particular severity for women. All of this has created a basis for undertaking a study of older churchgoing women in Britain today, with the expressed aim of being able to make practical recommendations to the churches for their own praxis.

Now, I will consider the context of feminist theology and the three key themes of community, connection, and caring.

---

<sup>37</sup> The concept of cohort differences will help us to understand why the women I studied for this research found church to be an important component of their lives. This concept will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 6, Methodologies and Methods.

## Chapter 2—Feminist Theology: Introduction to the Critical Tools of the Thesis

There is an urgent need for more study of the spiritual lives of elderly women, for further expansion of the relationship-oriented philosophy uncovered by my research. In a world which is becoming increasingly divisive, and where people are rapidly becoming isolated from each other, not only by physical and material circumstances, but also by the perpetuation of models of human maturity which encourage individuality and autonomy at the expense of mutuality, the unique “elderly, womanly” approach to life...could provide a positive counter-balance.

—Patricia Hubbert<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Introduction

Community, connection, and caring are areas where much exciting research and theorising have been done in the past two decades, particularly within feminist scholarship and feminist theology.<sup>2</sup> The thinking that has emerged is grounded in understandings of the inter-dependence of all human life—indeed all life—on this planet, as well as a rejection of hierarchical, competitive arrangements in favour of an ethical system based on mutuality, shared authority, and a celebration of diversity. In this reasoning, the individual does not lose her unique identity; rather, her identity is understood within the context of her various relationships.

These three key themes and Christian feminist theologians’ ideas about them will be explored in detail in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. In this chapter, I will focus on developing an overview of Christian feminist theology and feminist spirituality and consider what place—if any—these fields accord older women. I will discuss what spiritualities and/or theologies of older people and older women are emerging, as well as indicate what opportunities exist for expanding our knowledge. I will introduce practical theology as a useful arena within which to bring together feminist theology and older women’s lives. Finally, I will provide an overview of this project and an outline of the remaining chapters in the thesis.

### 2.2 Feminist theology and feminist spirituality

Feminist theology and feminist spirituality have common elements but are distinct areas of thought. Here, I will give an overview of each, as well as touch upon the issue of difference and diversity which is important to feminists.

#### 2.2.1 Christian feminist theology

Feminism is a worldview that takes a critical stance against patriarchy and the dominant social structures that oppress women (and other subordinated persons) throughout the world (McEwan and Poole, 1990). The overall goals of feminism are (1) to raise awareness of and to correct past

---

<sup>1</sup> Hubbert (1991:88).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Gilligan (1982), Heyward (1982), Cady (1987), Friedman (1989), Grey (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1999a, 1999b), Zappone (1991), Jantzen (1992), Haney (1994), and Chodorow (1999).



and present wrongs and (2) to liberate women and other oppressed peoples (Serene Jones, 2000).<sup>3</sup> Feminism places a particular emphasis on women's experiences, maintaining that past actions of societies have neglected or deliberately suppressed women's lives and views. This emphasis on experience provides both a theoretical construct and a methodological approach within feminism.

Building on the work and ideas of feminists in general, feminist theologians 'claim women's experience and women's activity as valid theological resources' (Hogan, 1997:84), valuing them above the 'overly rationalistic conceptualizations of traditional theologies' (U King, 1994:322). As within feminism in general, there is no one, universal feminist theology but rather a plurality of theologies (Fiorenza, 1995). The three major 'strands' within feminist theology may be labelled as reformist, womanist, and post-Christian (Hogan, 1997:12). Reformist feminist theologians are 'in dialogue with the Jewish and Christian traditions', womanist theologians foreground 'the experiences and praxis of women of colour', and post-Christian thea/theologians<sup>4</sup> create 'new symbols, rituals and prayers and [re-appropriate] ancient, pre-Christian ones' (Hogan, 1997:12-13). In each of these cases, feminist theologians have prioritised praxis over theory, an ordering also claimed by liberation theologians (Hogan, 1997:65).<sup>5</sup>

Also like liberation theology, feminist theology takes a political stance, advocating for particular (groups of) persons and particular political/social outcomes (Fiorenza, 1995; Hogan, 1997). Feminist theology challenges the Christian churches: 'feminist theology is first and foremost a critical comment on the sexist, exclusive character of theological reflection and church practice'.<sup>6</sup> In the last chapter, we saw how the churches are ageist; now, feminists add that they are sexist. This is why, in the early days of feminist theology, the primary focus of theologians was on getting more women into positions of authority and leadership (e.g. ordination in the Church of England), inclusive language and hermeneutics (e.g. including women in scripture and liturgy), and on recovering the stories of important women from church history. Feminist theology, then, should be both based on critical reflection on human *actions* (praxis) and be *activist* (liberation-oriented). A definition of praxis that I have found especially helpful and which also speaks to the Christian community is that offered by Willows and Swinton:

---

<sup>3</sup> It is actually more accurate to speak of feminisms (plural), as there are various forms of feminism—e.g. liberal, socialist, radical, and womanist (Campbell and Wasco, 2000)—each of which takes a different standpoint on questions such as what constitutes the category "woman" and what the goals of feminist activities should be. Sometimes these differences lead to 'antagonisms' (Maitland, 1992:36). For a further discussion of feminisms, I refer the interested reader to Beasley (1999) and Delmar (2001).

<sup>4</sup> The term "theologian" is often used to refer to 'those feminists who construe the deity in female terms' (Hogan, 1997:10, f.n.1).

<sup>5</sup> Feminist theology is often considered to be a form of liberation theology. For more background on liberation theology, see Smith (1991).

<sup>6</sup> Linda Hogan, private e-mail correspondence, 20 December 2001.



[P]raxis denotes a form of action which is value-directed, value-laden and profoundly saturated with meaning. In short, praxis thus refers to a practical form of knowledge that generates actions through which the church community lives out its beliefs (2000a:14).

Christian feminist theology is not without its difficulties—theoretical, practical, and methodological—however:

[O]ne must recognize the ambiguity of the Christian feminist position, at once advocating an understanding of knowledge which is reluctant to make claims for universally valid criteria and for objectivity, while critiquing much of patriarchal theory and providing a somewhat normative vision (Hogan, 1997:118).

It is just this instability—and the attendant incompleteness—which makes Christian feminist theology an exciting discipline with which to engage. As Ursula King says, ‘[t]he emphasis is on “*doing* theology”; feminist theology is theology in the active mode; it is seeking, questioning, listening, encountering and responding to rather than passively handing down a systematically developed body of tradition’ (1994:323).<sup>7</sup> According to Zappone, theology must do more than consult and reflect upon ‘sacred texts, traditions, and contemporary experience’, the areas most frequently addressed by theologians. Political and liberation theologies, she says, ‘insist that we attend to at least three other issues: (1) the *purpose* of theological reflection (what is it for?); (2) the *place* of theology (where is it being done and who is doing it?); and (3) the *method* of theology (what steps are involved?)’ (1991:4; author’s emphasis). Here, we see the similarity with feminism; later in this chapter, we will see a similarity with practical theology, which is also ‘in the active mode’.

In this thesis, I will be engaging with ideas of feminist reformist theologians (whom I term Christian feminist theologians), because the ideas of community, connection, and caring which these theologians have proposed are most relevant to the experiences of the older women I have chosen to study. These theologians point to a core of Christianity at which there are ‘great reservoirs of hope and large scriptural, historical and spiritual resources for empowering women to seek liberation and justice’ (U King, 1999b:113).<sup>8</sup> Two leading figures in Christian feminism are Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose primary work has been in the area of feminist biblical hermeneutics (Hogan, 1997:88), and Rosemary Radford Ruether, widely known for both her advocacy of “Women-Church”<sup>9</sup> and of a right relationship with our natural environment.

<sup>7</sup> Not all observers, however, recognise the existence of a distinct feminist methodology in theology (e.g. O’Neill, 1995:740).

<sup>8</sup> Post-Christian feminists, on the other hand, believe that ‘Christianity is irredeemably sexist and patriarchal’ (Isherwood, 1996:182). Key figures here are Carol Christ, Mary Daly, and Daphne Hampson—although Daly ‘no longer wishes to be referred to as post-Christian’ (Isherwood, 1996:182).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Women-Church [is] a group of feminists who meet as an intentional community to strengthen and support each other, while remaining in dialogue with conventional Christianity but not accepting its limits.... Women-Church sees itself as a developmental stage, eventually to be transcended by a community of women and men liberated from patriarchy’ (Gross, 1996:207-208).



Important theologians with whom I will engage in this thesis are Kathleen Fischer, Mary Grey, Isabel Carter Heyward, Serene Jones, Dorothee Sölle, and Katherine Zappone.

These theologians (and other feminist scholars) have given much thought to the concepts of community, connection, and caring. In general, they argue that women live their lives and understand and express their faith through these entities and processes. The thinking that has emerged is grounded in understandings of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all human life—indeed all life—on this planet, as well as a rejection of the hierarchical, competitive arrangements associated with patriarchy in favour of an ethical system based on mutuality, connectedness, shared authority, and a celebration of diversity. In this reasoning, the individual does not disappear or lose her identity; rather, her unique identity is understood within the context of her various relationships. We are all members of various communities (familial, geographic, associational; some temporary, others permanent; some given, others chosen) that affect us in various ways and which we affect in return. Most frequently, we interact with our communities through contact with other individual members and, if we are fortunate, develop relationships characterised by reciprocal caring and support. A sense of community and the expression of caring complete this understanding. We will see this develop throughout the next three chapters.

### **2.2.2 Feminist spirituality**

Spirituality is a burgeoning area of interest for feminists, feminist theologians, and the general public. While it is not explicitly the subject of this thesis, nevertheless, it is important to see how it intersects with this project. “Feminist theology” and “feminist spirituality” are not interchangeable terms, though there are areas of overlap.<sup>10</sup>

Because so many different types of people are interested in “spirituality”, it is difficult to pin down an all-encompassing definition or even a single definition that would satisfy the majority (Zinnbauer, et al., 1997:562).<sup>11</sup> Spirituality can mean anything from a ‘belief in God or a higher power’ to ‘mystical experiences [and] New Age beliefs and practices’ (Zinnbauer, et al., 1997:561), and ‘is increasingly characterized as “personal and subjective”’ (563). One way that people try to understand “spirituality” is by distinguishing it from “religion” (e.g. Burkhardt, 1989). Yet, this is not a clear-cut pathway either, for as Ursula King says, ‘[o]n the one hand the spiritual can be seen as wider than the religious; on the other hand it can be understood as the deepest and most central element of religion, or as something which is outside and beyond religion altogether’ (1996:219).

---

<sup>10</sup> Carr (1988) cautions that feminist spirituality is also not the same as women’s spirituality. She claims that the former incorporates a feminist consciousness, while the latter exists dualistically with a male spirituality. Likewise, Spretnak (1994b) states that female and Goddess spirituality are not the same thing. Hence, the understandable need to define terms clearly each time they are used.



Traditional Christian spirituality has been ‘grounded in ascetic and monastic practices’ (Waldron, 1996:66), which separated it from the everyday, material world. In this dualistic view, spirituality became associated with men and earthly materiality with women. In contrast, ‘contemporary revisioning of spirituality seeks holiness through wholeness and integration by reconnecting all forms of life’ (U King, 1996:219), including the spiritual and material aspects of ourselves (U King, 1999a). Rather than expressing itself in private or in the hidden practices of monks, spirituality is how Christians, individually and collectively, live their everyday lives (Carr, 1988:201). This is a particularly feminist viewpoint, as it incorporates the feminist ideal of interrelatedness and therefore does not envision spirituality as an individual pursuit (Carr, 1988).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this view sees ‘salvation as the overcoming of separation’ (Waldron, 1996:67).

As with feminist theology, we must speak of multiple feminist spiritualities (Waldron, 1996). Along with Christian resources, feminist spiritualities make use of symbols and images from different world religions, as well as ancient and mythical ideas of the Goddess (U King, 1996) and extensive use of ritual (Gross, 1996).<sup>13</sup>

In writing about Goddess religion, Starhawk identifies its core principles as immanence (i.e. embodiment), interconnection, and community (1989:10).<sup>14</sup> Setting aside the first of these for a moment, we can see that two of our three themes are important to the Goddess movement, which takes interconnection and community to exist not only among human beings but with every part of the earth—and indeed the cosmos (Starhawk, 1989:10-11). The third of our themes, caring, is also significant to the Goddess movement. When Starhawk writes, ‘interconnection demands from us compassion’ (1989:11), she is not only speaking of feeling, such as empathy, but is actually issuing a call to act for justice. This is an important form of caring. Finally, to return to the idea of embodiment, this will come into play in Chapter 4 in the notion—raised by some feminist theologians (e.g. Heyward, Sölle)—that God is called into being by the caring connections between persons, that God cannot exist without embodied human beings. Thus, there are strong links between many conceptions of spirituality and ideas of relationship, interdependence, and connectedness (Spretnak, 1994b; A S King, 1996).<sup>15</sup> This

---

<sup>11</sup> Burkhardt (1989) presents an exhaustive list of terms—and their meanings—in current usage.

<sup>12</sup> There is some disagreement about whether feminist spirituality is involved with ‘self-development’ or is ‘community-oriented’ (U King, 1996:220)—or incorporates elements of both. A detailed discussion of feminist spirituality is beyond the bounds of this thesis, but interested readers may pursue it in Carr (1988), Plaskow and Christ (1989), Zappone (1991), Ursula King (1993, 1998a), Spretnak (1994a), Waldron (1996), Ochs (1997), and Foltz (2000).

<sup>13</sup> Ritual is important to Christian feminists, too, as it establishes and reinforces community, connectedness, and the value of each (Zappone, 1991). The reader can find out more about feminist ritual, and see examples, in Fischer (1995).

<sup>14</sup> Primavesi explains that when referring to “the Goddess”, spiritual feminists are using ‘a shorthand term for a ... varied set of concepts’, not merely substituting a female deity for a male one (i.e. God) (1996:46).

<sup>15</sup> Also between spirituality and ecofeminism (Primavesi, 1996). We will touch on this in Chapter 4.



is certainly true in Carr's (1988) discussion of Christian feminist spirituality as encompassing interdependence *and* autonomy.

### 2.2.3 Difference and diversity

A final caution about feminist theologies. Just as with early feminist theories that employed "women's experience" to draw their conclusions, there was a tendency among the early writings of feminist theologians to assume a universality about women's *religious* experiences. This is no longer the case, as the three main strands of reformist, womanist, and post-Christian show. However, there is the ever-present danger for feminists and feminist theologians alike of falling into this trap, where we assume that the experiences of *some* women can represent those of *all* women. For this reason, Hogan suggests a "hermeneutic of difference" (1997:166) which recognises a 'commonality among women' (61)—a commonality that 'is not coterminous with sameness' (61). In this way, feminist theologians hope to promote certain ethics and values without making *universalising* claims for how things are or should be (Hogan, 1997). As with feminism in general, feminist theology recognises a multiplicity of perspectives based on experience (Hogan, 1997).<sup>16</sup> What is more, Grey comments that it is '[o]n the basis of connection [that] we value difference' (1993:77; author's emphasis). Valuing difference, she says, often eludes us because 'our imagination is stultified through *reductive models of conformity*' (76; author's emphasis).<sup>17</sup>

This is a particularly apt consideration for this project, as older women are (or may be) not only different from younger and middle-aged women but also very different from each other. Indeed, 'older people are the *most* diverse group in our population' (Keith, 1980:196). Having lived long lives and collected different experiences along the way, older women may be one of the most internally diverse "groups" of women for feminist theology to consider and, possibly, incorporate. If this can be achieved—if 'the dangers of either universalism or unrestrained relativism' can be avoided (Hogan, 1997:172)—then feminist theologians will be well on the way to creating the hoped-for 'cumulative understanding [of women's lives] rooted in our particular social and sexual histories' (Hogan, 1997:61, citing Ruddick, 1989). The tension between a desire for cohesion between "ourselves" and "others" while maintaining a recognition of and commitment to diverse experiences is characteristic of feminist theology. Rather than "resolve" (i.e. gloss over) differences, feminist theologians strive to maintain the dynamism that such a tension brings about (Hogan, 1997).<sup>18</sup> This naturally leads us to ask, have older women's

---

<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, feminist theology has been criticised for having a white, Western slant and for neglecting the input of Christians from non-Western cultures and countries (Gross, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> As Wraight rightly notes, '[o]ne of the greatest dangers of the sense of belonging is an expectation that everyone should conform' (2001b:66).

<sup>18</sup> Biggar questions whether 'all instances of this "otherness" are equally valuable and deserve the same respect. What about the otherness of the fascist or the fundamentalist or the sexist' (1998:27)?



experiences been “accumulated and analyzed” to create the desired cumulative understanding (Hogan, 1997:61)?

### **2.3 Feminist theology, feminist spirituality, and older women**

Now that we have a basic understanding of feminist theology and feminist spirituality, the next step is to ask what they have to say about older women. In this section, we will examine existing research and practice, consider developing theologies and spiritualities, and note key forerunners and opportunities in the specific area of older churchgoing women.

#### **2.3.1 Existing research and practice**

As we saw in the last chapter, despite older people in general and older women in particular having suffered the effects of oppression and marginalisation, feminism has not taken notice of nor championed their cause until very recently. The same can be said of Christian feminism and feminist theology. The spirituality and the religious beliefs, experiences, and needs of older people, let alone older women as their own group, have only recently been the subject of investigation (O’Brien, 1996; Bright, 1997). Walter and Davie note that sociologists of religion and Christian feminists alike have shown little interest in ordinary women’s religious attitudes or their involvement in their churches:

[F]eminists...have been more concerned with why there are so few women in the chancel than with why there are so many in the pews. They have also been concerned to document in history the anti-women stance of Christianity, the pre-Christian spirituality of women, and the spirituality of hitherto ignored but highly gifted individuals, rather than document the ordinary religiosity of millions of churchgoing women (1998:640).

Is this another instance of ageism among feminist researchers/theologians, as many (if not most) of these pew-sitters, these “millions of churchgoing women”, are older women?<sup>19</sup> O’Brien (1996) in particular notes a void with respect to older women’s voices in the literature on women’s spirituality. As we will see below, Ursula King (1999a) is among a minority of feminist researchers and theologians who include the voices of older women in developing their theologies and spiritualities.

Without any hard evidence one way or the other, I nevertheless suspect that today’s older women did not participate (either as theologians or as research subjects) in developing feminist theologies in the past three decades. The feminist theologians who wrote in that period represent a different generational cohort to the women who are over 65 today, and it was the concerns and experiences of the (then) younger women at the forefront of feminism and feminist theology that held sway and whose texts we now have in the Christian feminist “canon”. None of the

---

<sup>19</sup> There are exceptions to this focus, however. Maitland (1983) writes of two autonomous Christian women’s groups that have involved large numbers of “ordinary” women: the Episcopal Church Women



foundational Anglo-American writings in feminist theology, and particularly none that discuss community, connection, and caring at length, give any indication that older women's ideas and experiences were sought, critically interpreted, or included in the final text. Yet, it is older Christian women whose faith system is built on strong values of relationships with others and caring for more vulnerable members of society.

Despite the growing realisation that they cannot 'speak for all women' (Gross, 1996:50), that it would be inappropriate for a privileged, white, Western, Northern woman to speak for an economically marginalised Eastern, Asian, or Southern woman, Anglo-American Christian feminist theologians—with some notable exceptions we will examine in a moment—still seem to believe that they can speak for all Anglo-American women, including older women. This does not seem to be an explicit decision or belief as much as a case of neglect—and another instance of the invisibility of older women, despite that fact that they are very much in our midst and we in theirs. Until the views and experiences of older women are seriously sought and studied, our feminist theologies remain incomplete.<sup>20</sup> If there is any overlap in views, then I suspect it is only a fortunate coincidence and not intentional. Which returns us to one of the key concerns in this thesis: What would a feminist theology of community, connection, and caring based on the experiences of older women have to say? Would such a theology differ from those that are extant?

More generally, why is a theology of ageing necessary or important? One reason, says Knutsen (referring to Saiving<sup>21</sup>), is the need 'to affirm old age, sickness, and death as part of the journey into actuality' (1995:474). When older people do appear in Christian teaching and theology, it is usually as the recipients of a Christian's good works rather than as actors. The few examples we have of notable older actors in the New Testament (e.g. Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, the widow who pestered the unjust judge<sup>22</sup>) are precursors, prophets, and parable exemplars, rather than disciples of Jesus.<sup>23</sup> A theology of ageing would place older persons squarely in the role of subject, not object. Fiorenza says that 'Christian feminism and feminist theology reclaim the right and power to articulate our own theology' (1995:7). Surely older

---

of the USA and the Women's Guild of the Church of Scotland. Dowell and Hurcombe (1987) meanwhile discuss the Mothers' Union in the Anglican Church.

<sup>20</sup> I find it interesting that Gross, who so rightly and eloquently takes feminist theologians to task for their limited (i.e. Western) perspectives (1996), does not mention age as an important "dynamic"—along with 'class, race, culture, and sexual orientation' (1996:53)—that needs to be considered. Granted, every last aspect of individuality cannot be listed every time a discussion of differences arises, but certainly age is something that affects all women, just as these others do.

<sup>21</sup> Saiving, V, 1988, 'Our bodies/our selves: reflections on sickness, aging, and death', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 4, 117-125. (Cited in Knutsen (1995:481)).

<sup>22</sup> Respectively, Luke 1:5-25 and 57-66; Luke 2:22-38; and Luke 18:1-8.

<sup>23</sup> We know that there were female disciples of Jesus (Spong, 2001:136), but their ages are unknown. There are three possible reasons why we do not know of any older female disciples: (1) the ages of persons in the New Testament are not always given, therefore some of the women could be older; (2) not



women have this same right and authority: the right not to have others—including younger feminists—speak for them?

Within feminist spirituality, some proponents, especially those who employ the symbol of the Goddess, have begun to recognise old age in women by creating “croneing” rituals that celebrate the wisdom of old women (Christ, 1992:282; Gross, 1996:212). There are other rituals, not specifically Christian- or Goddess-based, that recognise milestones in a woman’s later life.<sup>24</sup> While this is a positive beginning, as yet I am unaware that these activities and ceremonies are widespread.

### **2.3.2 A survey of developing theologies and spiritualities**

In the past decade, several authors have begun to address the question of the spirituality of older people (e.g. Rudd, 1988; Burton-Jones, 1990; Webber, 1990). In such studies, prayer is often cited as the particular duty of older Christians, although Webber (1990) acknowledges that if older people are thought capable only of praying that they will continue to be marginalised. Burton-Jones has identified five areas that are ‘almost the exclusive preserve of the elderly’: spiritual hindsight, reaching ultimate acceptance, using leisure time, relating to others, and dealing with death (1990:108-112). Each of these areas involves a great deal of self-examination and self-awareness, and some are more individual while others tend to be more communal in nature. In particular, using leisure time—which she defines as finding one’s new calling or vocation for service (110)—and relating to others both require thinking about one’s interactions with others and how those interactions can be fostered in changing circumstances.

Let us turn to the work of several theologians who have concerned themselves with older people: Mary Knutsen, Martha Larsen, Drew Leder, Kathleen Fischer, and Ursula King. After a brief introduction of each theologian’s work, I will indicate which ideas and issues I intend to follow up in this thesis.

Working with a foundation of understandings and priorities from feminist scholarship (i.e. economic and social justice, women’s identity through relatedness, and the importance of the body), Knutsen adds an important element for older women: the experience of time. She considers the situation of older women in contemporary US society, and discusses how the Christian concept of the trinity and ideas of eschatology can help us to build a community that includes and values the lives of older women. The resurrection event is significant because it sees the future as having glorious possibilities for all people, unlike society’s generally gloomy

---

many people lived to old age (by our 21<sup>st</sup>-century standards); and (3) the stories of some older women disciples are lost to us.



view of older age as a time with only a limited—and increasingly unhappy—future. This in turn lends new understandings to one's past experiences and, potentially, sparks new action in the present. Finally, like many feminist theologians, Knutsen calls for the creation of public rituals to 'celebrate the reality and presence of the aging and elderly among us' (1995:477).

While acknowledging her own position as a white, middle-class, younger woman, Larsen attempts to develop a theology of ageing that works to overcome these biases and that is 'intentionally intergenerational' (1995:249). She does this by picking up the important feminist issue of the body. Larsen claims that ageism is rooted in Western-societal sexual dualism that first separates the mind from the body and then values the former over the latter (as we saw above). It is also a society that says that older people, especially older women, are unattractive. Therefore, 'a theology that challenges commonly held notions of aging must address this issue' of what constitutes beauty (1995:243-244). Here is a feminist theologian acknowledging older women's unique contribution to this debate. Her emphasis on the valuing of the human body in all its forms incorporates a rejection of Western society's emphasis on youth and the consequent deriding of the physical signs of ageing. Larsen does not develop this further (at least, not here), but rather challenges religious communities to act.<sup>25</sup>

Taking an entirely different approach, Leder (2000) proposes a "spiritual model of aging" which goes against the prevailing Western model. He says that instead of 'assum[ing] that the losses that attend age should be *combated* wherever possible...the spiritual model calls for *embracing* the "losses" of age [and] using them as modes of liberation' (Leder, 2000:37; author's emphasis). Such a spirituality would value 'inward contemplation and service to others' (2000:40), or in other words, the "spirit" over materialism and the community over self. I believe that this is not intended as a continuation of the dualism described above, but is instead a call to incorporate mind *and* body within the context of communal growth, rather than a transcendent spiritual journey undertaken by oneself to an individual salvation.

Fischer, too, is primarily concerned with spiritual aspects of ageing. She states that a 'spirituality of aging must begin...with our very existence as older persons', grounded in 'the realities experienced in the aging process itself' (1998:13). This spirituality accounts not only for the losses of age but also for the individual nature of each person's experience and faith journey over the course of a lifetime. The goal of such a spirituality of ageing, says Fischer, 'is to convert the imaginations of both old and young to a new vision of the human' (1998:15).

---

<sup>24</sup> For example, 'A ritual for a sixty-year-old woman' (Ward and Wild, 1995b:65-66), 'Ritual for moving from a home of many years' (Fischer, 1995:138-139) and 'A ritual for passing on a legacy' (Fischer, 1995:169-170).

<sup>25</sup> The body is an area of extensive feminist theorising, and one which feminist theology has explored (e.g. Miles, 1989). Introducing the factor of age into this discussion of "body" is critical, and I hope Larsen and others continue to develop this.



Indeed, each of the theologians mentioned here is passionate about involving people of all ages in a mutual exploration of what it means to grow older—which we are all doing at every moment.

Finally, King emphasises the importance for older persons of reflecting on the experiences of their lives and integrating them into those of other people. She calls this ‘the work of befriending our own souls and memories so as to find answers to some of our deeper longings’ (1999a:152). She offers some practical steps for how older women might undertake this work, and, as many others do, suggests the use of ‘new rituals, prayers and liturgies of thanksgiving and celebration’ (154).<sup>26</sup> There are three particular and contemporary issues that older women face as they approach (overtly or otherwise) their own spirituality in later life: increased life expectancy, the prospect of living alone during these extra years, and (for some) the prospect of needing much physical care. King uses these issues to make the important link between the findings of social and medical gerontology and the subject of theology. She says that there are spiritual and theological concerns related to the gerontological issues (of longevity, living alone, and needing care) and needs older women have that go beyond the practical issues, which are also of great concern.

King also notes that ‘[t]he spiritual needs of older women are as diverse as individual personalities and life histories are’ (1999a:153). Is it even possible, then, to construct *a single* spirituality or theology of older women, when their experiences and their selves are so diverse? Do we risk universalising older women and silencing them in new ways? This returns us to the question of how feminist theologies address the question of difference and diversity more generally. Widening the perspective yet more, should there be a (single or multiple) unique feminist theology of older women? Or, should the experiences, praxis, and insights of older women contribute to a wider (and growing) “cumulative understanding” of feminist theologies?

These theologians’ ideas and emphases contribute pieces to the project of constructing a theology/spirituality of older people. They are a stimulus for further reflection. In particular, I will be following up the value of community well-being versus individualism, the symbolism of the trinity, and the realities of being older. I will be interweaving gerontological issues, such as the need for care, with theological issues such as the imperative to care. Throughout, I take the position that older women are (or should be) important members of the human community.

In terms of a basic process for developing a theology, we see two examples above. Knutsen and Larsen utilise a top-down process. They begin with either theological or feminist constructs and

---

<sup>26</sup> It is also important to have rituals and prayers that mark times of sadness and loss in older age. Fischer (1995) includes some.



concerns, and then apply them to the situation of older women. This is perfectly reasonable, but I prefer Fischer's approach: to work from the bottom up, whereby the actual experiences and ideas of older women are used as the basis for constructing a theology. While both methods are appropriate and have their place—and serve as useful dialogue partners—I favour the bottom-up approach.<sup>27</sup> This is the method pursued by the forerunners we will look at now.

### 2.3.3 Forerunners and opportunities in this area

In Britain, there is a dearth of research and writing on the connections between religion and ageing, compared to the USA (Howse, 1999). As noted in the last chapter, however, this is beginning to change. In addition to the church-sponsored projects mentioned in that chapter, social gerontologists are also beginning to consider certain religious and spiritual issues among the older people they study.<sup>28</sup> In the past decade or so, the increased interest in older women (and all older persons), both within British churches and British feminist circles, means that at present there is a considerable groundswell of research and material being produced. The spirituality of older people and of older women in particular has generated interest. The balance, however, continues to be weighted towards the US. Here, I will highlight three research projects that have already explored older churchgoing women's lives and views, in a similar way to my own. The first is British and the others are American.

Hubbert (1991) investigated the religious beliefs, practices, and aspirations of women aged 65 and over in a local community. The particular issues she focused on were: the women's religious development; their concept of the deity and the language of prayer; the role of the church in their lives and of women in the church; and their beliefs and understandings of the eschaton. Of these four issues, the third—the relationship of older women to the church—has the closest connection to my own project. (Recalling the opening quotation to this chapter, Hubbert found an “elderly-womanly” approach to life that was relationship oriented and that formed a basis of spirituality among older women.) Hubbert's study, however, was of women in a semi-rural village, whereas mine is of women in a mid-size city. Also, she focused specifically upon older women's spirituality, whereas my focus is on the interplay between their Christian beliefs and practices and the role of community, connection, and caring in their lives.

Ramsey and Blieszner (2000) also investigated the spirituality of older women.<sup>29</sup> They conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews with older (65+) women in the US and

---

<sup>27</sup> There are also various popular books available which take a “self-help” approach (I use the term in a positive sense) to spirituality and ageing. Examples are Guenther (1995) and Jewell (2000).

<sup>28</sup> For example, Coleman's recently completed twenty-year study of 340 ageing people revealed ‘the progressive decline in their allegiance to the Christian faith and the Christian Church’ (cited in Jewell, 2001:15). It will be necessary to compare these findings with others which indicate an opposite trend.

<sup>29</sup> Their work is more fully presented in Ramsey, J L, and Blieszner, R, 1999, *Spiritual Resiliency in Older Women*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi.



Germany, all of whom were Lutheran. The authors' work explicitly incorporates the themes of community, connection, and caring (which they term "love"). Interestingly, they found that the women's spirituality was based on community and connection, not individualism: to journey with God was to be part of 'the great togetherness' (2000:61) of life, highlighting the importance for older women of community over individualistic pursuits of spirituality. Like Hubbert, Ramsey and Blieszner's deliberate focus on the spirituality of older women complements the practical theological approach I am taking.

Gillespie (1992, 1995) looked at women of all ages in four geographically dispersed US Episcopal congregations. She conducted 80 in-depth interviews and considered all aspects of church life. In her reports, Gillespie presents four distinct congregational identities; but, more importantly for my project, she found that generation was a significant factor in analysing the women's experiences and attitudes, and she includes extensive information about older women. Her findings about the "bridge" and younger generations within these congregations will also help us think about how future generations of older women in British churches might be different from the older women of today.

Importantly, all three of these studies looked primarily at lay women, not clergy, thus focusing on the lives of "ordinary" women in the pews.

There are other projects of note that I will mention in the course of this thesis, all of which are British and studied older people, but which did not focus on older women exclusively. Chester and Smith used a case study approach with four British congregations—three Christian (one each Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Baptist) and one Muslim—'to study the total range of activities involving older people at various places of worship' (1996:2). As noted in the last chapter, qualitative and quantitative research among churchgoers has been conducted by the Christian Research organisation (Sanger, 1999; Brierley, 2000) on behalf of the Sir Halley Stewart Age Awareness Project. And, Reddie (2001a, 2001b) has looked at older people in Black-majority congregations. Nevertheless, despite such instances of research, much remains to be done and many questions to be answered.

#### **2.3.4 Practical theology<sup>30</sup>**

Christianity, for the ordinary person, is praxis, not theory—a way of life, not a philosophy (K Norris, 1998b:77). Certainly, beliefs inform behaviour and vice versa; but Christianity takes us beyond this: 'We are Christians not because of what we believe but because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus. To become a disciple is not a matter of a new or changed self-

---

<sup>30</sup> Practical theology is what German and many other continental theologians call ethics. (Thanks to Linda Hogan for this information.)



understanding, but rather to become part of a different community *with a different set of practices*' (Hauerwas, 1993:159; emphasis mine). What might this mean for this thesis?

I propose to put a 'different set of practices' at the very heart of this thesis, to examine the *lived experiences* of older women with respect to community, connection, and caring—not only to query and challenge feminist theologies but also to inform the *praxis* of the churches. In examining what might be the 'different set of practices' of older churchgoing women (i.e. input), it may be possible to challenge the churches to create their own 'different set[s] of practices' in relating to older people in general and to older women in particular (i.e. outcome). Because of this aim, I want to direct the reader's thinking along the lines of practical theology.

Practical theology is 'one of the fastest growing areas of theological study within the UK' (Willows and Swinton, 2000a:11). In Britain, pastoral and practical theology can be considered to be the same thing, although they are distinct fields in the US (Pattison and Woodward, 2000:3). Practical (or pastoral) theology<sup>31</sup> is, broadly, the theology underlying the activity of pastoral care or ministry, which is itself the concern, guidance, and assistance Christians show each other. Each—theology and activity—should inform the other in a continuous feedback process.

Practical theology has similar features, methods, commitments, and aims to feminist theology. For instance, practical theology incorporates a diversity of perspectives which it celebrates as mirroring human diversity (Willows and Swinton, 2000a). Also, practical theology focuses on a way of 'being theologians' (i.e. methodology) that is in sync with feminist theologies (Lartey, 2000:75). It is concerned with asking questions (and with who asks the questions), with reflecting on praxis, and with ethics and spirituality. It is also collaborative (Lartey, 2000), provisional, experiential, and interdisciplinary (Pattison and Woodward, 2000:14-15). And, it is 'deeply committed to the notion of understanding leading to and from action, or praxis' (Pattison and Woodward, 2000:11, citing Pattison). In other words, it aims to change the world (Polk, 1992). Because it is (or aims to be) committed to situations in the contemporary world and contemporary church (Pattison and Woodward, 2000:14), it is a reasonable area of application to and theorising about the experiences of older people in general and older Christians in particular.<sup>32</sup> Because practical theology chooses to promote the views of oppressed groups (Pattison and Woodward, 2000:15), it is, by definition, interested in the situation of

---

<sup>31</sup> If, using Pattison's model (2000), theological reflection is a three-way critical conversation between the student's ideas and feelings, the Christian tradition, and the contemporary situation, then that model is also the pattern of this thesis: my thoughts and perceptions, the Christian *feminist* tradition, and the situation of older churchgoing women today, as explored in empirical data and supporting texts.

<sup>32</sup> Biggar cautions that 'current experience or practice [should not be made] *the* simple foundation or criterion of (theological) theory' because it is, on its own, incomplete and because accountability to theory is essential (1998:25; author's emphasis).



older women, a doubly oppressed group. And, because it is engaged in dialogue with other disciplines and theologies (Pattison and Woodward, 2000:15), it is ready to interact with theories from feminist theology. Even so, Heather Walton (2001) and Elaine Graham (1993) dispute practical (or pastoral) theology's acknowledgement of feminism, Walton from a theoretical viewpoint and Graham based on the ignoring of women's experiences as pastoral agents and of their particular pastoral needs (217).<sup>33</sup>

#### i. Why a Christian feminist practical theology of older women?

If practical theology and feminist theology share so much in form and aims (Polk, 1992), can anything be gained by distinguishing a *Christian feminist* practical theology? I believe so. Such a specific sort of practical theology would foreground concerns that are particularly feminist in nature: it would consciously account for women's experiences and issues within the Christian life and tradition; it would raise awareness of past and present wrongs and work to correct them; and it would seek to liberate women and, by so doing, all people *and the church itself*. In the case of this thesis, a Christian feminist practical theology would say something unique about the experiences, views, and praxis of older churchgoing women, and use these to call the church to a new standard of working with and showing concern for not only older women but all members of the Christian community. And, it would recognise that change and development will be ongoing, and that the theology itself is always provisional.

A practical theology addresses the first of Zappone's issues (above), that of *purpose*. Practical theology's intention is to reflect on and influence *praxis*, a key aspect of feminist theology as well. A practical theology also addresses Zappone's issues of *place* and *method*, as it actively engages with the experiences, thoughts, and praxis of the group of persons (in this case, older women) with which it is concerned. The large and growing number of women of pensionable age, their dominance in the higher age groupings, and the fact that many are widowed and/or live alone supports my contention that these women are an important constituency to hear from and to understand, and that their thoughts about community, connection, and caring are potentially valuable for society and for the Christian churches.

## **2.4 This project**

In this final section of the chapter, I will review the methodologies and methods I employed in this project, note which avenues of research I did not pursue, and summarise the structure of this thesis.

---

<sup>33</sup> Walton claims that practical theology's 'clericalism and sexism' (2001:6) and its 'feminised discourse' (7) of caring have worked together to obscure and to silence women's authentic (bodily) experience. She does concede that this is changing and that a '[f]eminist practical theology is beginning to emerge' (7). For those who wish to pursue this, Walton lists a number of key texts. For a discussion of how a (female) United Methodist minister in the US uses concepts from feminist theology directly in her counselling with women, see Blue (2001).



### 2.4.1 Methodologies and methods, interdisciplinarity, and standpoint

My choice of theology and religious studies as the field in which to explore these questions is threefold. First, I wish to contribute to the ongoing dialogue within feminist theology discussed above. Next, the lack of extensive research on the lives of older Christian churchgoing *women* makes this territory ripe for further investigation and provides a specific category of persons against which to test these theories. Finally, as a Christian, a feminist, and a person committed to the interests of older people, I am interested in bringing together Christian feminist theology and older women's experiences to develop a praxis for the churches to use with respect to older women. The Christian feminist belief is that Christianity's patriarchal past *can* be transcended and reclaimed for the future, that indeed Christianity's message of community, connection, and caring is *crucial* for the future of individuals and of the world. It is this hope, this belief, which forms the foundation of my motivation for undertaking this research.<sup>34</sup>

As will be explored in detail in Chapter 6, I have employed a number of methodologies in this project—feminist, theological, and sociological—resulting in an interdisciplinary approach. In turn, the multi-disciplinary nature of my project is reflected in the internal interdisciplinarity (with respect to methodology and debates) of each of the disciplines I am engaged with—feminism, practical theology, and social gerontology (Peace, 1990b:1). The particular data-collection method I used was a qualitative one: semi-structured interviewing. Forty women over the age of 65 (all from the city and suburbs of York, and with Methodist and Anglican affiliations) were interviewed regarding the various communities (e.g. family, neighbourhood, church, other groups) of which they were members, their connections and feelings of in/exclusion and belonging, being an older woman, and the role of caring in their lives. I hope to reveal the unique experiences, activities, and thoughts of this particular collection of older Christian churchgoing women, from which it should be possible, nevertheless, to draw informative and valid conclusions—without claiming an unwarranted universality (Hycner, 1999).

### 2.4.2 Avenues not pursued

Every research project, including this one, has constraints. Because of the constraints of time, it was not possible to interview in depth more than 40 women and then analyse their testimonies. In addition to this, there were specific choices I made that shaped the project.

The interviewees were all churchgoers, so this project will not shed any light on the experiences and understandings of community, connection, and caring of those women who do not attend churches. This research will not take into account non-Christian faith systems, nor attempt to be

---

<sup>34</sup> For a further exploration and reflection on my standpoint as a researcher, see Chapter 6.



representative of all Christian denominations and traditions. It will not be a feminist critique of the Christian churches nor of the Christian tradition nor of the bible; those topics have been exhaustively covered by feminist writers elsewhere. It will not be a study of older persons with dementia; that subject is too extensive and important an area to give it due attention in this project.<sup>35</sup>

Why not investigate both older women *and* older men? Or, why not conduct a comparative study of older women and older men? Indeed, both of these would be worthy projects and I hope they will be undertaken. However, my desire to engage with feminist theology and its claims about women's experiences, defined my parameters. Added to this is the fact that, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, older women are not often studied in their own right, but are often lumped together with men in one general, catch-all category of "older people". I will not be claiming that any of my findings are *necessarily* gender-related; they may be or they may not be. What I will be able to say is that the findings relate to a particular sample of older women; we will then need further research to see if the findings are representative of other older women, of older men, or both.

A similar case may be made for why I did not conduct an investigation or a comparative study of women who do not attend church or women of other Christian denominations. These boundaries reflect my interests as well as certain themes and issues that were being debated at the time. As for why I chose to interview Methodist and Anglican women as opposed to, for example, Roman Catholic or Baptist women: not only does this choice reflect the Christian tradition with which I am personally most familiar, but it also engages with the two Protestant denominations in Britain that have gone on record as targeting the needs and desires of older people.<sup>36</sup>

The women in this study were all born prior to the outbreak of World War II. The oldest women, born at the start of the twentieth century, have lived through radical changes in technology, politics, the welfare society, health care, life expectancy rates, immigration, a religiously and culturally pluralistic society, and more, including the dismantling of most of the last vestiges of the British empire. Because of 'the inextricable social and cultural dimension of pre-war Christianity' (Furlong, 1995:xii), pre-war generations have 'a shared vocabulary; a common language' (Davie and Vincent, 1998:102). This can make them seem a fairly coherent

---

<sup>35</sup> Excellent work has been done by CCOA, Faith in Elderly People, Leeds, and other researchers into the spirituality of older people with dementia.

<sup>36</sup> The only published text which I have been able to locate by a denomination other than these two is one produced for the United Reformed Church (URC), *Respecting the Gift of Years* (Appleton, 1998). Although affirmed by the URC General Assembly in 1999, the messages of this report have not yet been forcefully put into practice. However, the URC is focusing on end-of-life matters and the importance of

body of persons to study. However, the findings of this study can be no more than an attempt at understanding a particular group of women.<sup>37</sup> Their views are necessarily shaped not only by the events of the society and world into which they have been born, lived, and grown old but by their individual experiences and circumstances.<sup>38</sup>

### 2.4.3 Structure of the thesis

In Chapters 3 through 5, I present a background discussion of the three key concepts of community, connection, and caring. These are discussed with reference to feminist theory, feminist theologies, and social gerontology. In each of the chapters, I raise questions about what we might expect to find in the data, and what questions remain to be answered.

Chapter 6, 'Methodologies and Methods', is a reconstruction of the journey I made through this project, from articulating the initial ideas, to engaging in fieldwork, to analysis, and through to writing up. Throughout this process, I was involved in encounters with various methodological disciplines, and in this chapter I show the impact they had on my decisions and course of action. Appendices I, II, and III are related to this chapter, and should be read in conjunction with it.

In Chapters 7 through 9, I present the findings of my interviews with older women in relation to the three themes, and we "hear" their voices as we read their statements. I relate what the women have said back to the arguments presented in the thematic chapters, and discuss what the interviewees had to say about old age in general and about being older women.

Chapter 10 brings the analyses on community, connection, and caring together in an overall discussion of what this research has found, and includes a section on what local churches might practically be able to enact as a result of this research. I return to the central question posed in this introduction: should there be a separate Christian feminist practical theology of older women, and, if so, what might it be?

In the Conclusion, Chapter 11, I review what this project has accomplished, consider what I might have done differently and offer suggestions for further research. In particular, I discuss the topic of future generations of older women and how their cohort experiences and expectations are likely to shape ongoing developments of feminist theologies of older women.

---

life-long learning, both of which are relevant (though not exclusive) to older people. (Thanks to Ruth Clarke, private conversation.)

<sup>37</sup> Because of the nature of the environment from which I drew interviewees, this group of women is exclusively white, further limiting the ability to generalise from the findings.

<sup>38</sup> Both Moberg (1968) and Davie and Vincent (1998) caution that it is difficult to determine to what extent views held by an older person are the result of that individual's ageing process or of societal circumstances and change. This is an important point to keep in mind.



## 2.5 Summary

Because older women are a significant proportion of the British churchgoing population—people who build communities (both church and non-church) and make contributions to them, who make and maintain connections, and who practice and experience caring—I believe there is an opportunity to learn from them about Christian faith and life from these three perspectives, and, as feminists, to challenge and refine our theologies. I firmly believe that there should be useful outcomes from research such as this, beyond contributing to and, I hope, advancing a discussion. I believe that there should be practical steps others can act upon in their professional and pastoral lives. This thesis involves a synthesis of the conceptual and methodological approaches of feminism, feminist theology, and social gerontology with the three key themes of community, connection, and caring, and with the praxis of older churchgoing women to create a first step towards a Christian feminist practical theology of older women.

### Chapter 3—Community: features, realities, and ideals

Community, like love, is where you find it.

—Barry Wellman, Peter J. Carrington, and Alan Hall<sup>1</sup>

[A]nthropologists working with old people report that, most fundamentally, they are people. They have the same need for community, and create it under the same conditions; the difference may be in its precious significance to them, who are so often excluded from community in modern societies.

—Jennie Keith<sup>2</sup>

The Christian vision is of an *interdependent* community of persons who are all both weak and strong in various ways, and who mutually exchange their gifts. Such a community recognizes the interdependence of the generations in the ongoing process of life.

—Kathleen Fischer<sup>3</sup>

#### 3.1 Introduction

As we learned in Chapter 2, “community” is a key area of interest to people in a variety of academic disciplines and professions—and indeed, to “the woman in the street”. Whether considering global issues such as the environment, national issues such as immigration, local issues such as community care, or personal issues such as the wellbeing of one’s immediate family, people wonder if past understandings of “community” are still meaningful. Older women, the focus of this research, may wonder if they still have a role to play as the nature of “community” seems to be shifting and as society appears to be bracing itself for the “granny boom”. In this chapter, I will present meanings and interpretations of community from a number of perspectives—historical and contemporary, social gerontological, feminist, and Christian feminist. I will consider both the benefits and the responsibilities of community membership as well as certain key features of community for this study. In light of this discussion, I will offer my provisional definition of “community” for this project and raise questions about how “community” might be understood and experienced by older Christian churchgoing women, signalling what we will want to look for in the data.

#### 3.2 What is “community”?

“Community” has a number of commonly understood meanings. The various communities we commonly speak of include geographic neighbourhoods (e.g. London’s “East End” and “Notting Hill”), fields of academic inquiry and work (e.g. “the scientific community” and “the medical community”), ethnic groups (e.g. “whites” and “Asians”), and religious adherents (e.g.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wellman, et al. (1988:130).

<sup>2</sup> Keith (1980:194-195).

<sup>3</sup> Fischer (1998:67; author’s emphasis).



“Muslims” and “Sikhs”).<sup>4</sup> There are intentional communities (e.g. communes), as well as those of chance and circumstance (e.g. families and workplaces). Some communities, such as monasteries, exist apart from the larger world while others, such as political parties, are engrossed in it. Communities may be associations of like-minded individuals who do not necessarily have face-to-face contact (Thompson, 1988). For example, members of various faith systems worship as communities of believers, both locally and on an international scale. Some would say that we exist in community with deceased persons, while others believe that all life on this planet—the ecosystem—is a single community. How can each of these very different collectives be called a community?

### i. Historical meanings

Understandings of what constitutes a community have changed over the years, especially in the last several decades. Since the fourteenth century, the word “community” has carried a number of senses in English, from naming ‘actual social groups’ to describing ‘a particular quality of relationship’ (R Williams, 1983:75). Both of these senses continue to be current, and therefore the meaning depends on the speaker and the context. Discussions of community often make reference to Ferdinand Tönnies’s distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* refers to a more traditionally defined community: a small, closely-knit group, such as a family or village, where membership is involuntary. In contrast, *Gesellschaft* describes a larger group of people, such as a society, with few bonds, where membership is more likely to be voluntary (Etzioni, 1995:116). Communities of the former type, writes Etzioni, have more of a “we” feeling. They can be viewed as authoritarian and restricting or, alternatively, as caring for their members. *Gesellschaft* communities, on the other hand, promote “me” feelings because they offer more personal freedom and anonymity. However, this can lead to extreme individualism and a lack of concern for others.<sup>5</sup>

Locality—the geographic space or place where people live—is often used to identify a particular community. Neighbourhoods, towns, regions, and areas of specific governmental authority create communities of this type, and beginning with the Chicago School in the 1920s and continuing through to the 1960s, this was the definition used by the subdiscipline of sociology known as community studies (Vidich, et al., 1964; Bell and Newby, 1971). Since the 1980s, in the postmodern period, sociologists and others have continued to use the term “community” but in different ways with different understandings from the past. There has been a shift in emphasis from the static nature of locality to the dynamic nature of culture (Albrow,

---

<sup>4</sup> Knott speculates that ‘in the mid-1970s, the notion of “community” in British public discourse (whether related to class, religion or ethnicity) was used uncritically as a safe and respectful term to indicate groups of others’ (2001:2).

<sup>5</sup> These distinctions, although they raise certain notions that I will address in this thesis, are more appropriately applied to considerations of large-scale societies such as nations rather than the small, personal-scale communities with which this thesis is primarily concerned.

1997), and members of communities frequently give their allegiance to interests, ideologies, and goals, rather than to particular physical places. This shift has been hastened by experiences of globalisation in the economy and the advent of ‘[i]nformation and communication technology [that] now make it possible to maintain social relationships on the basis of direct interaction over any distance across the globe’ (Albrow, 1997:44).<sup>6</sup> In association with this have arisen ideas of “imagined communities” and “virtual communities”.

#### ii. Contemporary understandings—the break with locality

Anderson (1983), in his analysis of nations, was the first to discuss imagined communities in detail. Within imagined communities, he writes, most of the members will never know or encounter one other, yet they will share a common vision, one which includes the conception of the community as ‘a deep, horizontal comradeship’ (1983:16). Building on this, Bauman (1992) says that members’ belief in and commitment to imagined communities gives them a type of substance, as well as authority. Further, he claims that today the search for community is obsessive (1992:136), resulting in (citing Maffesoli<sup>7</sup>) *neo-tribes*: ephemeral ‘concepts rather than integrated social bodies’ (136) and ‘vehicles...of individual self-definition...[that are] transient and always in flux’ (137). Here is where so-called “virtual” or “cybercommunities” enter the picture.

By definition, ‘virtual communities are genuine social groups that assemble around the use of e-mail, webpages, and other networked resources’ (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000). There are debates surrounding whether such groups can actually be called communities, based on different authors’ views of what constitutes a “community” (e.g. Catalfo, 1993; Reid, 1995; S G Jones, 1998a). However, despite the lack of physical contact between members, these groups do indeed constitute communities, because they are “places”—or arenas—where things happen and where people connect.<sup>8</sup> In describing an online community he is a member of, Catalfo tells of ‘people gathering on a central, common ground to share the prosaic and the profound, the small facts and large events that become landmarks in a community’s life’ (1993:175).<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> We will see that this is the case with the interviewees, several of whom had family members in North America and Australia.

<sup>7</sup> Maffesoli, M, 1988, ‘Jeux de masques’, *Design Issues IV*, nos. 1 and 2, pages 141ff. (The concept is developed further in Maffesoli, M, 1996, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, SAGE, London.)

<sup>8</sup> Virtual communities can be based on any number of interests, including religion. When I did a web search with the keyword “cyberchurch”, I found a number of sites, including one that listed no fewer than 54 ‘Christian Internet fellowships and “cyberchurches”’ (CrossSearch Online Christian Resource Directory, n.d.). One of these was Church On Line, which describes itself as ‘an internet based place of worship where you can come to offer a prayer, share a story, or just meditate and look at some artwork’. Should connection time be a bit slow, it offers the intriguing disclaimer, ‘Be patient, we are only human :-)’ (Church On-Line, n.d.). NB: The emoticon at the end of the text is perhaps being used to emphasise the “humanity” of the project.



Bringing this look at types of community more directly back to the subject of this project, Wellman and Berkowitz state that the notion of community has been transformed from its former connection with locality into the idea of “social networks” (1988:125). Going further, Wellman, Carrington, and Hall term the social networks of individual persons ‘personal communities’, and propose that personal communities offer many of the attributes of traditional communities: ‘sociable relations, interpersonal support, informal social control, and a sense of personal identity’ (1988:131). It is this understanding of community that will prove most useful for my thesis.

### 3.2.1 Characteristics of community

Some of the factors that determine the precise nature of a particular community include members’ proximity and/or shared interests and goals, the degree of formality and intentionality of the group, and the flexibility of membership and boundaries. A community and its members may either be easily identifiable, both by insiders and outsiders, or difficult to recognise. Resources may be available for members to draw on and certain behaviours may be expected or proscribed. Members may share certain interests, such as rambling or stamp-collecting; particular values, such as world peace or universal health care; or specific goals, such as teaching computer skills to older people or working to eliminate homelessness. Formal communities generally exist to achieve a specific purpose, whether quantifiable (e.g. raising money for charity) or qualifiable (e.g. offering support to beginning writers). Duration is another determining factor: some communities are permanent while others are temporary (e.g. the particular patients on a hospital ward). If there is long-term continuity, then a community may include deceased and as-yet-unborn members as well as the living. Christianity is one such community, which its members see as transcending time. Concern about the continuation of the community may be of deep concern to its members—or of no concern at all.

Intentionality indicates whether a community is “given” to or “chosen” by its members. “Given” communities—where persons find themselves members by chance and have limited or no control over their membership—can include family, ethnic group, and neighbourhood. On the other hand, an individual’s friends and social groups are usually “chosen” by herself.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, communities may be free to choose their members, and membership may be flexible or strictly defined. Other communities, such as friendship groups, may have implicit or common understandings about who belongs that are unclear to outsiders. Rights, responsibilities, and

---

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the definitive text on this subject is Rheingold, H, 2000, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, revised edition, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London.

<sup>10</sup> Most of the communities I will be considering in this thesis are of the voluntary, associational type because of their characteristics of like-mindedness and choice. Even one of the major “given” communities—family—has elements of choice in it, as older women choose (or not) to associate with other persons in their families. Likewise, my current home of York was chosen by me in the first instance.

privileges usually come along with membership in a community, and certain forms of behaviour and contributions are expected—though, again, not always clearly evident. Additionally, membership may be strictly egalitarian or there may be different status levels, and internal differences between members may be tolerated well or suppressed by required conformity.

The interests, goals, activities, and attributes that members of a community hold in common work to create an identity both for the community and for its members. A community may have a history, a shared story that forms part of its identity,<sup>11</sup> and that shared story in turn forms part of the individual identities of each of the members. For instance, not only do people find identity through their relationships and their (paid or unpaid) work, they also find identity through their associations with neighbourhoods and towns and with organisations (e.g. ‘I’m a Yorkie’; ‘I’m a member of St. Anne’s Church’). Participating in a community can express our interests and values, who we think we are as individuals. We bring our prior identities to communities, as well as receiving identity-shaping influences from them. A woman can actively seek to influence the community she is a part of, or she may allow herself to be influenced by it. Or, she may exist on the fringes, choosing to remain detached.

In contemporary imagined communities, both membership and boundaries (which are often the determining factors of “insiderness” and “outsiderness”) are fluid and dynamic. No matter a community’s size or degree of materiality, it has boundaries and these are often situationally created rather than pre-existing. They may be either well or loosely defined, and may or may not be clearly understood by insiders, outsiders, or both. Communities with flexible boundaries may freely allow insiders and outsiders to pass, whereas those with rigid boundaries have a tighter control on such exchanges. In her study of two small rural towns in Iowa in the US, Naples writes of ‘the fluidity of “outsiderness”/“insiderness”’: ““Outsiderness” and “insiderness” are not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed by community members’ (1997:71). She says that ‘[p]erceived “newcomer” status is only one aspect of “outsiderness”’ (79) and that people who don’t conform in other ways are also outsiders. Further, people who are (or feel themselves to be) outsiders are alienated from the wider community. She notes that being an outsider in these towns carried other consequences:

The idealized construction of what it meant to be a part of the “community” and of who were “legitimate” community members served as both an

---

but the people I have met here were “given”. From within that larger, found community, I have created smaller, chosen communities of friends and associates.

<sup>11</sup> Keith (1980) writes of background factors and emergent factors in the life of communities. Background factors are ‘those which are present or not among a collection of individuals at the beginning of the process’, and emergent factors are ‘those which may or may not develop over time’ (176). Examples of the former are ‘[s]ocial and cultural homogeneity of the individuals’; examples of the latter are ‘[s]hared symbols [and] levels of participation’ (176).



internalized and externalized means of social control. When someone spoke up to challenge the construction, they were formally silenced or ostracized. Others silenced themselves for fear that they would disrupt the fragile sense of community. Consequently, many members walked around *feeling alienated* from the mythic “community” yet were careful not to share their feelings with others who they perceived were *more connected* to the “community”. As long as those on the margins felt silenced by the “outsider phenomenon” they would not challenge the power base and definition of the situation that privileged a small elite (81; emphasis mine).

As Naples hints, insider/outsider status can lead to feelings of belonging or not belonging, a topic which we will explore in detail in the next chapter when we look at connection.

As already noted, membership in a community places responsibilities on a woman as well as conferring benefits. These responsibilities include (in varying and potentially unstable degrees) ‘reciprocal accountability’ (Serene Jones, 2000:126), fidelity and loyalty, and contributing to social support and social capital. Social support refers to ‘the companionship and practical, informational and esteem support which the individual derives from interaction with members of...her “social network”, including friends, colleagues, acquaintances and family members’ (Cooper, et al., 1999:9). Social capital ‘embraces all the social, collective, economic and cultural resources to which a community...has access’ (7). Resources of *social support* and *social capital* may each vary in degree depending upon the community being considered and what the individual members can contribute to it. As we will see later, older people draw on “reserves” of social support and social capital in their communities but are also very concerned about contributing in good measure.

From this brief discussion, we can see that there are both positive and negative aspects to communities. On the plus side, communities can be a source of support, help, encouragement, guidance, appreciation, and approval for their members. They can provide a foundation for further growth and development by being a place where members can express themselves through their talents and services. They can be a source of information, intellectual stimulation, entertainment, and leisure, of keeping in touch with people, ideas, and current events. Communities can be a source of friendship and sociability, nurture and caring (both received and given), and security and comfort—places where a woman can relax and be herself. A community might provide moral and social codes and role models, and may also offer a frame of reference for individual identity. Finally, communities are dynamic organisms, often being influenced, changed, and guided by members’ input, as well as shaping members’ lives.

Yet, each of these positive aspects has its negative counterpart. Communities may be clannish, cliquy, narrow, parochial, limited, rigid, outdated, old-fashioned, or “past it” in terms of usefulness. Members may be subject to sanctions if they fail to behave properly. Segregation,

marginalisation, exclusion, and ostracism can be negative consequences for those who fail to behave properly or to perform expected tasks. Experiences of the same community (e.g. a local church congregation) are not necessarily the same for each community member: ‘what one member experiences as a positive community is cited by another as harmful’ (Serene Jones, 2000:127). An example of this is the oppression and silencing women of colour and non-heterosexual women have often felt within the feminist “sisterhood”. Whereas some members will take pride in a given community, others may resist being identified with it, especially if the consequences from outsiders are negative (e.g. the gay/lesbian community). Minority communities may be subject to attack (either verbal or physical) by outsiders or by a changing world.

Communities can be fragile and fall apart due to members’ lack of interest, poor definition of values and aims, changing goals of the membership, or an inability to compromise over problem-solving or goal-setting. The fact that like-mindedness is a hallmark of contemporary, imagined communities must not be allowed to disguise the fact that, in any size community, there are often—even usually—internal divisions, differences, and disagreements. How do communities deal with ‘differences in opinions and outlook’ among their members (Koehn, 1998:27)? Are they accommodated and even encouraged, or are they glossed over, denied, or even “put down”? Feminism has actively attempted to address this in its approach to difference and diversity, as we saw in the last chapter. Bauman writes that

[t]olerance reaches its full potential only when it offers more than the acceptance of diversity and coexistence...., when it acknowledges not just the *otherness* of the other, but the legitimacy of the other’s interests and the other’s right to have such interests respected and, if possible, gratified (1992:xxi-xxii; author’s emphasis).

This would certainly be a feminist principle, but how successful have feminists and others been at enacting it? Bauman gives us an answer when he says that community ‘is thought of as the uncanny (and in the end incongruous and unviable) mixture of difference and company’ (1992:134). Such an ideal of community is ultimately unattainable but it must nevertheless be struggled for, and the best way, according to Bauman, is through ‘the acceptance of heterogeneity of dissensions’ (1992:139).

As we can see from this overview, the word “community” can be the site of multiple interpretations and understandings; therefore, it will require refinement for the purposes of this thesis. The concept of “place” will help us do that.

### 3.2.2 Ideas of “place” as related to community

In choosing to use the word “place” to help define “community”, I need to clarify exactly what I mean by “place” because this is a term with specific meanings in other fields, such as



geography, sociology, and the study of religions. Further, I wish to use the notion of community as a “social place” because, in my project, there is always at least one person involved (and interacting with someone or something) in any community under discussion.<sup>12</sup>

For me, the word “place” carries with it the idea of a “somewhere” that can be identified, named, pointed to—even if it is an imaginary “where” (S G Jones, 1998a:15). Knott (2000), in her overview of religion and locality studies, notes that the physical concepts of “space” and “place” are central to that field of inquiry.<sup>13</sup> “Place”, she says, is usually associated with notions of “particularity” and “subjective significance”, notions that I am drawing on for my own interpretation of community when I refer to it as a “place”—even though, as I am using the word, it does not necessarily have physical dimensions. Indeed, other words that I could also have chosen to indicate community are “arena” or “stage”. These terms incorporate the idea of performance, of activity, of “events” (Casey, 1996:26ff) of some kind and of people taking control of these events.<sup>14</sup> Continuing this notion of performance and activity, Nye writes,

although places [i.e. communities] may appear to be fixed and given, in practice a place...is a dynamic cultural manifestation. A place has a history, or histories (and potential futures), it has meanings which are assigned to it, groups and persons who use it in their own particular, and sometimes conflicting ways, and acts as an embodiment of various discourses, some of which may be explicit and generally accepted...whilst others may be strongly contested (2000:43).

These ideas of conflict and contestation will prove helpful later on when I analyse the findings on community from the interviews.

In his extended examination of the concepts of “space” and “place”, Casey introduces an idea of “place” that resonates for my own notion of “community”. This is the idea that ‘places gather things in their midst—where “things” connote various animate and inanimate entities [including] experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts [and memories]’ (Casey, 1996:24-25). Thus, not only do people exist in a place (community), but so, too, do the many results of human activity. Further, Casey says that places have ‘a power of gathering’: ‘a place holds out, beckoning to its inhabitants and, assembling them, making them manifest’ (1996:25). As we will see as this thesis develops, older women not only create communities, but are in turn “created by”—shaped and influenced by—the power that those communities have as entities apart from the women. Because other persons (or entities, such as God and values) are involved

---

<sup>12</sup> I will use the terms “place” and “social place” interchangeably throughout the thesis.

<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of my argument, I will not be examining ideas of the concept of “space” and how it is distinguished from “place”. There are complex and continually developing lines of thought with respect to these two terms. To lessen confusion, and to keep within the bounds of my definition of community, I will only be discussing “place”. The interested reader may pursue the arguments in humanistic geography through the work of, for example, Yi-Fu Tuan and Doreen Massey, and in anthropology in the work of Michel de Certeau and Edward Casey. (Thanks to Kim Knott for this information.)

<sup>14</sup> As we will see in Chapter 5, there is a particular form of activity that occurs in communities: “caring”.

in communities, the connections between an older woman and these “others”—and the activities they engage in—reflexively act on the older woman to contribute to her identity and to shape her future actions. Casey says that a place’s ‘power consists in gathering these lives and things...into one arena of common engagement’.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, building on the notion of an individual’s communities as “places”, I will borrow another concept from physical geography. Just as physical places are grouped and enlarged to create “regions” within which people live and function (Tilley, 1994:15), so, too, do an older woman’s separate communities come together to create networks or webs within which she functions. This will become clearer as we see how many of the interviewees’ communities overlap (Chapter 7).

### **3.3 Social gerontologists on community**

As we saw in the quotation from Keith that opened this chapter, evidence from social gerontological research shows that community is important to older people (and thus to older women, the majority of older people). In this section, we will look at how social gerontologists have interpreted the role and meaning of community in older people’s lives, especially the important community of family. Following on from the earlier discussion, we will see how notions of community have shifted for older people just as they have for society in general, and the positive and negative consequences this has for them. We shall consider the key topic of social support and social capital and also the welfare topic of community care. Finally, I will direct our gaze to the community that forms a significant part of this study: the local church.

#### **3.3.1 Community and older people**

The changes in understandings of community noted earlier have had an impact on how older people today experience “community”. In their research among older people in three urban communities in England, which they contrasted with research results from the same communities in the post-war period, Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, and Ogg note that ‘over the past fifty years, we have moved from an old age experienced largely within the context of family groups...to one where it is shaped by what Wellman has termed “personal communities” (i.e. the world of friends, neighbours, leisure-associates and kin)’ (2001:252). Further, today ‘old age...is experienced alone or with one other person (usually a spouse)’ (2001:57). The phenomenon of couples ‘retiring and managing old age together is stronger now than it was

---

<sup>15</sup> Although Casey writes of this as an empowering experience for persons, we will see in the data that this “power” of a place (i.e. community) to gather lives together is not always benign—let alone empowering—for older women. Further, it is a feminist paradigm that authority comes from (or should come from) the experience of community, rather than domination or hierarchy (e.g. L Russell, 1985b). That is, communities should be speaking for themselves, rather than suffering the interpretations of outsiders. However, even when this is the case, there may still be individuals within a community who are not empowered to shape that community’s “authority”.



forty years ago, and this has done much to alter the dynamics of family life in old age' (2001:159). If what these researchers discovered is more widely true of British society today, then we would expect that the loss of a partner would strike an older person particularly hard, a view these authors appear to support: '[F]or people losing a "strong tie" of some kind (for example with the death of a spouse) there were few other ties to fall back upon' (2001:256).

In light of this, there is some discrepancy in the literature as to whether older people, particularly older women, are able to create and maintain communities as successfully as they did when they were younger. While some authors seem to say "no" (e.g. Cooper, et al., 1999), Jerrome says that 'women's social networks and spheres of influence are inclined to develop as they go through life, if only because the earlier years are characterized by relatively narrow concerns and later years see a removal of some of the constraints on social activities' (1993:97). The negative experiences of community attachments that all women may be subject to are perhaps more keenly experienced by older women. For instance, where money and health are often issues in deciding to move house, many older women will not have sufficient resources and therefore will not be able to relocate. Also, 'older women feel that they are often forced to live on the margins of society' (Maynard, 1999:64), when what they seek is integration. However, it is important to remember and to foreground the positive side of older age, so that the more commonly presented "problematic" image does not have exclusive sway (Maynard, 1999).

Importantly, older people have access to social capital and use it. The social capital of older people can be defined as 'family, friends and voluntary organisations', 'intimacy' or 'emotional investment', and 'leisure activities' (Phillipson, et al., 2001:25, 258). Citing Bowling, Farquhar, and Browne,<sup>16</sup> Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, and Ogg offer a distinction between social networks and social support: 'A social network...is the set of people with whom one maintains contact and has some form of social bond. Social support is defined as the interactive process in which emotional, instrumental, or financial aid is obtained from one's social network' (2001:26). Instrumental and financial help for older people comes mainly from immediate family; emotional help can come from others, such as friends, in the social network (2001:131-132). Sufficient reserves of social capital are essential if older people are not to become overwhelmed by changes in their environments (2001:259).

---

<sup>16</sup> Bowling, A, Farquhar, M, and Browne, P, 1991, 'Life satisfaction and association with social network and support variables in three samples of elderly people', *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 6, 549-566.

Social support and social capital, which are benefits of a person's network of communities, are particularly important for older women.<sup>17</sup> Among the forms of social capital that are important for older women in Britain are security, neighbourliness and reciprocity: 'Access to caring resources is an important source of capital for older people'. Even more importantly, older women *generate* social capital by, among other things, 'forming new friendships'. We will see evidence of these forms of social capital in the data chapters (7, 8, and 9).

Another form of social capital that many older people lay claim to is, according to Jerrome, 'values [as] a cultural resource' (1992:157). 'In asserting their moral superiority over youth,' she writes, 'the elders claim to possess the correct values and thus a share of the cultural resources which confer status' (157). Whether others in society share older people's views on what constitutes 'correct values' is questionable; nevertheless, by staking out the moral high ground, older people are actively creating a group identity rather than passively accepting one.

Community care (which was referred to in Chapter 1 and will be looked at in greater depth in Chapter 5) is relevant to a discussion of community because it requires that we define what we mean by "community" as well as by "care". Martin Green, Chief Executive of Counsel and Care (a charitable organisation providing advice and practical help to older people and carers), suggested that my project was very timely because of the new thinking about what constitutes a community—that communities are not just geographic, but exist because of how individuals form links. There is now recognition, he said, that services must work within *these sorts* of communities, rather than merely pouring money into existing geographically based local governmental councils.<sup>18</sup> Because such communities are more difficult to define and to "rationalise" nationally, this task will require flexibility and creativity to carry out successfully.

#### i. Local churches

As I discussed in Chapter 1, older people—especially older women—are the primary constituent base of mainline Christian churches in this country. Therefore, local churches form a key community that I have investigated in this project. What do we know at the outset about older Christian women's experiences of local churches?

Butler and Orbach cite Rabbi Julia Neuberger as suggesting 'that older people, especially widows, go to a place of worship *primarily* for a sense of community' (1993:177-178; emphasis mine). The problem with this statement is that it subordinates the possibility that older women

---

<sup>17</sup> Ideas in this paragraph are from Sara Arber, presidential address, 'Gender and generation: Changing inequalities over time and across the life course', British Sociological Association annual conference, April 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Private conversation, 19 May 2000.



go to a place of worship primarily in order to worship—or for any other reason.<sup>19</sup> Thompson operates on the same premise as Neuberger: ‘Women consistently outnumber men in membership and attendance in Christian denominations, suggesting that they have a greater need or willingness to be involved in voluntary communities’ (1988:227). Walter and Davie (1998), however, state that there is no evidence for this interpretation. They also argue that ‘for many people “the church” is the social life built up by the (largely female) congregation over decades’ (1998:645). This highlights the creative work done by women in establishing communities within formal church structures (645). It might also indicate that the work women do in maintaining the community life of a local church is obscured by patriarchal thinking that diminishes the contacts women have as “merely” social. It would be wrong to suppose that women, particularly older women, attend church or continue their connections with a church *solely* for social interaction. Indeed, Ramsey and Blieszner conclude that, in the case of the older women they studied, ‘group participation was meaningful because it occurred within the context of a *spiritual* community’ (2000:58; emphasis mine). This is not mere sociability, but shows the importance and uniqueness of a church or church-based community for older Christian women.

Nevertheless, individual researchers in the area of older women and their churchgoing or spiritual lives have identified that, for older women, communities and relationships appear to have particular importance (Hubbert, 1991; O’Brien, 1996; Ramsey and Blieszner, 2000).

### **3.4 Feminists and Christian feminist theologians on community**

In the past two decades, feminists in many disciplines have taken up the theme of community. While the work has been extensive, and there is no uniformly “feminist” position, nevertheless there are certain ideas that are widely adhered to. According to Humm, there are three main aspects to feminists’ thinking on community: ‘Feminist theory defines community as...a sense of shared and warm identity between individual women. Community can also mean a separatist women’s group....Other feminists define community as “model”—a feminist guide for the whole of society’ (1989:33).<sup>20</sup> Feminists usually discuss community in opposition to extreme forms of individualism; therefore, inclusiveness and co-operation are characteristics of feminist community.

---

<sup>19</sup> I can think of a number of reasons why a woman might want to attend church, reasons that have little or nothing to do with participating in a voluntary community. For example, church may be the focus of her social life if her choice of places to be “entertained” outside the home is limited due to issues of safety, spousal control, finances, etc. Church can also be a practical outlet for talents, such as organising and managerial skills, teaching, catering, flower arranging, etc. Then again, she may want to show off her piety—or she may just want to show off a new hat! (Although interviewee Doris gave a definitive “No!” to this last!)

<sup>20</sup> Feminists ‘avoid strict definitions’ of an ideal community (Serene Jones, 2000:130).

### 3.4.1 Feminist theories of community

All of these uniformly positive definitions can be seen in the notion of oppositional communities.<sup>21</sup> In general, oppositional communities have aims and practices set up in contrast to those of other (often more dominant) groups. Such communities, where women either choose to live together or to gather regularly, are deliberate attempts to recognise and overcome biases and privileges by including a diversity of perspectives (Gruen, 1994; Warren, 1994) in order to create new epistemologies and moralities that are feminist in form and outlook. Ecofeminist communities, which ‘provide a place...to build community with nature’ (Gruen, 1994:129) are an example of this,<sup>22</sup> as are some groups with specifically religious or spiritual roots, such as certain peace groups (Knott, 1994:213).

But this early, cheerful thinking about community masked a number of problems which feminists have more recently explored. The first problem is that idealistic visions of community are based on outdated notions of the close-knit, homogeneous rural town or village, which rarely existed in an ideal form (F Williams, 1993). Next is the idea, prevalent for most of the twentieth century, that the individual is competing with other individuals for finite resources (Grey, 1991; Ruether, 1995). Here, the individual’s rights are considered to be at odds with the community’s cohesiveness, setting up an adversarial relationship between its members. However, not all observers agree on this point, stating that only certain types of *oppressive* communities, ‘for example, sects, clans, caste systems and parochial village life’ (Biggar, 1997:115) are at odds with individual freedoms or that the notion of extreme self-centred individualism has been overblown (Klaus, 2000). The rather simplistic counterpointing of community (and its positive connotations) with individualism<sup>23</sup> (and its negative connotations) has led to an ongoing debate about the value of autonomy.<sup>24</sup>

In more recent years, feminist observations and theorising about community have become much more nuanced and shaded. For example, there is the problem that we saw in the discussion of difference and diversity (Chapter 2), in which ‘a false sense of wholeness and togetherness’ (Tilby, 1992:2) masks underlying unrest and disagreements. Not all members of a community, especially larger communities, necessarily share the same understandings (Knott, 2001:6). For example, neither all Christians nor all Muslims will have precisely the same beliefs or understandings about how those beliefs should be interpreted in everyday life. Religious

---

<sup>21</sup> Gruen (1994) cites this term as coming from Ann Ferguson.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson and Hopkins (1991), for example, describe the history of the Feminist Spiritual Community of Portland, Maine (USA).

<sup>23</sup> In this context, individualism means personal independence without regard for interdependence, self-reliance that discredits mutuality, and individual freedom at the expense of others’ needs and rights.

<sup>24</sup> Autonomy will be addressed in Chapter 4.



communities include many voices, and leaders (often male) do not speak for everyone (especially women) (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis, 1992a:17).<sup>25</sup>

There are also problems particularly associated with women, prompting Serene Jones to state that '[f]eminists...think that communities harbor as much potential for harm as for hope' (2000:150). Speaking from a locality perspective, Williams (1993) writes that a community can be either empowering or disabling for women, depending on whether women claim it as their space to act towards their own goals or whether a patriarchal system uses it as a tool to keep women from moving any further into a public world.<sup>26</sup> Turning to a more general view of community, a woman may experience conflict between herself and the norms, identities, and demands of a particular community, or between the norms, identities, and demands of the various communities of which she is a part (Friedman, 1989). This conflict can lead to a woman viewing herself (or being viewed by her community), as deviant, especially if it is a "given" rather than a "chosen" community (Friedman, 1989). Some women will be able to choose to leave communities they do not like or cannot identify with or which reject them; others will not have that choice or will not make that choice. Ward and Wild (1995a) caution that some women are ambivalent about or even wary of the entire notion of community, particularly if they have suffered from traditional patriarchal (often religious) teachings regarding self-sacrificial service, or if they have experienced violence (Serene Jones, 2000).

The issue of public versus private spheres has generated many debates among feminists. To rehearse them in their entirety is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I will review the subject briefly as it has some relevance to the project.

Since at least the nineteenth century, there has been a notion that the public<sup>27</sup> sphere of commerce and politics belongs to men, while the domestic, private sphere of the home and family belongs to women—with the former being viewed as more powerful and important. (This understanding is also evident in many academic discussions as a distinction between 'formal, large-scale organizations' and 'informal relationship-centred settings' (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998:14).) The concern arises when "private" (i.e. women's) spaces and communities are considered outside the intervention of "public" institutions (such as the government and the churches) and women's needs and contributions are ignored or dismissed as a result. Certainly,

---

<sup>25</sup> See also Knott (1994) for a discussion of women who felt they had to leave religious communities.

<sup>26</sup> The notions of public and private are discussed below.

<sup>27</sup> When examined closely, "public" and "private" turn out to be complicated terms, especially as they are sometimes used in confusing ways. Consider this pertinent example. In the US, a church congregation would be considered private because of the constitutional separation of church and state; in the UK, however, a church congregation could be considered public, especially if it is of the established Church of England. Where the country and the Church, represented in and defended by the monarch, are one, then the Church is indeed public. But in practice, where the monarch no longer makes the laws, where society

as Maitland reminds us, ‘the feminist slogan that “the personal is the political”...[means that] nothing falls into an entirely private sphere’ (1992:34). I am taking all of the communities women describe as being of interest and/or access to them, and it does not matter if they might be labelled as either public, private, or some cross between the two.

According to Serene Jones, the reality of how people, especially women, form communities is ignored by this simple dualistic view. Frequently, she says, emotion and altruistic impulses are involved in creating social bonds (2000:139), both those deemed by others as public and as private. Rather than self-interest alone (a feature of the so-called public sphere), interest for others and for the community as a whole—in other words, caring—also comes into play. Additionally, the nature of chosen communities (as opposed to given communities) ‘can provide the resources for women to surmount the moral particularities of family and place which define and limit their moral starting points’ (Friedman, 1989:288). Therefore, the moral vision of the “private” sphere of women’s communities has much to inform the “public” world.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, none of this discussion of feminist community is explicitly about *older* women. What *their* experiences are and what *they* might teach us (beyond the findings of social gerontology) remain to be discovered. This will form the basis of Chapter 7.

### 3.4.2 Christian feminist theologians on community

Just as the word “community” has many interpretations in the non-religious world, so it has numerous meanings within Christianity—and these, too, have changed over the centuries. For example, biblical references to community are seen in Christ’s promise to his followers, in Paul’s explanation of the one body having many members, and in the letter to the Hebrews.<sup>29</sup> These passages attest that Christians, by definition, exist “in community” rather than as

---

is multicultural (and multifaith), and where fewer and fewer people consider themselves even nominally tied to a religious faith, then the Church in the UK could now be considered a private enterprise/entity.

<sup>28</sup> The importance of a moral vision is a central concern of the communitarian movement.

Communitarianism is a contemporary socio-political movement that has issued a ‘call to restore civic virtues’ (Etzioni, 1995:ix). It emphasises the restoration of a balance of individual rights and individual responsibilities and argues that communities must exercise ‘a moral voice’ (ix)—actions which the movements’ advocates claim will correct the present situation (in the West) of extreme individualism. Etzioni believes that “nongeographic” (i.e. imagined, associational) communities can provide some of the necessary elements to achieve these goals (1995:122). There is no single communitarian viewpoint; however, what the different perspectives have in common ‘is their rejection of liberalism’s isolated individualism in favor of a more community-centered understanding of human life’ (Serene Jones, 2000:144). An analysis of the communitarian project is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is worth noting that both Marilyn Friedman (1989) and Serene Jones (2000) point out that the relationship between communitarianism and feminism is an uneasy one.

<sup>29</sup> Respectively: ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (Matthew 18:20); ‘For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ...[Y]ou are the body of Christ and individually members of it’ (1 Corinthians 12:12,27); and ‘And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together...but encouraging one another’ (Hebrews 10:24-25).



independent, unconnected, solitary believers.<sup>30</sup> The basis for this reaches back to God's first covenant, which was with all peoples (not just certain individuals), and is repeated in the new covenant through Christ.<sup>31</sup> Scripture, writes Serene Jones, 'is the story of a communal God who comes to a communal people who corporately sin and collectively seek to dwell in loving community with God and one another' (2000:156). The passages also indicate that Christians need to be in community with other Christians in order to practice, maintain, and develop their faith and to give and receive God's love.

Many ecclesiologies talk about "the Church" being a community, although denominations differ as to whether this community is defined as 'the whole body of Christians; the place of worship; a particular sect or group of Christians; [or] the clergy' (Cooper, 1996:53). King (1998a) notes that 'Christianity has always had a strong emphasis on the communal dimension, whether understood as the worshipping community, or the institution of the church, or the communion of saints, the body of Christ, or the Kingdom of God' (102). The church could also be those Christians who attend a particular place of worship: a congregation. One form of Christian community that is particularly interesting to feminist theologians is the trinity. This is because 'it is neither hierarchical nor a family' (Gelder, 1996:32) but rather 'a society...based on mutuality' (Jane Williams, 1992:41). Jane Williams also proposes that the trinity is a useful means of 'talk[ing] about unity and diversity at the same time' (1992:42). This helpfully brings in this important theme in feminist theology.<sup>32</sup> In the Christian trinity, God is understood to be a community of three co-equal (and, feminists add, genderless) "persons".

Over time, Christians develop certain expectations of their church communities, both at local and universal levels. Maitland names 'inclusiveness, membership, incorporation, equality and belonging' (1983:165). To this I would add moral instruction and guidance; absolution and forgiveness; fellowship; social interaction and friendship; assistance in times of crisis; security in a changing world; opportunities for and leadership of social action; employment (for clergy, missionaries, and laity); a source of identity for members; worship and celebration; and a pathway to God. Whatever idea or ideas the average believer may ascribe to the nature of "the Church", it very likely either symbolises or embodies her understanding of Christian community. What distinguishes a church from other sorts of communities is, first of all, that it is both "given" and "chosen". While there is certainly voluntary association in a congregation, the church community 'describes itself as brought into being by an act of divine initiative' (Serene Jones, 2000:158). Further, '[t]he church requires its members to give the church priority over other communal commitments' (2000:158).

---

<sup>30</sup> Further, that Christian community may often include 'diverse and not always compatible brothers and sisters' (Guenther, 1995:25).

<sup>31</sup> Witness the beginning of the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father', not 'My Father'.

<sup>32</sup> See Carr (1988) for more on feminist theology and the trinity.

Feminist theologians' work reflects both the ideas put forward by feminists working in other disciplines and those of the Christian tradition. Although there is no one "feminist theological" view of community (Serene Jones, 2000),

[i]nclusive access and egalitarian structure above all characterize the conviction, if not always the practice, of contemporary Euro-American Christian feminist work on and in community....[T]he centrality of community is a point of both connection with and departure from the malestream<sup>33</sup> Christian tradition (Russell and Clarkson, 1996:50).

Some feminist theologians (e.g. Sölle) write of "koinonia", community, along with preaching and service, as one of the three main roles of church, a role that they claim has not been valued by the church in the past. There are many ways that Christian feminists strive to live out "community". Some Christian feminist communities endeavour to include excluded persons and groups and to work for justice for all creation (Russell and Clarkson, 1996). Other groups of Christian feminists, such as those in the Women-Church movement (Ruether, 1986) and The St Hilda Community (1996) have formed worshipping communities and developed liturgical forms that reflect these ideas. Throughout, definitions of "community" are provisional and particular, attempting to account for a diversity of views while striving towards a vision of unity. Even so, as we saw in Chapter 2, there are feminists who have left the Christian churches because they feel they cannot find anything redeeming for women within the church. Such leaving of community can be painful as well as liberating (Knott, 1994), particularly when the community touches the important life issues of religion and spirituality.

As with feminists in general, what feminist theologians have said about community is not expressly based on the experience of older women. However, we have already seen that there is some literature on the place of Christian community in the lives of older people in general, as well as their role within Christian and church communities. Christians as well as feminists have expressed deep concern over the high value placed on individualism in contemporary western society (e.g. Jantzen, 1992).<sup>34</sup> They warn that valuing extreme individualism over community concerns can be damaging both for the communities and for vulnerable individuals—including

---

<sup>33</sup> "Malestream" is a feminist neologism that signals the concept of the "mainstream" as being dominated by masculine views.

<sup>34</sup> Regarding feminist theologians' denigration of individualism, Walrath suggests that it may not be so much a preferential way of living as a fact imposed by external forces:

Daily life, which formerly took place within an integrated community or neighborhood, is now, for most people, composed of separate segments, each isolated from the rest. For most of us, the particular activities of work, school, home, leisure, and church are carried on in different places....Only each individual is in touch with the diverse experiences of all the segments of his or her life....The task of keeping it all together, balancing the demands of each segment with the rest, constructing a manageable life, falls almost entirely on the individual....Individualism is no longer a choice for most people; it is a functional necessity (1987:21).

I think that feminist theologians would largely agree with Walrath, and add that this is the particularly frightening aspect of our Western society's individualism.



older people—within those communities (Bray, 1991). Oppenheimer concurs: ‘If we set up autonomy as an obvious aim, we load an extra burden on vulnerable people, making them not only helpless but inadequate’ (1999:44). Taking a positive view, Fischer, in the remark that opens this chapter, notes that older people are essential for the wellbeing of our larger society, as they have their own unique gifts to contribute. By examining the experiences of some particular individuals, I hope to be able to learn about the successes and failures of community and older women.

### **3.5 Community and this project**

From the background offered in this chapter, I have formulated this provisional definition of “community”, one in keeping with Wellman’s concept of “personal communities”. For this project, community is a “social place”, and may be either real or imagined. It may be very small or quite large: from as few as two individuals (or a person and *something* else) to as many as the entire human population—or even a community of one person with her God. A community may be either given or chosen (or include elements of each), formal or informal, and temporary or long-lasting.

I expect that an interviewee’s communities will be recognisable to and identifiable by her. I expect that she will be concerned about membership, though she may not always desire it or find it a positive experience. Her identity is likely to be connected to her communities, and she will probably be involved—actively or passively—in creating the identity of the community. Some women may desire the continuation of certain communities and the dissolution of others, while other women may be creating new communities. An interviewee may actively participate, although “activity” will be defined quite broadly. I would expect to discover a wide range of examples of community, encompassing both common (e.g. family, local church) and unique forms of given and chosen “social places”—some of which will be important and others less so or not at all. It may be that, at this stage of life, the interviewees experience little or no sense of community, though the literature indicates otherwise. All of these things remain to be discovered through the empirical research data, which we will examine in Chapter 7.

#### **3.5.1 Questions to be answered**

Based on the literature from the fields of social gerontology and feminist theology, there are certain points I hope the data will support or challenge, as well as questions to be answered (or at least addressed). These include, what sorts of communities do older women identify? Are they local or “imagined”? Do older women create and nurture communities, and if so, how? Does a woman’s role or position in a community change as she ages? If so, is it consolidated or weakened? Who determines when and how these changes occur—the community or the individual? What happens when ageing means that a member’s contributions to or interaction

with communities change in form or decline? How do both the community and the individual react? If membership ends, is it by choice and what is the impact on an older woman's life? What benefits are sought from community membership? What responsibilities do older women have towards their communities? What is the balance of involvement versus independence?

Is the local church a significant community for older Christian women? Are the experiences there good, bad, or mixed? Is the local church 'a central institution' in an older woman's life, providing friendships and an outlet for various activities—or is it 'merely nominal', of limited significance in the totality of her life (Stark and Glock, 1968:163)? Or, as a third possibility, do older women seek to balance their interaction with their churches with their other, non-church communities? Are local churches places with high social capital and therefore excellent resources for older women? Are any perceived problems and difficulties linked to ageism or to some other cause?<sup>35</sup> Finally, will the interviewees discuss community in terms larger than their own personal networks? Will they see "community" as a goal, as an ideal state for our civilisation to achieve?

A final word about "community" within the scope of this project. When researchers study an entity that they label a "community", they often do so by pre-selecting and defining the boundaries of that community, and then by making observations about its characteristics and functions. In contrast, in this project I asked the interviewees to name and describe their own communities, without either limiting the parameters or adding any external observations as a counterpoint. I hope this will broaden our own thinking as we consider what meanings "community" has for older women, and how those meanings can help shape a Christian feminist practical theology of older women.

### **3.6 Summary**

In this chapter, I have explored the key concept of community as it is employed by sociologists, social gerontologists, feminists, and feminist theologians, and have shown how it may apply to older Christian women. I have also presented my provisional definition of community as "social place" and raised questions about how the interviewees might experience "community" in their lives.

As this thesis develops, I will propose that community, connection, and caring are separate concepts with distinct purposes, yet linked in important ways that make them best understood together. From the preceding discussion, we can see that relationships are involved in a community, and there are hints that a caring concern—perhaps for other individuals, perhaps for



ideals, perhaps for maintaining the community's existence—might be involved. But, the precise interplay between the individual and her community, and how this interplay translates into the associated ideas of connection and caring, remain to be unravelled in the following chapters. Importantly, as we will see in the next chapter, a community is not only *a* place, it is also *the* place where connection exists and is experienced. Its boundaries, whether physical or conceptual, are defined by the connections persons make. So, let us now turn our attention to the second key concept of this project: connection.

---

<sup>35</sup> An unconscious or non-overt ageism within the church could still cause problems for older women, even if not perceived by them. Further, not meeting the needs or desires of older people is not necessarily ageism if there are other, more pressing causes involved (e.g. a lack of resources that effects everyone).

## Chapter 4—Connection: relationship in community

Hell is other people.  
—Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>1</sup>

The isolated, autonomous individual clinging to his or her rights and impartially performing his or her duties is, from the connectedness perspective, a good picture of hell.  
—Grace Jantzen<sup>2</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, we considered the concept of community and arrived at a working definition for this thesis: that it is a social place. In this chapter, we will build on this notion by looking at ideas of connection put forward by gerontologists, feminists, and feminist theologians. If, in the wake of globalisation and new social imperatives, we accept that “community” is a preferable societal model to “individualism”, then we must also take on board the role and significance of connection: the idea that people do not function in isolation but rather that their actions affect one another. Connection includes the notions of belonging and interdependence and influences understandings of identity. There are benefits to be gained from connection, but also potential negative outcomes. Importantly, a lack or a loss of connection can have serious consequences for an individual.

I begin this chapter by looking at what connection is and how it works. Then I will review social gerontological research on connection, examining its importance in older people’s lives and taking a closer look at the issues of belonging and identity. Problems of connection will also be noted. We will then look at the local church as a particular source (or not) of connection for older people. Next, we will examine what feminists have to say about identity and moral development, autonomy and dependency, and relatedness and mutuality. Following this will be a discussion of the topics of interconnectedness and God-in-relation as put forward by Christian feminist theologians and writers on feminist spirituality. I will conclude with my working definition of connection and raise key questions we hope the data will answer in Chapter 8.

### 4.2 What is connection?

A connection is a relationship between an individual and someone or something “other”. A connection can exist between persons (e.g. family members, co-workers), between a person and either animate (e.g. pets) or inanimate (e.g. books) things, between a person and an idea (e.g. beliefs, values), between a person and the planet (e.g. the environment), between a person and a place or institution (e.g. hometown, church), between living and dead persons (e.g. the

---

<sup>1</sup> From the one-act drama, *No Exit*.

<sup>2</sup> Jantzen (1992:11).



communion of saints, departed family members), between living and unborn persons (i.e. “the future”), and between a person and God (or her idea of the ultimate). Connections are often referred to with terms such as “network”, “ties”, and “links”. There is a continuum of strength and durability of connection, ranging from very tenuous to quite strong. Some connections are clear and well defined, while others may be “garbled” or “fuzzy” (like a poor telephone connection). Because there is a relationship, connection implies some sort of familiarity and perhaps mutual understanding, even if not mutual agreement. The connection may involve mutual responsibility, although not necessarily symmetrical or equivalent responsibility.

Interaction between connected individuals can be in person, via low or high technology, or even via thoughts, prayers, and memories. Connections are maintained in a variety of ways. Active ways include face-to-face meetings and visits, cards and letters, telephone, and, increasingly, new communication technologies such as e-mail and Internet discussion groups. Passive forms of maintenance require little or no input from an individual: watching television, listening to the radio (although radio talk-back programmes can be interactive), reading printed media (newspapers, magazines, books), and surfing the Internet. Active maintenance by one or more parties to the connection generally implies a desire to continue the relationship—although that desire may not come equally from both sides. For instance, some connections can be involuntary or unwanted, especially if they are forced upon an individual without her consent (e.g. being placed in a nursing home; being stalked).

Whether desired or not, connections have a quality of attachment that adds an emotional dimension to community membership. We will see this now as we consider the social gerontological literature.

#### **4.3 Social gerontologists on connection**

Just as communities play a key role in the lives of older people, so, too, do connections. Jerrome names the things to which older people are connected: ‘to people, to groups and organisations, to beliefs and values, to places and possessions, and to the self’ (1992:191). Those with other people, however, are often the most important.

With respect to older people’s social networks, Phillipson, et al. found that ‘[m]ost...respondents identified immediate family (partners, children and grandchildren) as the most significant part of their social network’ (2001:118). Friends were next in importance (67), often stepping in to help when family members were not available (e.g. when children lived at some distance) (80) or when there were no immediate family members (e.g. some ever-single older people) (121). And, although neighbours are traditionally viewed as behaving in either

benign or helpful ways (e.g. as friends), these researchers discovered that this was not always the case (94).<sup>3</sup>

Social gerontologists report that connections created and maintained by older people serve several purposes. In the case of families, where women are usually the “kin-keepers”, older women are the link between previous, departed generations and future, upcoming generations, thus holding family communities together (Jerrome, 1993).<sup>4</sup> In her intriguing study of unconventional beliefs, Bennett (1987) found that many older churchgoing women felt themselves connected to deceased loved ones. They reported a range of types of encounters (e.g. dreams, the odour of lilies) and/or a steadfast belief that the dead watch over the affairs of the living.

In social and church settings, connections with age peers allow older people to ‘affirm their belief in tradition, their solidarity with one another, and their adherence to shared standards of behaviour’ (Jerrome, 1989:163). Close friendships in old age, as we have seen, can be more important to women than their own family ties (Jerrome, 1993), especially those friendships among age-cohort members. Such ‘strong and positive friendship groups provide a way of fighting back and a means through which [older women] can re-enter social and community life’ (Maynard, 1999:71). Overall, connections in old age can be ‘part of a strategy for survival’ (Jerrome, 1989:161) and the ‘expression of a notion of ageing well’ (Jerrome, 1992:131). Women in particular invest in and spend this form of social capital<sup>5</sup> which provides the benefits of security, reciprocity, friendship, and support in time of need.

Browne (1998) has written of connections as a source of power and strength for some older women, whether for taking collective action or for personal successful ageing. Indeed, connections are very important for older persons, both for physical and mental well being, especially if the older person lives alone and has little contact with others. One can be isolated physically, yet still be connected (by thought, by technology, etc.). Phillipson, et al. discovered that social networks (i.e. communities) are today maintained in a variety of ways in addition to face-to-face contact, thanks to increasingly widespread and affordable technologies such as telephones, mobile phones, and computers, the latter allowing access to e-mail and the Internet (2001:77). Likewise, television helps older people keep in touch with the wider world (243).

---

<sup>3</sup> We will see evidence of this in my own data in Chapter 8.

<sup>4</sup> Jerrome describes “kin-keepers” as ‘those family members who take responsibility for keeping track of personal developments and sustaining links between the generations and between the different branches’ (1993:86).

<sup>5</sup> Sara Arber, BSA presidential address, April 2000 (see Chapter 3, footnote 17). The concepts of social support and social capital were discussed in Chapter 3.



Two other key benefits of connection for older people, especially older women, are belonging and a sense of identity. We will consider these now, as well as problems that can arise with connection.

### 4.3.1 Belonging

It might appear to the reader that the idea of “belonging” should have been discussed in Chapter 3 as part of ideas of community. Certainly, belonging is usually considered to be an aspect of communities. However, I see belonging as an element of connection. For me, “belonging” has emotional connotations above and beyond what “membership” implies (recalling that membership was discussed with community). Community, by my definition, is a social place, a stage, an arena; as such, it does not have emotional overtones. Connection, on the other hand, involves one or more persons, and persons have feelings. Thus, “belonging” is a feeling a person has. There is an emotional element to belonging that gives it a proper home with “connection”.

As we saw with “given” and “chosen” communities, there is a parallel in desiring to belong to a connection or wishing one did not belong to a connection. However, this does not match up one-for-one with given and chosen communities because a particular given community (e.g. family) may involve connections a person strongly wishes to maintain.

Positive connections may provide a sense of security and a source of strength, as the individual knows that she has a partner, a support, a cheerleader, and someone to share a burden. As Grey points out, ‘[b]eing connected does not spell death to the self’s free determination and creativity, but is the framework for making these concrete’ (1991:16). Indeed, power (empowerment) can come from a connection, as much as from a hierarchy (Ozorak, 1996). And, a person often has the power to either accept or reject a potential connection (Griffiths, 1995). There will be expectations from both sides of the connection, but this is not necessarily bad. Obligations are a sign of mature responsibility, of being needed and depended upon. Some examples of obligations we might have are to attend to another’s needs, to take on tasks, and to share of oneself as well as to let others share of themselves. Even in a connection of unequally distributed power, a woman need not subordinate herself (O’Brien, 1996).

Finally, belonging is also about identity. When we feel we belong to a particular connection, for better or worse, that connection helps us identify who we are. Relationships with family, employment, geographic areas, socio-political movements and more give us labels that we and others can use to understand ourselves. Later in this chapter, I will review the feminist theorising on identity; but first, I wish to consider some particular concerns regarding identity and older women. How do older women construct and manage their identities? Do they use their

connections to help them? What words do they use to describe themselves (e.g. “Christian”, “mother”, “neighbour”)? In particular, do they claim or reject “old age” as an identity?

### 4.3.2 Identity

Identity is a particular issue for older women, who face societal discrimination on the grounds of age. MacRae notes that the emphasis of identity

as the sum total of an individual’s roles has contributed to a view of old age as a time of identity crisis....[E]mphasis is placed on role and status loss...and identity is considered to be in jeopardy, negatively and detrimentally affected by the losses which elderly persons face (1995:149-150).

And it is not just others in society who take this view, but sometimes older women themselves. So, how do older women maintain—or even create—their identities as they age? ‘The primary basis of self-identity for the majority of...elderly women...is focused around their interpersonal relationships to others’ (MacRae, 1995:158).<sup>6</sup>

Older women have identities as teachers and grandmothers. In both capacities, they have experience that they are willing to share with other individuals and with their communities. They can offer advice, historical facts and perspective, empathy, knowledge (often labelled “wisdom”), and practical help. (When society speaks positively about older persons, it is often with the phrase, ‘The old have so much to teach us’.) These roles of teacher and grandmother lead very naturally into another identity older women have, that of carer.<sup>7</sup> Having a role is very important to establishing an identity, and older women should claim as many roles as they rightly can. (For instance, in the Christian context, and especially that of the churches, older women are the repositories of the faith, the keepers of the oral traditions as well as the rites and beliefs of their communities.)

‘[C]onfirmation of identity’ is one of the benefits many older people gain from their connections to ‘old-age organisations’, specifically social clubs and church fellowships (Jerrome, 1992:189). This comes both from solidarity with one’s cohort peers in the group as well as the fact that particular clubs and fellowships are chosen by the individual and are therefore ‘a means of self-expression’ (189). Together, the members of such groups work to define the meaning of “ageing well” and to set standards by which individual members can compare themselves (Jerrome, 1992). In the absence of relevant role models among previous generations, today’s communities of older persons are trailblazers, informing society of what older age is and of what older people are doing with their lives (Jerrome, 1992:190), thus countering ageism. Jerrome adds other images older people wish to have of themselves: ‘as caring friends, as independent-minded

---

<sup>6</sup> This should not be surprising if we accept the feminist theories of identity discussed below.

<sup>7</sup> This will be explored in depth in Chapter 5.



parents, as responsible association members, as old people who cope with difficulties' (1992:195).

The churches are currently making an effort to deliver the message that “being” is as important as “doing”, and that older people should not be devalued if they can no longer participate actively in their communities. While roles are important to identity, so, too, the churches say is one’s basic humanity. Sanger notes that her focus group participants ‘did on the whole feel that they were accepted by the church for who they were and not for what they did, although there was represented the feeling that who you are and what you do are intertwined’ (1999:27).<sup>8</sup> This raises the issue of “being” versus “doing”.<sup>9</sup> Gillespie found that, for older women in church congregations, ‘[b]eing “active,” *doing* something, was evidence to themselves that they were worthy members. Their standard exacts a painful toll when the physical disability of aging sets in’ (1992:195).

Besides roles, identity has much to do with our connections with other people. As Bray states, ‘[m]uch of our knowledge of ourselves and of God is formed and maintained through our lifetime in relationships, but as the social circle declines in old age there are fewer relationships in which to test our identity and through which to find God’s love’ (1991:16).

Wilson writes of identity as a process, which could mean that it is never complete. She mentions ‘the privatised obsessions of the search for identity’ (1996:247), which are usually associated with younger or perhaps middle-aged persons, but rarely discussed in conjunction with older people. One aspect of ageism is the assumption that older people have formed their identities and are no longer seeking to understand themselves in relation to others or to the social world. However, Jerrome (1992) challenges this by describing how older people compare their individual experiences to those of other persons in order to determine whether they are “old” and to learn how to adapt to the physical changes age brings. Older people resist having identities such as “old” assigned to them and, like any other people, wish to choose their own identities and how they wish to be known to others.

Why is identity important to this thesis? Older women themselves are concerned about identity, about feeling good about themselves, and about being given recognition.<sup>10</sup> Maynard remarks on the importance to women of ‘self-worth, personal identity and pride’ as necessary for later life (1999:65), and says these are linked to independence and autonomy. Even more importantly, older women are concerned about *lacking* an identity and thus being invisible and/or superfluous in the eyes of the world.

---

<sup>8</sup> As Wraight notes, ‘[a] job in the church, whatever it is, gives a sense of identity’ (2001b:52).

<sup>9</sup> This topic will be discussed in Chapter 5.

‘The issue of identity in later life is raised often in the social gerontological literature but is little researched, let alone adequately conceptualised or theorised’ (Tulle-Winton, 2000:643).<sup>11</sup>

Because concepts of identity and how it is formed are varied and complex, and because they are often within the realm of psychology, which is not a part of this thesis, I will not delve too deeply into it here. While I do not wish to dash off a shallow definition, neither do I wish to sidetrack this thesis into an area that is not its primary focus. Therefore, I ask the reader to accept that I will be using a common-sense understanding that “identity” is how a person distinguishes herself from others—the characteristics that she knows as constituting “herself”. There is a boundary between herself and others, a separation, but there is also a sense of connection, of belonging, that forms a part of an older woman’s identity. Self-esteem comes from knowing oneself as an individual and from knowing to whom or to what we belong.

Being old can become the predominant identity for a woman, particularly if she relocates to a new community where she is unknown in any other way (Macdonald and Rich, 1984; Fennell, et al., 1988). How does old(er) age become part of a woman’s identity?

#### i. Old age and being older

What is “old”? Fischer says, ‘[b]ecause aging is culturally defined in ways that do not correspond with our experience, we find it hard to call ourselves old’ (1995:8). One common definition offered by Jerrome: ‘You are old when ill health produces a change in life-style’ (1989:156) and ‘to be really old is to be functionally impaired. Old age should be resisted, though surrender is legitimate after a struggle....Old age is thus a moral category. Responses to it are a matter of virtue and moral strength or weakness’ (1989:160). These points are reinforced by other researchers (e.g. Hurd, 1999).

Minichiello, Browne, and Kendig identified two social aspects of being older: “‘being seen as old” and...“being treated as old”” (2000:258). Their informants cited numerous negative associations with oldness, including ‘not trying, withdrawn, isolated, irritating, self-oriented, living outside the mainstream, unattractive, uninteresting, frail, senile, silly, over the hill, narrow-minded, a burden, lonely, vulnerable, dowdy, and unproductive’ (259). Jerrome’s informants distinguished themselves as active and therefore different from their fellows who were ‘lonely, passive, demanding, sometimes suspicious and ungrateful, and often childlike’ (1989:161). By contrast, people who are active no matter their chronological age are not old (Jerrome, 1989; Hurd, 1999; Minichiello, et al., 2000).

---

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Kim Knott for this suggestion.

<sup>11</sup> More about identity in later years can be found in Simon Biggs, 1999, *The Mature Imagination: Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond*, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia. (Book review by Tulle-Winton, 2000).



Importantly, Minichiello, et al. found that

ageism in interpersonal relationships may have the greatest impact on the older person's self-perceptions and their feeling[s] of safety [and support] in the community.<sup>12</sup> The affronts of face-to-face discrimination can prompt an assessment of the self as old, with a subsequent move from a positive to a negative ageing experience (2000:275).

Thus, while connections and membership in community may help stave off a person's sense of being old herself, those same connections and communities might also pose a danger to self-identity and the ability to maintain one's connections and roles. An unsought and undesired shift in identity from "not old" to "old" could result in anger or depression. She may struggle with seeing herself in a new way and, without support, lose her sense of self. (She may reject others' definitions outright, if she has a strong sense of identity.) Other meaningful identities may be altered by adding "old" to the mix. There is a loss of control when others claim the right to label a woman in a way she does not wish to accept or believe. This can be frightening as well as frustrating: what other things will she lose control over once her right to self-identity is taken away?

In recent years, there has been much debate in the gerontological literature about the usefulness and appropriateness of terms such as "elderly" and "old age".<sup>13</sup> As Molly Andrews states, '[a]ge, like other aspects of identity, comprises both an objective and a subjective dimension' (2000:794). Thane lists some of the subjective dimensions as 'social power and/or physical activity, appearance, and capacity for work' (2000:235-236). Minichiello, Browne, and Kendig's study supports the subjective dimension, saying that 'older people embrace a notion of oldness which is not about chronological age, but about a state of being, that is about how one sees oneself' (2000:260). Hurd found that old age was largely subjective, that 'chronological age, while a badge of honor, is not the means by which the "not old" are distinguishable from the "old"' (1999:425). It is 'the act of distancing themselves from the "old" [that] becomes an exercise in self-definition' (Hurd, 1999:425). By denying their own age, however, older persons lose touch with 'all the years they have lived, the things they have learned, the selves they have evolved from and the selves they are becoming' (M Andrews, 1999:309). A better conception, she says, is to understand 'a continuity of self' (312), to realise that '[w]e are still the same people who we always have been, but we are more deeply so' (311).

---

<sup>12</sup> The community the authors refer to is the general society in which people live, rather than a specific subgroup of people.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Bytheway (1995, 2000) thinks that ageist terms should be abandoned entirely, while H B Gibson thinks 'ageist...words...should be rehabilitated and used only in [their] true descriptive sense, dissociated from all the negative terms that have become associated with [them]' (2000:776). Molly Andrews (1999, 2000) agrees that some terms have a usefulness and can be claimed as empowering. She suggests "ageful" as just such a term (2000:791).

### 4.3.3 Other issues associated with connection

Much of the social gerontological literature on connection and older women focuses on the problems and negative aspects of connection in their lives, rather than on the positive aspects. Even so, in addition to struggles over identity and old age, older women may experience other issues related to connection, such as isolation, dependency, and loss. (It is important to remember that these can occur at any age, however.)

*A lack of connection* can cause isolation and loneliness. ‘*Social isolation* (aloneness) describes the situation of the older person who lives alone and has few social contacts. In contrast, *emotional isolation* (loneliness) refers to the subjective experience of feeling lonely’ (Johnson and Mullins, 1989:113; authors’ emphasis). As noted earlier, an older person can be physically isolated from regular social contact, yet still be connected. Isolation becomes a problem when it is *felt*: ‘Clinical experience suggests that one of the, if not *the* most, terrifying human experience is psychological isolation. This is not just being alone. It is the feeling of being locked out of the possibility of human connection’ (Miller and Stiver, 1993:428; authors’ emphasis).

The issue of *dependency* is also significant for older women. Older people are at risk in a society that spurns dependency. Their fears about “becoming a burden” to loved ones or to society are encouraged by the valuing of independence and self-reliance. Instead of seeing it as the opportunity for others to share in the grace of interrelatedness, their dependency becomes a huge worry for older people. Says Fischer, ‘as we age...[w]e move, not from dependence to independence, but from the kind of dependence we knew as a child to a mature dependence characterized by mutual exchange, by reciprocal giving and receiving over time’ (1995:16). As Maynard points out, ‘[i]ndependence and autonomy are...key indicators of quality of life for older women’ (1999:64). We will take a closer look at dependency a bit further on when we review feminist theories of connection.

*Loss of connection* may be the result of a decision by the other person or persons in the connection to end the bond, or by the practical need to cut ties, such as the decision to move house to be closer to family. For example, an older woman whose identity has been tied to being active in her church may worry (if physical frailty means that she must drop out of certain activities) that her entire presence in the church community is no longer necessary (Gillespie, 1995). These losses may even threaten an older woman’s sense of self-worth (Fischer, 1998) and identity. Other women may be more comfortable with a less active role, and the transition is easier and the fear not present.

Older women fear losing their connections to other people, and with that loss a loss of their roles in their communities. They fear being known to others as only “an old woman” or as “so-



and-so's widow", if those who knew their history are gone and no one new takes up that interest. Establishing an identity at any age takes effort; making friends gets harder with age. They may be distressed by the changes to the world around them, and fear being left behind. Loss of connection can happen between a person and an idea or way of life, as well as between two people. For example, Irene Brown (1992) discovered that, in the case of one older woman and her church, 'as the church changed, the loss of those half-known, half-felt meanings...[meant that her] familiar world had been disrupted, without any explicit process that might have helped her to recognize how she needed to disengage in order to make new commitments to new ways' (242).

#### **4.3.4 Local churches and connection**

Connection is a fundamental aspect of Christianity. Fostering a sense of belonging and offering places of fellowship are key and very important to churchgoing older people (Sanger, 1999:27). Hammond and Treetops note how crucial a sense of belonging to one's church is for older people, as the church community is 'a family which in some ways substitutes for the natural family, and in other ways transcends it' (2001:39). These authors list three key ways that churches can foster a sense of belonging for older people: through fellowship, affirmation of intrinsic worth and gifts still to be offered, and 'sensitive pastoral care' (40). Delving a bit deeper, Wraight comments that 'there are five levels of belonging which are particularly important [for women] when joining a new congregation': being known, being valued, feeling accepted, being involved, and feeling called by God to that place (2001a:107-109).<sup>14</sup> We will see in Chapter 8 whether this project's respondents felt a sense of belonging to their local churches, and why or why not.

What is the local church's role in identity formation and maintenance for older women? Shaping of identity, and especially whether or not one is "old", is at work in the local church. Says Jerrome, 'personal constructions of old age are dependent on confirmation by others. This principle—the intersubjectivity of experience in old age—is clearly at work in the church community' (1989:158).

Fellowship (as distinct from friendship) and dependency are issues that churches have identified as relevant to their connections with older members. Jerrome defines fellowship as 'a vital Christian concept implying spiritual solidarity, universal goodwill and tolerance' (1992:72), while friendship, 'in British culture, is a voluntary, informal, personal and private relationship' (72) that functions to provide 'social integration, support, sociability, [and] socialisation' (9). While a church may offer both fellowship and friendship opportunities for older persons, it is the former that is considered to be its area of expertise. A quantitative study undertaken by the

---

<sup>14</sup> Wraight explores this further in *Eve's Glue* (2001b).

Christian Research organisation showed that ‘[a]most all (94%) churchgoers...find it important to a greater or lesser extent for them to meet or have fellowship with other Christians....It was also more true of female than male churchgoers’ (Brierley, 2000:36). Fellowship, rather than friendship, was also cited by Hubbert’s respondents as a primary reason for attending church—especially being able to pray with others (1991:59). Jerrome (1992) distinguishes between religious fellowships (not worship services, but church-related gatherings, such as “women’s fellowship”) and non-religious clubs by the intent of the community. The implication here is that, although both clubs and fellowships have much in common, the underlying intent of a fellowship is religious or devotional, while that of a club is for friendship purposes, or to further some cause or goal. Fellowships work to strengthen individual members’ faith by offering them the opportunity to associate with like-minded Christians.

For older women, dependence comes when increasing age brings frailty, lack of mobility, mental incapacity, or other infirmities. Usually seen by both the carer and the recipient of care as negative, dependence has more recently been interpreted in a positive light from the life of Christ. John Williams cites Vanstone<sup>15</sup> who argues that the elderly share an important feature of Christ’s passion: the progressing from a time of activity to one of passivity, ‘from the realm of doing to the realm of being done to’ (1992:16). Being able to find dignity and meaning in dependence could be another area where the churches could show their aptitude.

Yet churches are not solely enriching places of fellowship and support for their members, as is true of any institution or collective of human beings. The potential for problems is always present, and some problems can be quite distressing for older members (Krause, et al., 2000). These can be either unpleasant encounters with fellow congregants at church (cliques, unwelcoming behaviour, gossip, and unresolved conflict from the past), conflict with the minister, or conflict over specific church policies or doctrine. Unresolved past conflicts can include those outside the church as well. These can also be quite troublesome for older people who may feel they have less time (or opportunity, if the persons involved have died) to resolve them:

The unfinished business of human relationships from our earlier years becomes the pressing business of our later years....The need, before it is too late, to become reconciled with significant others and to find the healing of painful memories is a legitimate and urgent focus of spirituality in ageing (Jewell, 1999a:11).

As we hope to be reconciled to God, so we need to be reconciled to one another.

---

<sup>15</sup> Vanstone, W H, 1982, *The Stature of Waiting*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London.



In her study of older women's spirituality, Hubbert discovered 'the centrality and sanctity of relationships in their lives' (1991:71). We can see, then, that connection in the church is an area rich with life-enhancing possibilities for older women, yet not free from problems.

#### **4.4 Feminist theories of connection**

Connection is an evocative concept for feminists. Since the 1970s, they have worked to get beneath superficial understandings of the term to discover nuanced meanings in its depths. The theme of connection is played out in discussions of identity, moral development, autonomy, and dependency. While not all feminists agree on definitions and valuations of these concepts—indeed, some are hotly contested—it is still possible to construct a general picture of feminist thought in this area.

##### **4.4.1 Identity and moral development: the self-in-relation**

Much research and theorising has been done in the fields of psychoanalysis and psychology on the nature of identity formation and subjectivity (how the individual comes to understand herself as a separate, unique self), particularly by Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva. While a detailed review of the literature is beyond the scope of this thesis, nevertheless some basic ideas put forward by feminists will help us understand the ways women establish or view their identities.

Wilson (1996) suggests that there are various identities women have or seek to have. These can be divided, as I see it, into four oppositional pairs: herself versus individual others; her personal identity versus her social or political identity; her individual identity versus that of her collective(s); and her "true" or "real" identity versus the socially constructed one she is assigned. All of these function and develop for a woman concurrently as she strives to answer the question, 'Who am I'? Women find some identities given to them (e.g. the socially constructed) but choose others for themselves (such as by aligning themselves with political groups).

Can connections (i.e. relationships) contribute to or even determine a woman's identity? Two early, key texts that laid the foundation for an understanding of women's sense of "self-in-relation" are Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* and Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice*. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, first published in 1978, Chodorow makes the important point that 'women experience a sense of self-in-relation that is in contrast to men's creation of a self that wishes to deny relation and connection' (1999:viii). Whereas women see themselves (and others) as fundamentally connected to the world, men see themselves as separate. This view of oneself and one's identity as either connected or separate provides the foundation for a person's behaviour (e.g. women and girls are more affiliative, men and boys are more competitive).

*In A Different Voice* (1982) is a study of the moral development of girls and boys. Gilligan, too, theorises that women have a different worldview from men, that women '[see] a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through human connection rather than through systems of rules' (29). And, it is on the strength of this worldview, she says, that women make moral judgements based on situational responsibility rather than on universally applied statements of justice. Gilligan calls women's image of the world 'a network of connection, a web of relationships' (32), and proposes that it could be the basis of a new ethic.<sup>16</sup>

Extensive debate followed Chodorow and Gilligan, and there continues to be no universally agreed view among feminists of women's "self-in-relation". Nevertheless, most feminists support an ethic of connection, however they may define it. Unlike human developmental models that equate maturity with separation and independence, feminists claim that true maturity is based on a realisation of connection and a striving to enhance it—and that this is the path women most frequently follow (Miller and Stiver, 1993:425). Feminists also suggest that such a theory of moral development, one based on connection, 'provides a better social model than the typically individualistic one' (Fischer, 1995:15) that is typical of our male-dominated society.

From this female worldview comes a new concept of self. A woman, writes Gilligan, 'comes to know herself as she is known, through her relationships with others' (1982:12). She asserts that being in relationship forms one of 'the paradoxical truths of human experience—that we know ourselves as separate only insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationship only insofar as we differentiate other from self' (63). The authentic self, then, is both separate and connected and dependent upon others for its identity.<sup>17</sup> As we will see in the discussion of autonomy (below), it is important to hold onto the idea of separate selves, even when defining persons as being in relation. For feminists, both oneself and other persons are equally important and distinct partners in a connection. The other person (or group, for that matter) '[is not] a projection of self, [nor is the self] a continuation of the other' (Donner,

---

<sup>16</sup> Walter and Davie note that 'Gilligan is not without her critics...who argue that it is social role, not biological femaleness, that leads to an ethic of connection—a view Gilligan herself seems not averse to' (1998:651). For my purposes here, these two possible sources of women's "ethic of connection" are not at issue; I will take the ethic as a given.

<sup>17</sup> Importantly, other writers have theorised that not only women but all people experience their identity through relationships with others, without losing their separateness (e.g. McFadyen, 1990). While not disputing that men and boys may experience this, Chodorow and Gilligan are claiming that understanding oneself as "self-in-relation" is a foundational aspect of female identity.



1997:381, citing Grimshaw).<sup>18</sup> Were either of these cases true, then the relationship would be oppressive and potentially exploitative.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Autonomy and dependency

How do feminists, then, conceptualise autonomy, commonly understood to imply a separate, rather than a connected, self? Autonomy is a word used by feminists of all persuasions, but with different interpretations; frequently, those interpretations are pejorative. For example, Haney notes that while having certain positive aspects, ‘there is much about that concept [of autonomy] that isolates us and commends an illusory sense of self-sufficiency’ (1994:8). Yet, Hampson reminds us that the opposite of autonomy (self-governance) is heteronomy (other-governance) and that ‘[autonomy], etymologically, does not mean independence’ (1996a:1), and therefore does not exclude connection. It is ‘[e]xcessive claims to autonomy [that] lose sight of human connectedness and distort understanding of responsibilities and duties to others and to the planet’ (Clague, 1996:14). Can these views be reconciled?

In an excellent review of feminist thinking on autonomy from the 1970s through the early 1990s, Friedman explains that

the predominant tendency for feminist philosophers writing about autonomy in the 1980s and early 1990s was both to criticize mainstream theorists of autonomy for their male-oriented neglect of interpersonal relationships and to propose the development of an alternative, relational conception (1997:47).

Latterly, feminists have arrived at a more nuanced understanding of autonomy, a viewpoint that values aspects of autonomy (Donner, 1997) and integrates it with connection:

For feminists autonomy means liberation from patriarchy and the resultant empowerment experienced by those who take control of their lives in their own particularity and subjectivity...[T]rue autonomy lies in [a woman’s] own subjective view of being a person in particular relationships (Clague, 1996:15).

This integrated understanding is sometimes called “relational autonomy” (Fischer, 1995:15), and aims to incorporate the positive aspects of both connection and autonomy.<sup>20</sup>

However, if autonomy does not mean independence, and if persons are essentially connected, then dependency becomes an issue that must be addressed. In contemporary Western society, dependency is often denigrated, even despised. To be dependent is to be a drain on society’s

<sup>18</sup> Grimshaw, J, 1986, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

<sup>19</sup> This is not to be confused with the concept of “the Other”, which feminists have used to deride patriarchal attitudes towards “those” who are different (and somehow either inferior or opposed) to “us”. For example, ‘[i]f we believe...that neither our sisters and brothers nor the rest of nature is “the other.” we will not violate their being, nor our own. Ethics of mutual respect would not allow coercion or domination’ (Spretnak, 1994b:xxix).

resources, a non-contributor to the common good.<sup>21</sup> According to Kittay (1997), dependant persons and those who care for them are not fully equal citizens in our society. In short, while independence and self-sufficiency are applauded and rewarded, dependence is considered to be a defect at best and a social evil at worst. How can an understanding that persons are essentially in connection with one another counter such assertions? Can one be connected and still be independent, or is there always an element of dependence (of ourselves on others or of others on us) in a connection?

Feminists answer these questions by emphasising the positive aspects of dependence. Recognising and choosing dependence becomes a positive step in moral development. Again drawing on her research, Gilligan (1986) writes:

By opposing dependence to isolation, the girls conveyed the assumption that dependence is positive, that the human condition *is* a condition of dependence, and that people need to rely on one another for understanding, comfort and support. Therefore, dependence was *not* simply the condition of the unequal, the one controlled by someone else, the one who lacks independence. Dependence, rather, was created by choices to be there for others, to take care of them, to listen, to try to understand and to help (227-228; author's emphasis).

Feminism has posited a way to achieve this turnaround by advocating a new ethical system in which the individual and her community are not viewed as discrete or oppositional, but as *mutually necessary* and reinforcing.<sup>22</sup> This is the “we-thinking” (as opposed to “I-thinking”) that is critical for humanity’s—and the planet’s—future, says Sölle (1990). Such a system would ‘further the welfare of the community *and* the dignity of the individual’ (Jantzen, 1992:9; emphasis mine).

Nevertheless, a very real experience of dependence for many women is that of oppression, where a woman loses her individual self in meeting the expectations of another. It can be restricting or smothering if there is a dominant (or problematic) person who has undue influence on the relationship. This is the negative extreme of the sense of security and mutual dependence that can come with connection: ‘Self-interested and self-seeking individuals who, in relation, are only there in, for and with themselves are destructive of the possibilities of genuine relation’

---

<sup>20</sup> For an in-depth exploration of this concept, I refer the reader to Mackenzie, C, and Stoljar, N, eds, 2000, *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford.

<sup>21</sup> According to Fiona Williams of the University of Leeds, the recipients of state benefits are despised for just this reason. (Plenary speech at the University of Leeds Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies conference, “Gendering Ethics/The Ethics of Gender”, June 2000.)

<sup>22</sup> Professor Richard Sennett refers to his theory of ‘the incomplete self’: ‘[P]eople’s competencies are limited. And I am now trying to understand more analytically what that kind of incompleteness means about the social relations of people, because it needs other people to do things you can’t do for yourself’ (Strangleman, 2000:3).



(McFadyen, 1990:151). Therefore, 'relationships of certain sorts are necessary for the realization of autonomy, whereas relationships of certain other sorts can be irrelevant or positively detrimental to it' (Friedman, 1997:56).

There are other potential negative consequences of connection. Although we enjoy our connections with others when times are good, along with the attachment comes the possibility of sharing another's pain and suffering, or of experiencing our own sense of sadness and pain, as when we watch others suffer (Burch, 1994). We may be asked to take on certain roles, duties, or functions that we would prefer not to. Some connections compete with others (Friedman, 1989), for example work and family, sometimes forcing us to make a choice between them or else to live with the tension this raises. We may discover that we have been only partially or begrudgingly accepted into a relationship, and we may not participate as fully as we wish. Just as Griffiths (1995) tells us of our power to accept or reject connections with others (above), so she reminds us that we can, in turn, be accepted or rejected by others.

Perhaps the worst outcome of connection is the possible loss of it. If we accept feminist theories that women define themselves by their relationships with others, then 'when a woman loses a loved one she also loses a sense of self, which intensifies grief and requires a new identity formation' (Rice, 1989:248).<sup>23</sup> Loss of connection may also lead to anger and frustration (Zorn and Johnson, 1997) and perhaps even more severe physical, emotional, and psychological distress. Even the fear of loss can be debilitating, causing what Miller and Stiver term 'the terror of disconnection for women at all ages' (1993:425).

Finally, there is the trap of using theories of women's essential relatedness in ways that oppress, rather than liberate, them (as we will see an example of in the next chapter). Misuse of the idea of connection can hold women back from achieving full humanity and selfhood in the eyes of the world (Grey, 1991). Too much emphasis can be placed on the idea of connection, particularly if it obscures the differences between women and instead considers all women to be essentially alike. We do well to be wary of 'the overvaluing and glorification of connectedness, community, and relation' (Donner, 1997:384).<sup>24</sup>

While acknowledging the very real problems women experience with connection, and despite the difficulties of arriving at a consensus among themselves, feminists continue to work with the

---

<sup>23</sup> Rice is being extreme, I believe. Does the loss of a loved one *necessarily* require a new identity formation? This would be true only if there was no identity apart from the deceased loved one. Perhaps an identity *reorganisation* is what is called for, as might happen with any major life change (e.g. getting married, moving home, unemployment). In my view, identity is always either "under construction" or "being renovated".

<sup>24</sup> Koehn takes exception to certain feminists' essentialisation of relatedness, stating that it poses problems for a true ethic of care (1998:44).

concept of connection—also known as relatedness—because of the rich possibilities it offers for new ways of living in the world:

[W]omen’s experience...of relationships...provides a nonhierarchical vision of human connection. Since relationships, when cast in the image of hierarchy, appear inherently unstable and morally problematic, their transportation into the image of web changes an order of inequality into a structure of interconnection (Gilligan, 1982:62).

This could be a new structure for communities, one based not on hierarchy but on equality, interdependence, and mutual support and empowerment (i.e. mutuality) (Zappone, 1991; Heyward, 1996). Taking the concept further, many feminists share ‘the conviction that the whole of human existence is grounded in terms of relationality—to other people, to ideas, to value-systems and so on’ (Clague, 1996:14). Connectedness involves all of creation, not just humanity.

How have Christian feminist theologians used these ideas in their work? In the next section, we will first consider general ideas of connection (or interconnection, another term frequently used) discussed in feminist theology and spirituality, then proceed to examine the Christian feminist concept of “God-in-relation”.

#### **4.5 Feminist theology, feminist spirituality, and interconnection**

The concept of interconnection is a powerful and resonant one for feminist theologians (both Christian and post-Christian) and for writers of feminist spirituality. In fact, it is a ‘common, dominant characteristic’ (Alsford, 1999:129). Despite the caveats, mentioned previously, that relatedness can be construed negatively as an essentialist view of women’s nature, and that connections are not always positively experienced by women (Grey, 1991), nevertheless many feminist theologians have chosen to take up the idea as ‘both true and useful’ (Alsford, 1999:131).

Let us break this apart. Feminist theologians see connection as “true” because, as Heyward states, ‘the experience of relation is fundamental and constitutive of human being’ (1982:1). God creates us, she says, as ‘relational characters’ (8). So essential to human existence do some feminist theologians perceive connection to be that they say our connections precede our awareness of them:

[T]he interdependence of reality means that every life form is *essentially* related to every other. So, the process of the self’s becoming whole...does not have to do with transcendence—since the self *is* essentially connected to God, others, and the natural world. It has to do with the self’s becoming aware of its interconnectedness and then living in ways that nourish the relationships between self, others, God and the world *that already exist* (Zappone, 1991:11-12; author’s emphasis).



This truth—and our awareness of it—is then liberating, allowing individual fulfilment, as Zappone implies.<sup>25</sup>

Further, say feminist theologians, the truth of humanity's essential interconnectedness can ultimately be liberating for all people, men as well as women (Alsford, 1999:132). Of course, there have always been relationships between human beings. What feminist theologians are speaking of is 'a new way of relating...of overcoming relationships based on hierarchical dominance/submission patterns with relationships of reciprocity, interdependence and mutuality' (Grey, 1993:59). This is what Heyward terms living in mutual relation or right relation.<sup>26</sup> The process of relating in new ways—of being aware of and acting upon our essential interrelatedness—is a necessary component of achieving "wholeness". As Zappone states, women's spiritual journey is from a state of brokenness to one of wholeness, and wholeness cannot be achieved without the involvement of others (1991:8). Further, wholeness is not an individual but a *collective* pursuit.<sup>27</sup> And as such, the journey towards wholeness involves the difficult task of actively seeking relationship with and valuing those who are unlike ourselves—"the other". It involves *all* humanity. Therefore, wholeness comes from *completeness of connection in community*.

Notions of interconnectedness are "useful" because they allow feminist theologians to challenge traditional theories and theologies that, on examination, exclude (or appear to exclude) women. For example, Slee uses it to challenge certain aspects of Fowler's (1996) theory of faith development as not accounting fully for aspects of women's experience. She contends that 'women's faith is constructed in predominantly relational terms' (2000:12), saying, 'relationality appears to represent not so much a moment or phase within a developmental sequence of faith as a more fundamental epistemology which underpins the whole of a woman's spiritual journey' (13).

Connection, and its converse, separatism, are also useful ways of accommodating feminist concerns about difference and diversity. Feminists point out that separateness and separatism are not interchangeable concepts (Keller, 1989). Whereas the former is necessary toward establishing individual identity and difference *within connection*, the latter is dualistic, hierarchical, and divisive.

---

<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, Zappone understands that 'relationship, not self, is the basic unit of spirituality' (1991:169, note 31).

<sup>26</sup> Heyward first presented her theology of mutual relation in *The Redemption of God* (1982). In *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*, she says that this theology is not just about personal relationships. Rather, it is about a right relation that is social and political, 'the *creative basis* of our lives, the world, and God' (1999:62; author's emphasis).

Returning to Zappone's statement above, the notion of the interconnectedness of all creation is important to many Christian and post-Christian feminist theologians as well as writers and practitioners in the feminist spirituality and Goddess movements. Writes Hogan, 'Rosemary Radford Ruether is perhaps the most vocal of Christian feminists on the relationship between women and nature...[She] sees the liberation of women as intimately connected with the liberation of nature from technological control' (1997:49-50).<sup>28</sup> We can see the recognising of interdependency in the philosophies of ecofeminism (Jantzen, 1992). Ecofeminism draws from the similar beliefs and concerns of the ecology and feminist movements, expanding on this particular concept of the interrelatedness of all things. As Primavesi says, ecofeminism points out 'the interconnectedness of war on nature and the hidden, daily war on "others", however characterized and by whatever means' (1996:47).<sup>29</sup>

Finally, the idea of the interconnectedness of all creation is useful to feminist theologians because it offers new ways of imaging God: as "God-in-relation".

#### 4.5.1 God-in-relation

The idea of God as relational is not new, nor exclusive, to feminist theologians. The God of relation is seen in both the old (Genesis 17) and the new (Hebrews 8:6-7) covenants. There is Paul's comparison of the interrelatedness of the members of the "body of Christ" with the various constituent parts of the human body (1 Corinthians 12:12-30). Throughout the centuries, followers of Christ have spoken of having a "personal relationship" with Jesus. More recently, Alfred North Whitehead and others developed process philosophy, with 'its vision of the world as relational in nature' (Grey, 1990:369) and of 'God and world as mutually involved in a process of becoming' (Grey, 1991:11). Although process thought is not without gender problems, Grey claims that it provides a way to see 'the intrinsic link between a mutual, relational understanding of personhood and a relational concept of God' (1990:369). God is connected to the world and the people in it; persons are connected to each other and to all creation. There is no "being" apart from connection.

---

<sup>27</sup> For Zappone and some other Christian feminists, this wholeness can be equated with salvation (1991:69ff).

<sup>28</sup> For example, *New Woman, New Earth* (1995), originally published in 1975.

<sup>29</sup> Various groups, which are not overtly feminist, also unite concerns for spirituality and ecology. One such is GreenSpirit, which identifies itself as 'the UK arm of the world-wide Creation Spirituality movement'. (This is taken from an undated brochure I collected in 2000.) The opening statement on their website reads:

GreenSpirit is a movement which celebrates all existence as deeply connected and sacred. This radical vision brings together the rigour of science, the freedom of creativity, the passion of social action and the wisdom of the spiritual traditions of all ages. Our activities combine the full potential of the human spirit and imagination with our passion for the survival of the diversity of life on earth (GreenSpirit, n.d.).



As we saw in the last chapter, many feminist theologians have noted that the trinity symbolises God as a community. Grey goes further, speaking of the trinity as a useful (though not entirely unproblematic) way of illustrating God's *internal relational* nature. The triune God is, she says, 'a God in movement, in process, a God whose whole being is to be in relation' (1993:99). These concepts lead on to the idea that human persons are also in community and are also relational—that they are not isolated, as God is not isolated. In fact, many feminist theologians would probably agree with Jantzen's statement that opened this chapter.<sup>30</sup>

I would like to suggest that a connection is itself an entity, which exists apart from and in addition to the partners that constitute it. An example of this would be the connection of marriage that exists between a husband and wife. Because of this separate nature, a connection carries a meaning of its own, in addition to the identities, meanings, and self-understandings of the individuals in the connection. Cady has identified love as a particular form of connection, one that is in fact the new commandment given by Jesus (John 13:34):

Love is a mode of relating that seeks to establish bonds between the self and the other, creating a unity out of formerly detached individuals. It is a process of integration whereby the isolation of individuals is overcome through the forging of connections between persons. These connections constitute the emergence of a wider life including, yet transcending, the separate individuals. This wider life that emerges through the loving relationship between selves does not swallow up individuals, blurring their identities and concerns. It is not, in short, an undifferentiated whole that obliterates individuality. On the contrary, the wider life created by love constitutes a community of persons. In a community, persons retain their identity, and they also share a commitment to the continued well-being of the relational life uniting them (1987:141).

For some feminist theologians, connections are how we encounter and come to understand God. Writes Grey, 'God...is urging us on to deepen our connectedness, weave new connections, unravel and re-weave the patterns of relating. The mystery of God's own becoming enfolds and unfolds as we move to new levels of relating and interdependencies' (1990:371). This connectedness, she believes, will ultimately be redeeming for all creation.

For others, God *is* the relationship. Sölle urges that 'the dispute over whether God can be thought of beyond us as resting in himself [sic] and unrelated, or whether *God is the relationship itself and can be thought of only as relationship*, seems to me to be one of the most important arguments between male-patriarchal and feminist theology' (1990:181; emphasis mine). Grey writes that '[s]eeking to co-create in forming more just patterns of relating, new forms of mutuality, is...actively making God incarnate' (1991:14), a view shared by Heyward (1982:9). Feminist theologians such as Grey and Heyward are speaking of the possibility that,

---

<sup>30</sup> However, I would suggest that, in light of the earlier discussion of autonomy, the word as Jantzen has used it is better replaced with "without responsibility to others" or "self-serving".

rather than existing as some sort of separate individual being, God exists as the relationship between individuals, and that God is called into being by the dynamic process of relationship (i.e. connection). Heyward states this quite elegantly:

I believe that God is our power in relation to each other, all humanity, and creation itself. God is creative power, that which effects justice—right-relation—in history. God is the bond which connects us in such a way that each of us is em-powered to grow, work, play, love and be loved. God makes this justice, our justice. God is not only our immediate power in relation, but is also our immediate re-source of power: that from which we draw power to realize actively who we are in relation (Heyward, 1982:6).<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, she says, God cannot exist without us (7). And Zappone adds, God cannot function without us (1991:85).

Going a step further, that ‘power in relation...is relentless in its determination to break through the boundaries and boxes that separate us’ (Heyward, 1982:172). This implies that the power (entity, process) of connection is stronger than the individuals (or beings) engaged in the connection. Could this be a useful way to tackle the thorny issue of difference and diversity?

#### i. Difference and diversity

As we saw earlier, too much emphasis can be placed on celebrating connectedness, ‘obscur[ing] important differences and conflicts between women’ (Slee, 2000:14, n2). Speaking of her own development as a theologian and a feminist, Grey writes:

[W]ords like mutuality, connectedness, weaving just connections, mutual enablement and interdependence took on a visionary significance, and became the keystones of my theology of redemption and a political spirituality of connectedness...But into this Garden of mutuality and connectedness came...the challenge of difference...[M]utuality became a suspect word, accused of collapsing difference, and disguising privilege and power; connectedness, too, was suspected of drawing all diversity into a kind of homogeneous soup (1999a:9).

In recent years, feminist theologians have addressed this by stating that the notion of interconnectedness must be ‘extend[ed] to include not only those with whom one has obvious affinity but also those who are alien, different and strange yet are known in new ways to be affiliated to the self’ (Slee, 2000:13). As feminist theologians learn to celebrate difference, they are led to understand connection not in the light of “sameness” but in the light of diversity. And

---

<sup>31</sup> Heyward presents this God of power-in-relation as entirely positive, just, and empowering. Anything which acts against this power is either human sin (‘our denial of our power in relation’ (161)) or evil (‘the violation of relation in human life’ (154)). She does not allow for the possibility that God-in-relation could be the source of evil as well as of good. One theologian who does so is Spong (2001).



what is this nuanced meaning of connection? Now, says Grey, ‘connectedness between women is not a presumed given, but a *relation that emerges*’ (1999a:14; author’s emphasis).<sup>32</sup>

We have strayed some distance from our focus on older women in gaining the necessary background on feminist theories and Christian feminist theologies of connection. In part, this is due to the fact that *these theories and theologies do not specifically mention older women*—and in my view, this is a failing. Nevertheless, there are a number of important ideas that should help us in interpreting the data. Identity, autonomy, dependency, and interconnectedness will all be useful in understanding the lives of the interviewees. If, as the theorists here have suggested, women in general understand themselves as essentially connected to others, then this should be true of older women. We will want to see if older women are the agents of connection in their relationships, whether they struggle with problems of broken and lost connections, whether they see dependency as an issue in their lives. Based on the social gerontological literature reviewed above, we could hypothesise that these things will be true, as we will see in Chapter 8. For now, it is time to bring older women back into the picture once more.

#### **4.6 Connection and this project**

In Chapter 8, when we review the data collected in the interviews, we should expect to find the key connections of family, friends, and church named by the women. What others do they identify? Do older women experience belonging from them, and are connections a source of identity? In the case of their churches, I would expect women to talk about both friendship and fellowship. For each person, it would be natural to hear about both positive, affirming connections as well as negative, problematic connections—perhaps even some that are especially distressing. Some of the women who are less physically able might talk about their dependency, and others who are still active may talk about their fear of dependency. All of the women may talk about how they work to remain connected to people and things, despite society’s devaluing of dependent persons.

The relationship between community and connection is that a community may be “given” and therefore precedes connection. But if connection comes first, then the resultant community is “chosen”. Community and connection feature equally in people’s lives and are not always easily distinguished. As I have identified community as a social place, then connections are the relationships that exist or function in that place. Connections cannot exist without a place, a community, in which *to be*. Connection is the force that draws separate selves into communities, and connection is the outcome of community membership.

---

<sup>32</sup> Grey names several critics of “connection theology,” among them Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1999a:9). As always, it is important to remember that feminist theologians are not all in agreement.

Is the existence of connections necessarily community? Steven G. Jones (1998a) says it is not, that communication and interaction do not themselves constitute community. However, I believe that creating connection is creating community—*indeed, creating God's community*. I feel supported in this by Heyward's statement that '[t]he relation becomes the realm of God' (1982:59). Further, connections exist only within communities: '[N]o relation happens in isolation from its social milieu' (Heyward, 1982:135). And, again in my view, connection will be an important part of how older women construct and negotiate "community".

#### 4.6.1 Questions to be answered

What do women have to say about being older? Is "old age" a part of their identities? It is possible that older women, as with people of any age, seek a balance between separation and connection; is that the case? What (potential) problems do older women experience (or worry about) with respect to maintaining connections? Is the local church a significant source of connection? How do older women maintain and nurture their connections? Is maintenance simple and straightforward or difficult and complex? Are older women the agents in initiating and maintaining connections or the recipients of others' efforts?

What questions do feminist theological considerations raise? Do older Christian churchgoing women define God in relational terms, either as the source of connectedness or, more radically, as its consequence? Do older women engage with "the other", and if so, what form does that take? What do the interviewees have to say about the issues of difference and diversity? I hope the answers to these questions will guide us towards a Christian feminist practical theology of older women. Ultimately, I am interested in whether older women's experiences of Christianity might be the source, or the consequence, of such an ethic of connection (and community and caring), and I hope we might be able to determine this.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, much research over the years that has focused on identity-formation and self-understanding places the researcher in the position of exploring and explaining an individual's subjectivity against a backdrop of community ties and relationships with others. Likewise, communities have been interpreted by researchers through observational studies and analysis of individual and group behaviours. In this project, however, I am exploring community and identity using individual self-accounts. How do older Christian churchgoing women describe community and their own identities?

#### 4.7 Summary

In this chapter, I have explored ideas of connection from social gerontology, feminist research, and feminist theology. We have seen its importance to the lives of women in general and of

---

<sup>33</sup> We will return to this question in Chapter 10.



older women in particular. I have defined connection as relationship that occurs in community. Connections form communities and vice versa; the two entities are dependent upon each other. And, I have raised questions that we hope the data will answer.

What are the activities older women engage in in order to maintain their connections and to help their communities flourish? How do they (if at all) realise the “completeness of connection in community”? To answer these questions, we will now turn to the third and final key concept of this project: caring.

## Chapter 5—Caring: The Active Realisation of Connection

I love everything that is old. Old times, old ways, old values, old freedoms, old traditions, old manners, old horses and dogs. Not forgetting the ones that love and care for us...old ladies.

—Letter to the *Yorkshire Evening Press*, 2 March 2001

### 5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, we considered the concept of connection and said that it is a relationship. How is a connection enacted or expressed? I propose that it is in the give-and-take of caring, a complex activity (or set of activities) that has many forms—and consequences. Just as we saw with our review of community and connection, caring is not always experienced positively, and it is critical to consider the negative aspects, along with the more generally accepted positive ones, in order to have a balanced view of the process. Further, caring not only expresses the nature of a connection; it can also establish a connection between previously unattached persons or between a person and something “other”. The act of demonstrating care can, over time, build a connection where none existed before. The communities wherein this happens can be existing ones (e.g. a family or local church) or can themselves be created as a result (e.g. a new group of friends or political activists).

Our society is confronting urgent questions about what constitutes caring, who will provide it and who will receive it, and where it will happen. Older women are often the topic of such questions, but rarely do we find their ideas and experiences brought forward to help provide answers. In this chapter, I will first discuss some basic properties of caring, then review the issues of most concern to social gerontologists, feminists, and feminist theologians. I shall then propose questions I hope to be able to answer in Chapter 9, using the data collected. I will conclude by drawing together the three key themes of community, connection, and caring and discussing how together they will help shed light on the experiences of older Christian churchgoing women.

### 5.2 What is “caring”?

Just as with community, caring<sup>1</sup> has a wide range of definitions. For our purposes, “to care” may mean responsibility to protect someone, or to manage or act as a custodian for something. It may also mean to provide for, to nurse, or to look after someone or something in some way. When we talk about “the caring professions”—medicine, teaching, and social welfare—we are incorporating the ideas of protection and provision. In popular understanding, true caring is considered to be incompatible with selfishness and competition. When caring occurs, it implies

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter and the thesis as a whole, I will use the terms “caring” and “care” interchangeably.



that someone or something is in need, and that someone else chooses to act to alleviate or satisfy that need (Noddings, 1984).

In everyday speech, we tend to distinguish between two types of caring: “caring about” and “caring for”. “Caring about” is considered to be a general, usually intellectual, activity, its objects often diffuse and its experience (for the carer) qualifiable. “Caring for”, however, is a particular, usually practical, activity, its objects known and specific, and its experience quantifiable (Tronto, 1989:173-174).<sup>2</sup> If we refer back to the discussion of public and private spheres (Chapter 3), then “caring about” often takes place in the public sphere (e.g., writing letters on behalf of a political candidate, helping to build a wetland habitat), whereas “caring for” is generally more personal and private, as it is often one-on-one and performed in the home.<sup>3</sup> Care can be arranged informally and “privately” (e.g. between family members and friends) or formally and “publicly” (e.g. through charities and churches).

Yet, these two forms of caring are not fully separate. Qureshi and Walker state that ‘[c]aring for someone in a practical way is seen as an expression of caring *about* them [sic] as an individual’ (1986:116-117; authors’ emphasis). Nor do the resources called upon necessarily determine the form of caring. For example, a “caring” person may both contribute money to a political campaign (“caring about”) *and* purchase groceries for an unemployed neighbour (“caring for”), while another person with religious beliefs may pray for peace in a war-torn country far from her home (“caring about”) as well as for the healing of an ill friend in her local congregation (“caring for”).<sup>4</sup> Finally, there may be societal “restrictions” regarding what we are allowed to “care about” and whom we are allowed to “care for”. For example, are we permitted to care about so-called “evil” persons, such as the (then) boys who murdered James Bulger, the Liverpool toddler, in 1991? We will return to this problem later in the chapter.

### 5.2.1 Givers and receivers of caring

“Caring” involves a “carer” who gives something to a “recipient”. In this formula, the carer is an individual person;<sup>5</sup> the recipient, however, can take many forms. The recipient can be known to the carer (e.g. friends, neighbours) or unknown (e.g. future generations, beneficiaries of charities).<sup>6</sup> Recipients can be nonhuman (e.g. pets, gardens, the built environment) or abstract

<sup>2</sup> Tronto acknowledges that others, including Noddings, do not distinguish “caring about” and “caring for” in this same way; however, the formula suits my work on this project.

<sup>3</sup> Although much “caring for” takes place in public or semi-public settings, such as hospitals and nursing homes.

<sup>4</sup> In the latter case, this is “caring for” not only because the object of the caring is known to the carer (the pray-er), but also because many people believe that such prayer has direct, quantifiable results.

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of my argument, I am putting aside (for the time being) the idea that the carer could be something other than an individual human (e.g. God) or an institution comprised of humans (e.g. a governmental authority).

<sup>6</sup> Noddings, however, claims that recipients must always be particularly known to the carer. This idea is picked up later in this chapter.

(e.g. philosophies of democracy or privacy), as well as human. The recipient of care can also be oneself (e.g. maintaining one's health by eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly).

The caring activity affects both parties, on numerous levels. In order to care, a variety of resources are necessary (Tronto, 1989), although probably not all of these in any one circumstance: money, time, people to do the work, goodwill/social capital, health, knowledge/expertise, practical skills, and emotional, spiritual, or psychological energy.<sup>7</sup> In addition to use of resources, there are issues of awareness (of a need) and identification (of a carer and a recipient), commitment, expectations, acceptance, reciprocity, and costs. How committed must the carer be to meeting the recipient's needs? Both Noddings (1984) and Tronto (1989) speak of the carer being "engrossed" in the other; but we have all observed people who "go through the motions" just to be seen to be caring (Noddings, 1984).<sup>8</sup> Recipients expect sympathy, respect, knowledgeable and appropriate help, and a continuation of care, while carers expect appreciation and, sometimes, tangible rewards for their efforts. But there are important questions to be answered: is a recipient willing and able to accept her carer's efforts (Tronto, 1989; Conradi, 2000), and then willing and able to reciprocate in some way? What are the needs of and costs to both carer and recipient?

#### i. Reciprocity

For caring to continue in a relationship for any length of time, there generally needs to be some sort of reciprocity—or at least responsiveness—on the part of the recipient.<sup>9</sup> 'Reciprocity', says Card, 'in the ordinary sense, refers to doing to or for another something that is either equivalent in value or in some sense, "the same thing" that the other did to or for oneself' (1990:106). But because there is not usually an exact match of resources (otherwise the recipient might be able to meet her own needs), then what is offered in return from the recipient to the carer can range from simple gratitude to small gifts to something as grand as being made the beneficiary in one's will. Noddings, for instance, counts a baby's happiness and delight—its response—as a form of reciprocity to its mother's caring attentions because the response 'contributes to [the mother's] capacity to relate, to work, to sustain caring' (1990:123). Some writers have taken the notion of reciprocity even further. Kittay (1997) describes an 'extended notion of reciprocity', one that moves backwards and forwards across generational boundaries (e.g. back to parents and ahead to children). I would add that extended reciprocity could even move across time,

---

<sup>7</sup> Carers need not have access to all of these resources; the recipient(s) might have some of them. Because of this, what constitutes "caring" is usually negotiated between the parties involved in any particular situation or type of connection (Noddings, 1984:16).

<sup>8</sup> Noddings believes that perfunctory caretaking of individuals, such as frail family members, cannot rightly be called caring 'in the deep human sense' (1984:9). But she appears to acknowledge that some individuals act in caring ways in order to 'secure...credit' for themselves (24).

<sup>9</sup> Conradi, however, says that 'care need not be based on reciprocity' (2000:3).



through many generations, to include those ancestors and descendants we will never know—even to whom we are not related by blood but by common humanity.

Yet not all recipients are able to choose to accept caring, nor able to respond or reciprocate (see below). In these cases and others, there are costs to carers and recipients.

#### ii. Costs to carers and recipients

Caring can be a positive experience for the carer when she is a willing party to the activity (Koehn, 1998:48) and when she gains some form of reward or satisfaction from it. Sometimes this is the “feel-good” factor cited by volunteers. Other rewards may include earning esteem from significant others or from a particular community, serving as a role model to others, or receiving unexpected gifts from recipients. Many women gain feelings of self-worth and self-meaning from the role of carer. Even self-sacrifice can be seen as a satisfaction rather than a burden, depending upon the quantity and frequency of sacrifice and what proportions of the sacrifice are emotional, financial, and physical. If caring activities are shared within a particular community as a whole, rather than falling to one individual to perform, the beneficial outcomes are also often shared.

Unfortunately, caring can be experienced negatively or with negative consequences. This is often because the associated connection is itself a negative (i.e. non-life-enhancing) one. For instance, both carer and recipient are vulnerable to abuse, manipulation, and exploitation, either by the other party to the connection or by the larger community(ies) of which they are a part. There can be problems of too much caring, too little caring, loss of caring, and no caring at all. All of these problems may be experienced by either carer or recipient, albeit in different ways; however, the problem of too much caring *usually* has costs to the carer and the other potential problems *usually* have costs to the recipient.

The costs to the carer of too much caring may be psychological, physical, emotional, financial, social, or any combination of these (Fischer, 1995). Self-sacrifice is a potential negative cost if the carer herself is not cared for in some way. In addition to the danger to the carer’s own well-being, we can add the danger to the caring activity itself, for if overwhelmed by responsibilities, the carer may ‘cease to care for the other and become instead the object of “caring”’ (Noddings, 1984:12). There may be then no one to fill the dis-abled carer’s role.

Carers often experience guilt (and a sense of failure) if they cannot meet all of a recipient’s needs,<sup>10</sup> or resentment that they cannot meet an unspoken (yet commonly understood) ideal of caring, either the recipient’s (Noddings, 1984) or a more general societal ideal. This resentment

---

<sup>10</sup> Or even identify them (Tronto, 1989).

can lead to self-accusations, rather than anger at a society that demands too much, especially of women (Fischer, 1995). At the same time, the carer—male or female—may struggle with the burden of western society’s devaluing of caring (i.e. “caring for”) either because it is associated with women (Fischer, 1995) or because the recipients themselves are devalued. Internal conflict arises when a carer sees competing needs that cannot both be satisfied—for example, if two recipients of caring are in different locations, or if satisfying one recipient’s needs means depriving the other (Noddings, 1984). Carers may feel guilty if their actions bring about harmful consequences they did not intend (Noddings, 1984:26). More generally, carers frequently feel ‘empty-handed and powerless in the face of [the recipient’s] suffering, loss, and pain’ (Fischer, 1995:143).

Other psychological struggles can be encountered by carers. Sometimes, carers are required to end their “caring for” efforts and to demonstrate their “caring about” by letting a child or grandchild make her own “mistakes” (i.e. life choices) or by allowing a terminally ill loved one to choose to die (Fischer, 1995). A carer may insist that a recipient practice self-caring (Koehn, 1998:46), rather than having things done for her, as a step towards maturity or independence. Indifference may be an appropriate caring response in certain circumstances (Koehn, 1998:45), or even “tough love” (i.e. withholding care as a means of forcing another to change behaviour) if that carer believes the other person to be harming herself.

As noted above, in caring situations that “work”, the parties have negotiated a system of reciprocity that suits them both. But what about situations where care is not or cannot be acknowledged? Some recipients behave as though they are entitled to the care and attention they receive and deliberately withhold any demonstrations of appreciation. Alternatively, there is ‘the individual [who] may be pretending to have needs in order to get attention or to manipulate others’ (Koehn, 1998:30). Yet other recipients may reject the care given them (Koehn, 1998:42). Still others, however, may not even be able to respond with awareness, let alone reciprocate in some form, such as persons with severe dementia. Can the carer continue indefinitely without some form of response? At such times, there is the risk of “carer burnout”—or, more sinisterly, abuse of the recipient (Morris, 1993). Possibly the acknowledgement and appreciation the carer needs can come from another source, such as family members of the recipient or the larger community; but is this sufficient?

There are other types of costs to carers and recipients. Charges of insufficient or absent caring can come from outside the parties to the connection. At a societal level, for example, ‘it is very common indeed for women to be accused of failure to care’ (Grimshaw, 1986a:216-217). Teachers and nurses (occupations traditionally dominated by women) on strike are often accused of not caring for their pupils and patients (Grimshaw, 1986a:217), yet these situations



occur because of conflicting needs of self-care and other-care. Finally, less frequently discussed are the problems associated with a lack of someone or something to care for (or to care about). This sort of lack may leave a potential carer experiencing selfishness or psychopathology—or a feeling of extreme isolation. ‘We all need to be needed’ is a cultural truism; as we will see in Chapter 9, it is in fact true for some of the interviewees, even those who are recipients of much caring.

Too little caring, loss of caring, and no caring at all have obvious consequences for the recipient, including feelings of isolation, depression, poor physical health, and even death. Yet, other problems can result from a mismatch between what the carer can provide and what the recipient needs or wants. For example, the recipient may not be in need but may simply be the object of someone else’s desire to care for or about them. This desire may be motivated by a genuine concern for the recipient’s welfare, or, as noted above, by a wish to be seen by others as “caring” (Noddings, 1984). Some individuals who label themselves as excellent carers ‘clearly fail to receive the contempt, resentment, and misery of many who encounter them’ (Noddings, 1990:123).<sup>11</sup> A carer may also be in the position of unconsciously imposing her concerns onto the recipient (Tronto, 1989), without checking to learn the recipient’s wishes. Too much or inappropriate or unwanted caring can ‘suppress the urge toward independence’ in the recipient (Noddings, 1984:11). An activity seen as caring by the carer may be experienced as smothering or even antagonising by the recipient. Finally, recipients who need or ask for what is seen by others to be too much care, either from particular individuals or from the state, risk being punished in some way, perhaps by having the caring activities or services withdrawn. Then, the loss of caring can have devastating consequences for the recipient, as noted above.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in Chapter 4, we saw that dependency can have both positive and negative affects on the parties in a connection. When caring is involved in the connection, the carer may feel either a sense of self-worth and satisfaction (‘I’m needed’) or of restriction (‘I can’t leave the house’). On her part, the recipient may feel a sense of security (‘someone is there for me’) or fear (‘what will happen to me if she goes away?’). In extreme situations, the carer may become self-righteous (‘she couldn’t survive without me’) or the recipient behave as though she is entitled to caring (‘I cared for my daughter as a child; now it’s her turn’).

### **5.3 Social gerontologists on caring**

Older people’s lives reflect the issues and experiences of caring described above. “Caring for” and “caring about”, reciprocity, and some of the costs borne by both carer and recipient are all known to them. Many social gerontological studies have shown that reciprocity is common

---

<sup>11</sup> Here, Noddings uses “receive” to mean “recognise and internalise” the message(s) of another.

among older people (Matthews and Campbell, 1995:131). Phillipson, et al. found older people ‘actively involved in either providing help or expressing a willingness to do so’ (2001:127). These researchers discovered that ‘interdependence rather than dependence’ (2001:129) characterises older people’s relationships; indeed, older people play ‘the central part... within the helping network’ (2001:132). Contrary to popular conceptions, older people are themselves carers. The 1985 General Household Survey data on informal care showed that ‘[o]ne quarter of people aged 60 or over provide care for other dependent individuals’ (Evandrou, 1990:6). The types of support given by older people to others, especially family and friends, include ‘confiding, reassuring, [and] talking to when upset’ (Phillipson, et al., 2001:129) and providing advice (Phillipson, et al., 2001:132). We will find much evidence of all of this in the findings in Chapter 9. But what are the particular issues older women have regarding caring? How are the churches responding to these needs?

### 5.3.1 Caring and older women

Like the letter-writer whose comments open this chapter, many people see older women as the people who ‘love and care for us’. Yet many others view older women (whether positively or negatively) as needing “our” care. Indeed, the socio-economic model that constitutes old age as a problem to be resolved tends to have a monolithic belief that older women are only recipients of caring activities and attentions. While it is true that issues such as lack of caring, loss of caring, and too much caring can have profound consequences for older women, this view obscures the reality that *both* carer and recipient roles usually continue for older women, albeit in different forms and proportions. In this section I will look at three issues of particular concern to the older woman, all of which arise from this common view that she needs care: the challenge to her identity, the lack of recognition of her caring role, and the social welfare topic of “care in the community”.

#### i. Challenges to identity

Despite (or perhaps because of) the essentialist trap of defining women as natural caregivers, which we will review later in this chapter, many older women appreciate this role as crucial and constitutive of who they are. ‘Many women’, writes Fischer, ‘spend a lifetime in caregiving: raising children, supporting aging parents, being there for friends in need. They do not want to stop caring; it is a satisfying source of meaning and identity’ (1995:149). Yet an ageing and less co-operative body and a lack of obvious dependants signals, for many women, a need to begin thinking of themselves as recipients of care, something that may be new and strange to them (Willcocks, 1986:151), even difficult to accept (Ramsey and Blieszner, 2000:55). Having to relinquish (entirely or in part) one’s identity of carer ‘can be a source of disappointment and

---

<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the loss of caring is not the result of the recipient’s actions or requests, but occurs through external circumstances such as changes in government policy, lack of money, or the death of a carer.



distress' (MacRae, 1995:154). However, continues MacRae, being able to help others in some way (158) or being able to draw on a reputation (established as a younger woman) as one who cared for others 'can be a source of comfort and a meaningful component of the older woman's identity' (155).<sup>13</sup>

This raises questions, however. MacRae's study was of 'a stable small town community where the majority of the respondents grew old together, were familiar with the stories of one another's [sic] lives, and where meaningful reputations...[were] easily established and maintained' (163). What happens when a woman relocates her home to another town? Is she able to carry such a hard-earned reputation with her, and thus maintain 'a stable source of self-meaning and meaningful appraisal from others' (158)? Or are these lost? Is it necessary to have 'meaningful appraisal from others' in order to maintain her identity? Is the fact that an older woman has cared for others in her lifetime the *only* source of meaningful appraisal *from others*?

If older women attach part of their identity to the role of carer and are reluctant to accept the role of recipient, is this because they have absorbed society's vilification of dependency, which devalues recipients of care and turns them from "persons" into "a burden"? Certainly, many older people do fear dependency and interpret this as becoming a "burden" on their loved ones. What they may also fear is being denied the opportunity to function as mature adults. Older people are often excluded from meaningful and interesting activities, on the assumption that they cannot or would not choose to participate or because younger people might not want to have older people involved. Yet, a person is truly "cared for" if she has the freedom to exercise her autonomy, to make choices, to engage with other people or with stimulating activities and ideas, thus fostering feelings of self-worth and maintaining an identity.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that older women continue to make choices about caring was observed by Altschuler. She found that, over time, older women become

more discriminating as to whom and where to put their nurturing efforts, compassion, and care. Rather than diminishing their unpaid responsibilities, they continue to take on as many responsibilities as in the past. However, their ability to be more self-protective gives them choice over which responsibilities they will select. *The vast majority of women in this study have begun to include themselves as someone who deserves to be taken care of* (2001:92; emphasis mine).

This ability to continue to care by acknowledging and working within one's own limitations is an important finding. It demonstrates that older women *do* continue to be care-givers, a role that is often unrecognised by society.

---

<sup>13</sup> MacRae does add the disclaimer that caring should not be considered 'women's only, or even primary. route to self-meaning' (163).

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Kim Knott for this observation.

ii. Lack of recognition of caring role

What happens when ageing decreases opportunities or the ability to care? Does the form and practice of care one can engage in change from “caring for” to “caring about”? Is an older woman in these circumstances still able to see herself as a carer? Does society see her this way, or is she repositioned from the role of “complete carer” to that of “complete recipient”?

As we saw earlier, reciprocity, a key feature of the caring interaction, is common among older persons. Older people may feel that it is crucial to balance the caring exchange, so that in some instances the ‘inability to reciprocate creates a reluctance to accept help’ (Qureshi and Walker, 1986:114-115). Older women wish to be not merely dependent on younger family members but to have some caring activities of their own to offer in return for the “caring for” and “caring about” they receive. There may be an element of practicality about the exchange (e.g. child minding in return for financial support; see Kerns, 1980); but there is also a psychological and emotional need to continue to be a carer and to be seen to be a carer, to ‘maintain self-esteem by participating in varied reciprocities instead of being objects of one-way dependence’ (Jonas and Wellin, 1980:237). Reciprocity is not always, or even usually, symmetrical (Jonas and Wellin, 1980:233) but it can exist as a valid means of continuing to be a carer.

The societal focus on older women’s role as recipients of care ‘[obscures] the extent to which older...women are also carers’ (Morris, 1993:162). Older women care for spouses, children and grandchildren, and neighbours and friends. ‘[E]ven among those regarded as “dependent”, the vast bulk of care in old age is *self-care*, provided by elderly people themselves’ (Qureshi and Walker, 1986:111; authors’ emphasis), as we saw in Altschuler’s research, above. Some (if not most) older women have ‘a need to perform useful and needed services’ (Jonas and Wellin, 1980:233). Fischer eloquently captures this desire—and society’s resultant responsibility:

Older persons often feel unloved, not because no one is willing to do things for them, but because people no longer value and receive their gifts. They do not want to be objects of pity or duty; they want human recognition, welcome, and a sense of belonging. They want more than sympathy and kindness; they want to be able to give as well as to receive, to be recognized as persons who have something to contribute...[O]ne of the best ways to love any member of the Christian community is to receive that person’s gifts (1998:72).

A cared-for person will be permitted opportunities to care for others, as she is able. If younger carers (even well-intentioned ones) deny older people these opportunities, then they could be said to be not truly caring themselves.



### iii. "Care in the community"

Many issues involving the needs of older people are discussed in terms of "care in the community". In 1989, the UK government published a white paper addressing this issue, which provides a benchmark definition and establishes its aims:

Community care means providing the services and support which people who are affected by problems of ageing, mental illness, mental handicap or physical or sensory disability need to be able to live as independently as possible in their own homes, or in "homely" settings in the community. The Government is firmly committed to a policy of community care which enables such people to achieve their full potential (Department of Health and Social Security, 1989:3).

'Elderly people', says Dalley, 'form by far the largest client group served by community care policies and, in turn, form by far the largest group cared for by informal carers' (1993:121). While recognising that 'the great bulk of community care is provided by friends, family and neighbours' (Department of Health and Social Security, 1989:4), nevertheless the government was attempting with this report and the resulting initiatives and changes to provide the proper mix of social supports to assist recipients and carers alike in their caring relationships. There was certainly a positive intent, although the outcome of those policies has received mixed reviews.<sup>15</sup>

One key problem has been a lack of clarity about which "community" is being referred to. Is it the family (wherever they may be living), the church community, the immediate neighbourhood, the local authority, the national government, or some combination of these? Dalley argues that 'the original philosophy of community care...stresses independence, privacy, and self-help' and is 'inextricably bound up with the ideology of individualism' (1993:123-124). However, she states, '[o]pponents would argue that this is unacceptable and that concepts of reciprocity, fellowship and co-operation are better values on which to base a community-care strategy than the rugged, individualistic competition of the market' (124). Unfortunately, care has become a commodity, a transferable product. At the same time, there is a "care gap" in our ageing society,<sup>16</sup> as there are fewer labourers overall (due to a lower ratio of working to nonworking adults, and to the fact that more women—the traditional carers—are in the labour market), thus there are more people needing care but fewer available carers.

---

<sup>15</sup> One particularly strong (but not solitary) critic is Burch, who says that the phrase "care in the community" '[denotes] the closure of psychiatric wards and the dumping of bewildered and often institutionalised people in areas which are neither willing nor able to give them the support that a stable community might have offered in days gone by. The phrase presupposes a caring community, but no steps are taken to find out whether there is any reality behind the label' (1994:10). However, in her book review of a recently published evaluation of governmental community care efforts, Dalley states that 'the report is largely positive about the reforms' while including areas that have been less successful or that still need attention (2001:22).

Opponents of the government's handling of social services with respect to community care point out that, at present, 'caring for the elderly in the community is first and foremost the responsibility of women...many of whom are elderly themselves' (Allen, 1988:37).<sup>17</sup> Because the burden of care rests on women, who thus have restricted employment opportunities, 'community care is re-cast by feminists as a policy that reinforces the economic dependence of women' (H Graham, 1993:125). Dalley suggests that 'the welfare of many people, particularly elderly people, has come to depend on the altruistic commitment of informal carers, the majority of whom are women. In turn, women themselves as they grow older become the chief recipients of informal care—or, perhaps, of no care at all' (1993:124). Whatever standpoint is taken, "care in the community" is an issue that needs addressing as it effects older women especially.

How have the churches responded to the issue of caring?

### 5.3.2 Christian churches, caring, and older people

Caring is incumbent upon individual Christians, as evident in the formula that God first cared for us, Christ did (and does) care for us, and therefore we are meant to care for each other.<sup>18</sup> We have only to think of Christ's command that we love our neighbour as we love ourselves,<sup>19</sup> especially when our neighbour is unlike us.<sup>20</sup> Caring is understood to be as much a blessing, if not more, for the person who gives the care as for the recipient (John Williams, 1992), because human beings are the instruments of God's caring in the world. Indeed, caring is a means of making God incarnate, as is the act of connection, as we saw in the last chapter. Individual Christians who fail to care may harm those around them and (perhaps, depending upon the theology) be judged harshly at some future time.

At all levels, the church is also required to care, to help individual members, to conduct outreach to the local community, and, more recently, to speak out on matters of temporal as well as eternal concern (e.g. homelessness). Corporately, Christian churches have a call to care for and show solidarity with the larger community and the whole world, especially its "weaker" members (Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, 1985:59). When the church fails to care (either by omission or commission), there can be negative consequences for members, the institutional church, and society as a whole.

---

<sup>16</sup> According to Selma Sevenhuijsen of the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. (Plenary speech at the University of Leeds Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies conference, "Gendering Ethics/The Ethics of Gender", June 2000.)

<sup>17</sup> Peace adds, '[i]f community care inevitably means care by women, so too does residential care, and in both cases this commonly means women caring for women' (1986:74).

<sup>18</sup> See also John's instruction that actions as well as words are required of a Christian (1 John 3:17-18).

<sup>19</sup> The "second" commandment (Mark 12:28-31).

<sup>20</sup> For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).



In Chapter 1, we saw that the institutional churches tend to regard older persons as recipients of caring and, at best, seek to find ways to meet their needs, thus following a biblical imperative.<sup>21</sup> Chester and Smith note that ‘the religious beliefs of many older people and the religious communities to which they belong have a profound influence, not only as might be expected on their inner lives, but also on their social activities and on their experience of needing and receiving care’ (1996:2). Less often do churches, corporately or locally, discuss helping older persons fulfil their calling to be carers. There is nothing in the bible or Christian doctrine that exempts older persons from this responsibility,<sup>22</sup> and being able to continue caring could help an older woman maintain her sense of herself as a person, as a Christian, and as a valuable member of her church community.

#### i. “Being” versus “doing”

In the meantime, until they purposefully address the issue of older women as carers (and to counteract societal messages that activity and “doing” are the preferred ways to live one’s life), many churches have begun to stress the importance of “being” and that ‘[w]e do not have to *do* anything to be acceptable to God or to be of the community of faith’ (Butler, 1998:E4; author’s emphasis). In the past decade, churches, theologians, and other religious authors have particularly applied this message to those persons who are no longer or have never been capable of “doing”, and it is a message frequently given to older people. However, might “being” be a different form of “doing”, rather than its opposite? Challenging the prevalent message now being directed at older Christians—that “being” is equivalent with “doing”—is the idea that “[e]ven the most helpless frail elder is *doing* in the sense of eliciting care from others” (Kimble, et al., 1995:387; emphasis mine). (It seems our churches, along with our society, are reluctant to give equivalency to these two states.)

Interestingly, Crampsey reverses the usual view of the relationship between work and rest when he writes, ‘[w]ork is a cessation of rest. Our relaxing in God has to be broken off in order for us to perform our necessary tasks, but these while important are secondary’ (1999:57). Ursula King appears to explore the implications of this when she speaks of “receptivity” as a valid form of spirituality and

an integral part of life [that] marks especially those who are bedridden, or palsied, or mentally unable. They are women who are ill or old, or in some way forced to be waiters and watchers. . . . These are the women who experience life as something to be received in totality and are almost completely dependent on the care of others (1999a:155).

---

<sup>21</sup> For example, caring for older persons appears in the Old Testament as ‘the respect due from young people towards the elderly, and the care due to those who are deprived’ (John Williams, 1992:12). (The assumption is that older people—often meaning widows—were deprived.) In the New Testament, we see this instruction in 1 Timothy 5:1-16.

<sup>22</sup> Writes Bray, ‘[t]here is no retirement from [the New Testament calling into the Kingdom of God], and it is not measured by our “usefulness” or degree of activity, but is lived out in responsiveness to God (and so to our neighbour) within our particular capabilities and circumstances’ (1991:14).

Receptivity, then, could be viewed as either a “being” state (i.e. ‘others are caring for me’) or a “doing” state (i.e. ‘I am being receptive to others’ caring activities’). Either way, there is, in the Christian view, no shame for an older woman in being a recipient if she cannot be an active carer.

There is a place in the Christian world where a woman’s role as carer is extensively addressed, and that is within feminist theology. We will now turn to this area, along with feminism in general.

#### **5.4 Feminists and Christian feminist theologians on caring**

Unlike the previous two chapters, where I considered them separately, here I will interweave the ideas of feminists (e.g. Daryl Koehn, Joan Tronto) and Christian feminist theologians (e.g. Serene Jones, Kathleen Fischer). What the two groups have to say, apart from references to Christian teachings and sensibilities, is in fact quite similar. Therefore, I will integrate their views on the topics of essentialism of women, power, and a feminist ethic of caring.

##### **5.4.1 Essentialism of women**

The subject of caring has been of great concern to feminists. For the most part, they wish to hold it up as an important value and as the basis for an ethical way of life, while at the same time wanting to avoid the quicksand of being seen to merely re-state the traditional belief that ‘women are by nature more nurturing or caring than men’ (Soskice, 1996:55), and that therefore caring is their natural role. Feminists argue that what is termed “essential female nature” is in reality a form of social conditioning, an ‘historical subordination to men [made to] seem like a natural fact rather than a cultural product’ (Serene Jones, 2000:29). The *form* caring takes contributes to women’s subordinate role. Tronto elaborates:

Embedded in our notions of caring we can see some of the deepest dimensions of traditional gender differentiation in our society. The script runs something like this: *Men care about* money, career, ideas, and advancement; men show they care by the work they do, the values they hold, and the provisions they make for their families....*Women care for* their families, neighbors, and friends; women care for their families by doing the direct work of caring....[M]en care about more important things, whereas women care about less important (1989:172; emphasis mine).

The work of “caring for” ‘is still primarily a woman’s responsibility and is still largely unrewarded both in terms of financial recompense and status’ (Bernard, et al., 1993:173).<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> The most obvious example of this is motherhood. While many women are fulfilled by their maternal role, and while motherhood has been celebrated by many feminists (e.g. Ruddick, 1989; Chodorow,



The danger is that essentialism can lead to oppression, which can take two forms. In the first case, there is the assumption (by society in general and by other persons—women included) that women will do whatever “caring for” work needs to be done. Hand in hand with this is the further assumption that women will willingly ignore their own needs and self-interest in order to do that “caring for” work.<sup>24</sup> It is then only a small step to “compulsory” caring.<sup>25</sup> This is exactly the point many feminist theologians make: that essentialism of women is taken to the extreme in some traditional Christian theologies where women are expected to be nothing *but* caring. This emphasis, writes Fischer, ‘on emptying and self-denial has led many women to set aside the needs of the self and embrace an ideal of endless self-sacrifice’ (1995:141). Yet, ‘care and connection as moral imperatives should not dictate the sacrifice of one sector of the populace for another’ (Grey, 1991:16). Cady reformulates the Christian imperative of loving others thus:

Christian love...is directed toward all persons regardless of their intrinsic worth or attractiveness. This disinterested or universal character of *Christian love* does not lead to the subordination of the self to all others but to an unceasing effort to include all persons in a reciprocal common life (1987:143; emphasis mine).

Further, some feminists and some religions claim that there are equal but different gender roles, and that these roles are complementary. In these cases, “difference” can also be an essentialising process, one masked by the rhetoric of equality.<sup>26</sup>

Yet not all feminists see caring as oppressive; indeed, for some it is a liberating activity. Many feminists discuss the “sense of self” women get from being carers.<sup>27</sup> They choose to claim caring as a positive and powerful aspect of female identity. MacRae, for instance, notes that women’s caring is ‘both labor *and* love’ (1995:147; author’s emphasis), and Altschuler comments that ‘while [the work women do in the context of family life] can be burdensome and exploitative, it can also be meaningful as a vehicle and reflection of being connected to others’ (2001:80). Gillespie, a theologian, says that ‘[w]omen believers throughout Western Christian history have found their spirituality in the theology and work of caring’ (1995:194).<sup>28</sup> In other

---

1999), Western society has yet to be completely comfortable with either men’s parenting role or with compensating parents for the work they do.

<sup>24</sup> See Virginia Woolf’s description (in 1931) of “The Angel in the House” as ‘utterly unselfish....She sacrifice[s] herself daily’ (1993:357).

<sup>25</sup> “[C]ompulsory altruism”...impels women to take on caring responsibilities in a society which is founded at every level on an expectation of women’s willingness to deny themselves for the sake of others’ (Dalley, 1993:109). Compulsory altruism is the terminology of Land and Rose (1985), and I do not think that Dalley has used it as Land and Rose do. If Dalley is extending the analogy to all of Western society, then I will concur. For my purposes, I prefer to use the phrase “compulsory caring”.

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to Kim Knott for this observation.

<sup>27</sup> “Women’s core sense of self and of self-value [the Stone Center argues] is rooted in their sense of their capacity empathically to relate to and care for others...and to receive reciprocal empathic responses and care from others” (Knutsen, 1995:468). While I do not like the word ‘empathic’ here, I do like the notion of receiving care, not just giving it, as contributing to women’s sense of self.

<sup>28</sup> She does not elaborate on this, however, and we are expected to take it for granted. Gillespie acknowledges that she wishes she had asked her respondents about ‘the ministry of care-giving, women’s

words, caring is both the work women do in Western society *and* a significant source of identity and meaning. Based on this, women's affinity for caring (whether natural or conditioned) forms the basis for the argument 'that women will bring new ways of acting and new insights, values, and commitments into areas historically dominated by men' (Serene Jones, 2000:30), for example, the workplace and government. Additionally, to sever all ties between women and caring might negate the whole idea of "woman" as a valuable political category, and thus undermine the feminist project (Soskice, 1996:55).

Therefore, do we wish to join in with the "masculinist" view of caring and judge one form superior to the other? Is "caring about", because it is considered rational and spiritual, superior to "caring for", which is largely physical and practical? Is altruistic caring superior to caring that involves an exchange of money? Is "caring for" merely a commodity? Koehn suggests that a better representation of women's experience (or at least preferred experience) of caring is the phrase "caring with autonomy", which she attributes to Lawrence Blum (1998:171, note 17).<sup>29</sup> This phrase recognises the worth of the carer's needs and desires as well as those of the recipient.

We should also consider the possibility that, as more and more men are direct carers for other people<sup>30</sup> (less frequently discussed in the literature—or indeed recognised in everyday life), doing the hands-on, "caring for" work that has traditionally been taken on by women, the essentialist view of women's nature is no longer quite so clear-cut.<sup>31</sup> Even so, because caring is seen as "women's work", women are expected to care and to perform their caring activities well with little reward; men, however, are rewarded merely for making attempts at caring (Rose and Bruce, 1995). Also, there tend to be gender differences between the types of "caring for" activities women and men provide, with women handling personal care (e.g. bathing, dressing, and feeding) and men instrumental care (e.g. transport, shopping, and finances) (Matthews and Campbell, 1995:133). These issues could indicate where the debate about caring—as an ethic and as a social welfare issue—might head in the future.<sup>32</sup>

Returning once again to the subject of difference and diversity, we see that it has relevance to caring. "Caring" is not a 'universal and unitary moral concept' because there is a 'multiplicity

---

contributions to the theology of care, and care not only for one's own kin but a perspective on families in the world at large' (1995:219).

<sup>29</sup> Blum, L, Horniak, M, Housman, J, and Scheman, N, 1979, 'Altruism and women's oppression' in Bishop, M, and Weinzweig, M, eds, *Philosophy and Women*, Wadsworth, Belmont, Calif., 190-200.

<sup>30</sup> Using the 1985 General Household Survey data on informal care, Evandrou reports that 'of 6 million estimated carers in Great Britain, 2.5 million are men' (1990:6).

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Gollins reports from his empirical research that '[m]ale carers [sic] approach to caring is to see it as an activity, and not as part of their identity' (2001:17). This would seem to suggest that, although there may be a shift occurring in gendered divisions of caring labour, there has not been a corresponding shift in attitudes about the "essentially female" nature of that labour.

<sup>32</sup> Thanks to Kim Knott for this observation.



and diversity of [caring] practice' (Bowden, 1997:2). However, says Koehn, '[w]hat is universal about caring is not its form but rather the demand upon each of us to be caring' (1998:22). As with many other issues that feminists have addressed, "caring" needs to recognise difference and diversity among social actors and the context and particularity of their situations (Bowden, 1997:184). Feminist thinking on caring has been challenged as lacking an engagement with the experiences of non-white, disabled, lesbian, and/or economically and educationally disadvantaged women (H Graham, 1993; Morris, 1993). That only white, heterosexual, economically advantaged women are carers seems to be the mindset of the general public (H Graham, 1993). However, white women are often cared for by non-white or poor-white (and female) domestic servants, hospital workers, and other helpers. This raises the issue of power, often wielded by some groups of women over others.

#### 5.4.2 Power

Within reciprocal caring connections, the parties hold varying (and usually non-equivalent) degrees of power. In the popular view, caring implies a dominant carer and a dependent recipient of care. Here, the carer has power to either continue her caring activities or withdraw them (Conradi, 2000), with the latter resulting in physical and/or psychological problems for the recipient. Hoagland further cites "power in the form of dominance" as an important reality in many households where a parent and child live together (1991:252). She sounds a cautionary note, however, by stating that focusing on the carer without considering the situation of the recipient "reinforces oppressive institutions" (253). Recipients often feel helplessness (Fischer, 1995), either because they are unable to meet their own needs or, in some cases, because they are denied the truth of their situation or the opportunity to discuss their feelings. These reasons may have little or nothing to do with the carer's perceived or real power.

Although we might assume that it is always the carer who is in a position of greater power (Tronto, 1989), in reality it may be the recipient who is the dominant one, demanding care or determining its frequency and form, while the carer is obliged to perform. Land and Rose speak of a "compulsory altruism" (see footnote 25, earlier) that takes place

between persons who are both capable of self-care, but where the relations of power are unequal between them. In this situation the weaker is required to give in a continuous way more practical and emotional help than she receives...[T]he one with the greater share of the power gets the greater share of the services (1985:90).

Power, however, is seldom entirely in the hands of one party in a caring connection, and to think so is to fall into the trap that sees the caring act as unidirectional. As Conradi notes, '[t]his suggests...that caring subjects are not in need' (2000:6).<sup>33</sup> It is also important to bear in mind

---

<sup>33</sup> Hoagland challenges Noddings on this point, specifically the notion of parenting as an ideal example of caring because, in Hoagland's view, it is an unequal "dependency relationship" (1991:250-251).

that recipients of care may in turn be carers themselves. For example, a terminally ill recipient may exercise his power to refuse caring in order to hasten his death and thereby relieve his carer of the “burden” of caring. Should this happen and the carer not honour this, then is the carer inappropriately exercising *her* power in the relationship? Power is asymmetrical and dynamic, continually being shaped and negotiated by the parties involved. If this were not so, then ‘certain capabilities or possibilities [become] ascribed to the “essence” of a person, and this person is thereby relegated to a particular role [and] then power differences can turn into a form of domination’ (Conradi, 2000:7).

Finally, we must be critical of the word “power”. Power has positive as well as negative associations for feminists. Whereas men are believed to have a preference for “power over” others, ‘women exert enormous power in their role of fostering the growth of others. For women, empowering others is seen as growth-enhancing of self and others’ (Miller and Stiver, 1993:425). Letty Russell’s description of “authority in community” (1985b:143) and “authority as partnership” (144) is based on the feminist view of an interconnected world. In her discussion of how Christian feminists reconcile (or not) the issue of biblical authority with their understanding of the personal authority that comes from lived experience, Russell explains that what is required is a paradigm shift. Instead of the ‘prevailing paradigm of authority in Christian and Jewish religion [which] is one of authority as domination...the feminist-liberation paradigm of authority in community...allows for multiple authorities to enrich, rather than to outrank, one another’ (1985b:143). Hence, authority is exercised *in* community—members in partnership with each other—rather than *over* community (143-144) in a hierarchical fashion. Rather than one biblical or theological truth, such a community recognises a multiplicity of truths.

This new understanding of power as a force with life-enhancing qualities forms a foundation for what feminists and feminist theologians have termed an “ethic of care”. It moves the discussion of caring from an individual, personal level to a broader, community- and society-based level. An ethic of care describes how communities care for their members and for the members of other communities, as well as accounting for the caring activities of individuals.

#### **5.4.3 A (Christian) feminist ethic of caring?**

Feminists have debated intensely the subject of caring for the past two decades. Much of the debate has focused on Gilligan’s writings (e.g. 1979, 1982) in which she draws a distinction between care and justice. In this scheme, care allows for shades of grey, is situational, weighs circumstances, and adds mercy and a sense of fairness when considering an ethical problem. Justice, on the other hand, sees only black and white, and values equality and universally applied morals, rules, and laws. Gilligan says that because women employ a ‘contextual mode of judgment’ (1979:445), ‘a morality of rights...may appear to women as frightening in its



potential justification of indifference and unconcern' (444). Numerous critics, among them Koehn (1998), have challenged this theory of different polarities of moral reasoning, and Gilligan herself may have revised her earlier statements.<sup>34</sup> Researchers after Gilligan found that 'there is not a strict gender split between care and justice' (Dolan-Henderson, 1996:37). Just as caring for others and self-care need not be mutually exclusive, so might notions of care and justice both be brought to bear—by women—on challenging ethical situations.

Noddings has also been at the centre of the debate about caring. For instance, Tronto (1989), Hoagland (1991), and others have criticised her "feminine" (Noddings's own term) ethic of caring for precisely the reason that they claim it continues an essentialising of women, despite Noddings's claims to the contrary.<sup>35</sup> She has also been criticised for her belief that the recipient of care must be a 'particular person in a concrete situation' (Noddings, 1984:24). Here, Tronto (1989) and Hoagland (1991) challenge Noddings because she does not address how we are to care for those persons who are (geographically, economically, socially, or otherwise) far removed from us. Card (1990) believes that any ethic of caring must include the concept of justice in order to account for the vast majority of persons on this planet that we will never have face-to-face connections with (the "distant strangers"), yet who nonetheless are affected by the actions (or inaction) we take. Similarly, Koehn believes that '[c]aring for causes and rights would seem to be an integral part of caring for people' (1998:52). Today, feminist ethicists are more likely to believe that both care and justice are important in moral and ethical systems (e.g. Dolan-Henderson, 1996; Donner, 1997; Koehn, 1998), particularly if we are to account for these distant strangers. So, too, do Christian feminist theologians generally favour both, pointing out that God exercises both care (mercy) and justice (judgement).<sup>36</sup>

In developing her argument regarding an ethic of care, Koehn points out numerous difficulties with previous ideas and suggests solutions. One problem, as Koehn sees it, is that the early feminist thinking on an ethic of care posits that only the caregiver can assess the usefulness and value of her caring acts (1998:22-23)—there can be no external, predetermined standard. But would not the recipient (usually) be in the best position (or at least an equally moral position) to judge the value and appropriateness of a caring act done on her behalf? If the recipient is not consulted, then her viewpoint is silenced and we end up giving voice to the carer only. This would be paternalistic, anti-feminist—and, as we shall see later, ageist—behaviour.<sup>37</sup> And, if the recipient rejects the carer's acts or motivation, are we to sympathise with the carer's hurt and

---

<sup>34</sup> Card (1990) says that it is unclear from Gilligan's later writings whether her earlier distinction between justice and care is indeed so clearly drawn. See also Koehn (1998:37).

<sup>35</sup> Noddings (1990) says that her call for caring relations applies to all people.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Psalm 103.

<sup>37</sup> Vandenberg claims that Noddings has reserved the moral high ground for the carer, leaving the recipient without a stake in moral goodness. He says that assumptions about caring for others are 'patronising, if not maternalistic' (1996:265).

anger or honour the recipient's autonomy and power of self-determination (Koehn, 1998:42)? Koehn says that an ethic of care would allow room 'in which parties to the relation can challenge the goodness of each other's caring' (1998:51)—and, I would add, each other's manner of receiving caring.

Finally, Koehn says that an ethic of care, as it currently exists, does not address the problem of violent individuals and 'what sanctions or punishments, if any... a community [may] legitimately impose upon people whose behavior it finds unacceptable and perhaps even threatening' (1998:36). In addition to the question of how to deal with murderers, another problem with certain proposed ethics of care is that they do not adequately address the issue of self-defence (1998:36). If a woman commits a violent act upon a partner who has been repeatedly physically abusing her, is she then *not* caring for him/her? We have already considered this question—what happens when self-caring confronts other-caring, and both cannot be accommodated—in the less “dangerous” circumstances of “carer burnout”. Koehn reminds us that 'ethical caring is not identical with unconditional love' (1998:46). In short, there needs to be a balance between caring for self and caring for others, but this balance is notoriously hard to strike.

Do older women strike this balance and if so, how? The writings of feminists and feminist theologians do not yield much information about older women's views. We will instead need to turn to researchers such as Ramsey and Blieszner and to my own data to consider the meaning of caring in older women's lives.

## **5.5 Caring and this project**

Caring, in the scope of this project, is an activity that establishes or expresses the connection between members of a community. There are both givers and receivers of caring, who attempt to establish reciprocity and who incur certain costs in the caring exchange. Many studies have focused on the caring that older women *receive* from others, but *giving* care continues to be a key aspect of their identities and is regularly demonstrated within the family, among friends, and in special groups such as the local church. Older women also practice self-care. Some older women (e.g. the more frail) may need support in finding new ways of giving care in order to maintain this piece of their identity, as well as help in finding the means of valuing being recipients of care.

### **5.5.1 Questions to be answered**

We want to know whom older women care for/about and how they care, and who cares for/about them and in what ways. Do older women exercise their power to be carers, or do they find this more challenging with age? We will look for evidence that older Christian churchgoing



women's experiences do or do not support the theories of caring reviewed in this chapter. We want to discover such things as whether a "care-interaction" increases the autonomy of those involved (Conradi, 2000). Does caring form a significant part of an older woman's identity? Local churches could be a valuable resource in helping older women find meaning in being recipients of caring (the "being" role) and they could be encouraging older women to continue to contribute their caring abilities, perhaps in new forms (the "doing" role); are they? These are a few of the questions we will hope to answer when examining the findings from the empirical data in Chapter 9.

### **5.5.2 Community, connection, and caring brought together**

As this thesis has developed, we have seen glimpses of how the three main themes are linked. Now, I wish to make those links explicit by showing how feminists and feminist theologians draw out the interplay, and then state how I see community, connection, and caring interacting.

Caring is an activity which is often either the result (or the initiator) of connections, the relationships between people (Noddings, 1990; Conradi, 2000). According to Tronto, 'caring must have an object. Thus, caring is necessarily relational' (1989:173). In other words, caring cannot exist without a connection. However, as we have seen, communities, connections, and the caring activities that arise from them can be oppressive, lending a strong cautionary note to any unreservedly enthusiastic promotion of any or all of these concepts as new models for society.

Friedman explains how the understanding of self-in-relation has been extrapolated to a new vision of community: 'Conflict and competition are no longer considered to be the basic human relationships; instead they are being replaced by alternative visions of the foundation of human society derived from nurturance, caring attachment, and mutual interestedness' (1989:275-276). In Christian terms, '[a] community of persons who care is a symbol of a God who cares. Their presence says: God is with you. You are not alone. There is hope and help for you' (Fischer, 1996:131). Thus, for Christians, a community is a group of people that are in connection with one another not only by their shared religious beliefs, but also by a shared prioritising of relationships as a vehicle for mutual caring.

Cady writes of how the biblical command to 'love your neighbour as yourself'<sup>38</sup> can be used to build communities without the self-sacrificial stance women (and men) have traditionally been urged to adopt. In Chapter 4, we read how she identified love as a particular form of connection that led to community. See again how Cady says that 'the wider life created by love constitutes a community of persons. *In a community, persons retain their identity, and they also share a*

---

<sup>38</sup> Leviticus 19:18.

*commitment to the continued well-being of the relational life uniting them*' (1987:141; emphasis mine).

This commitment to create and maintain a community is expressed in the act of caring for others as individuals and for the "relational life" as a whole. Koehn believes that 'true caring' occurs when 'both the care-giver and cared-for put themselves at risk as part of a process of committing to the forging of a shared self' (1998:25). In my terminology, the shared self is the connection between carer and recipient, an entity that has its own nature and meaning, given it by the parties involved. Conversely, says Hoagland, 'when I have certain standards of caring for myself that I do not apply to the other...then I am not showing respect' (1991:254)—either to that other or to the shared self. This is not "true caring".

It is possible for Christian communities to have this foundational sense of a shared self. Sölle believes that "diakonia" (serving) and "koinonia" (community) are two elements of Christianity that the (western, patriarchal) churches have subordinated to "kerygma" (preaching, proclamation). She presents the example that third world women are experiencing 'koinonia, community, [that] arises out of diakonia and being there for others' (1990:152). Along the same lines, Wraight says that caring 'is a practical expression of the sense of belonging and shows an identity with, and commitment to, the community which is the local church' (2001b:97). In these cases, caring builds connections, which have their own meanings and importance and that then develop into communities.

Further, caring brings people to new understandings of the nature of God. Traditional, abstract views of God as "other" and "beyond" 'may not be necessary or meaningful to women whose lives revolve around an ethic of care' (Walter and Davie, 1998:651). A praxis of the feminist ethic of connectedness and caring is the means of encountering and understanding God (Grey, 1990:371). As we saw in Chapter 4, Grey also writes that '[s]eeking to co-create in forming more just patterns of relating, new forms of mutuality, is...actively making God incarnate' (1991:14). We recall Sölle's statement (Chapter 4) that 'God is the relationship itself and can be thought of only as relationship'. Perhaps, then, God is "us" and we are "God" when we are in caring, connected communities.

When Gillespie speaks of 'the connective work of caring' (1995:137), she harks back to Gilligan's definition of caring as 'an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone' (1982:62). This fits my three-part definition of community as the place where the processes of connection and caring occur and are experienced, and that caring expresses connection. Communities can be either the consequence of connection and caring, or they may be the source, the ground from which connection and caring emerge, depending in part on whether the



community in question is one of choice or circumstance. We see this, too, in Biggar's description of a sense of community: '[T]he sense of being a member of a community is...a sense of being personally invested in a relationship or set of relationships in which the parties are bound together by trust of and care for one another' (1997:101).

I further propose that "caring" is an active rather than passive state, a state where individuals consciously work at fostering the connections they have in a community, and that they use caring as a means of creating new connections and new communities.<sup>39</sup> Caring is the means by which we enact our relatedness to others and demonstrate our values with respect to communities and to other persons. The scope of caring—what we "care for" and what we "care about"—is defined by what we ourselves claim as "our" communities, whether personal, local, or much wider, and many of which will overlap.

We have seen how caring can take place between individuals. Caring also occurs between an individual and a larger group, or between two groups, such as one community (e.g. a church) helping another community (e.g. victims of a flood). In the latter case, there are indeed individuals who carry out certain tasks and receive particular services, but the caring and the receiving is intended on a corporate level. Further, communities, just as individuals, need not encounter each other in the flesh in order for caring to exist. These basic understandings can form the basis of an ethic of caring.

Finally, a connection does not need positive, life-enhancing care to exist; a misuse of care can also define a connection—or lack of connection. The form(s) and degree of caring depend upon the strength and nature of the connection(s) between the persons or the communities. These elements are cyclical, not linear. Any one element—community, connection, or caring—can be the starting point of a process that begets the other two. Writes Gelder, '[t]he key words to describe community in Christian feminism are mutuality, interrelatedness and compassion' (1996:32). In other words, Christian feminist visions of community incorporate the ideas of connection ("interrelatedness") and caring ("compassion").

This interpretation of community, connection, and caring now needs to be compared with the experiences and ideas of older women to see whether it has meaning for them and to learn what nuances or differences they have to suggest.

## 5.6 Summary

In this chapter, we have seen that caring both activates and follows on from connections in a community. As an activity for carers and recipients, caring has not only positive, life-enhancing

---

<sup>39</sup> Silverman and Cooperband (1984) see caring leading to cooperation, which in turn builds communities.

aspects but also many potential negative consequences. On a larger scale (beyond the individual and personal), an ethic of caring needs to address issues of essentialism and power, and needs explicitly to define what “care in the community” means. Caring is a key feature of older women’s lives, particularly in terms of having their dual roles of carer and recipient recognised and affirmed. This has social welfare implications as well as personal ones.

We have seen how closely tied all three concepts of community, connection, and caring are, and how it will best serve this research project to keep their interaction in mind while considering each in turn. To isolate community from connection from caring would be artificial, as they are constantly in motion, shaping and determining each other. I based the title of this chapter on Heyward’s statement that ‘[l]ove is the active realization of relation’ (1982:48) and on my statement at the end of Chapter 4, that people need a way to realise the completeness of connection in community. Caring, then, is the active realisation of connection in community.

We will now turn our attention to the methodologies and methods employed in this project, considering how they will help us to investigate these complex and interrelated themes in the lives of older Christian churchgoing women.



## Chapter 6—Methodologies and Methods: The Project as a Journey

Methodology is concerned with both the detailed research methods through which data are collected, and the more general philosophies upon which the collection and analysis of data are based.

— Michael Haralambos and Martin Holborn<sup>1</sup>

### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the methodologies and methods of this project. However, I will depart from the structure of the rest of this thesis by presenting the discussion using the metaphor of a journey. Thus, I will show what decisions were made and how activities progressed in the order in which they occurred, weaving in the relevant methodological considerations at appropriate points. This “processual narrative”<sup>2</sup> will answer not only what and how things were done but also why, allowing the reader a fuller understanding of the underlying philosophy of this project.

### 6.2 Getting ready to depart: background and preparation

Before any journey begins, it is helpful for the traveller to consider who she is, what her goals are, and how she expects to reach those goals. In this section, I will discuss pertinent details of my personal background and disciplinary position, followed by the general decisions I made about how best to investigate the research questions.

#### 6.2.1 The researcher’s background and position<sup>3</sup>

I grew up and lived my adult life in the northeastern US, in large cities that were religiously diverse, although strongly Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Jewish. I firmly believe in the value of a separation of church and state—at least in the US. As I noted in Chapter 2, feminist theologies can be identified as Christian reformist, womanist, and post-Christian. My own standpoint is that of a Christian reformist. Christianity is my faith tradition, and I am a firm adherent. For most of my life, including the present, I have been an active member of the United Methodist Church (US) and/or the Methodist Church (UK).

I have a long-standing interest in older people—their lives, concerns, needs, and aspirations. I felt my project could be an opportunity to let their voices be heard and contribute to a growing body of knowledge about ordinary older Christian women’s lives and to develop practical

---

<sup>1</sup> Haralambos and Holborn (1995:808).

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Kim Knott for this terminology.

<sup>3</sup> There is extensive discussion in the methodological literature about the value of the researcher positioning herself with respect to the project, and of how much personal detail and revelation is necessary or useful. I refer the interested reader to DeVault (1997) for a sociological view, to Hufford (1999) and Gross (2000) for a religious studies perspective, and to Jaffee (1999) for a discussion of these issues with respect to classroom teaching.

outcomes for churches. Also, undertaking this research might help me prepare for the person I hope to become one day: an older Christian woman.

Both my own academic background, first as a liberal arts undergraduate (BA, English) and then later as a masters student in Women's Studies (however, with no formal training or education in either social gerontology or theology), and my professional work<sup>4</sup> trained me to think in an interdisciplinary, multi-resourced way. I had no preconceived notions about what was "allowed" or "disallowed" within discipline(s), whether in terms of methodology, methods, or epistemology. I drew on ideas from a number of disciplines, and went to any source that might give me the answers I sought. As long as I was rigorous, then there was no need to be a slave to any particular methodological viewpoint (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996); instead, I could employ the most salient ideas to the task at hand. Hogan (n.d.) points out that interdisciplinary work 'is typical of feminist scholarship in theology', although Knott (n.d.) says that the 'cross-fertilization' in religious studies is still in its maturing stages. Because women's studies, feminist theology, and religious studies are interdisciplinary, I feel that they work well together in this research project, which does not want to be pigeonholed but rather seeks to spread itself along various lines of inquiry.

Practically, I had many years' experience conducting interviews with all sorts of people and in a variety of situations. Although there are differences between academic research interviews and the kinds of interviewing I had done in my career, nevertheless I was comfortable with meeting strangers, asking questions, using a tape recorder, and listening. I also think that my maturity and self-confidence, and my natural interest in older people, helped me meet the challenge.

#### i. Insider/outsider status

All researchers are, to varying degrees, both insiders and outsiders to the worlds they study. My stance as insider/outsider runs through the entire journey of this project, and I have come to see myself as both an insider and an outsider, on several levels. My position as an insider is rather straightforward. I am a resident of York and have acquaintances and friends in common with some of the interviewees. My first language is English (albeit of the American variety). My partner is a native-born resident of York, which gave me an additional insider status through association with him. My common ground with the interviewees came from our shared femaleness, whiteness, Christianity, (presumed) heterosexual orientation, and churchgoing status. Davies notes that, when conducting ethnographic research in a society 'not their own...[anthropologists] usually require a period of participant observation before interviewing is likely to produce anything but very rudimentary knowledge' (1999:108). In my case, that

---

<sup>4</sup> I had a full-time career in the retail industry for 17 years between completing my undergraduate degree and beginning my postgraduate studies.



period of participant observation consisted of the three years I spent in York as a postgraduate student working on my masters degree and then in the initial stages of my PhD research, before actually interviewing the majority of the women for this study.

But I regularly felt myself to be more of an outsider than an insider. My outsider status stemmed from three key areas of my identity: nationality (US versus UK), age (younger versus older), and education (postgraduate versus, in most cases, school leaver). On each of these fronts, the interviewees and I lacked a common, shared language. In my early 40s, I was more than 20 years younger than the youngest of the women and 55 years younger than the oldest. My experience of Methodism in the US was different from the Methodism the interviewees knew, either as adherents or as observers. I grew up in a culture where church and state are constitutionally separate, not constitutionally joined as they are in Britain.<sup>5</sup> Where I thought I might feel in the majority—a Christian—I discovered I was, in fact, in the minority because my habit of churchgoing actually makes me a bit of an oddity among the population at large.<sup>6</sup> And, I was a scholar, pursuing an advanced degree, not a wife, widow, or retiree. I was (and am) single and have no children, so I am an outsider to married life and motherhood.

Had I had more in common with the interviewees, I might have had a more immediate understanding of what the women told me. But the advantages of being an outsider were several. When it came to recruiting interviewees (see later in this chapter), I put my nationality on the agenda because I hoped it would add a note of interest or intrigue, as it had for Hubbert (1991). She notes that her ‘Australian nationality was a positive feature in [her] acceptance’, as her informants spoke of their own connections to that country (1991:38). My interviewees expressed an initial curiosity about why an American would be in Britain, and what my background in the States was. The “American thing” often brought out the women’s own experiences with travelling to the States, of having family abroad, or of meeting Americans who were on holiday in this country. (This was the one difference most often commented upon by the interviewees. They almost always asked me how long I would be in the country, which might have been a matter of curiosity or perhaps a way of ascertaining how committed I was to their culture.<sup>7</sup>)

---

<sup>5</sup> Although Methodism, the denomination of which I am a member, is *not* the state religion in the UK. As Sahgal and Yuval-Davis point out, ‘members of non-Established Churches, and especially non-Christians, can be only partial members of the British national collectivity’ (1992a:13). How much more so is this true for aliens!

<sup>6</sup> There is minimal churchgoing in the UK, even for rites of passage such as christenings, weddings, and funerals (Howse, 1999:6). In contrast, the US is a highly “belonging” and “practising” religious culture. Maybe, in a perverse way, my sense of alienation from established forms of worship in the UK gives me something in common with the average Briton who feels the same way.

<sup>7</sup> Reinharz (1997) reports that the same thing happened to her when she conducted research within a kibbutz.

Reinharz says that '[a]lthough the researcher may consider "being a researcher" one's most salient self, community members may not agree' (1997:3), and it is the identities assigned to the researcher by the informants that determines how successful the interviews (and the research as a whole) will be. How did the interviewees perceive me? How did they interpret my position in relationship to themselves, if at all? Did they focus on my nationality and whatever assumptions they had about Americans, or were they more concerned about some other aspect of my identity, such as my postgraduate student status? (I deliberately chose to present myself—visually—as a student, rather than as a professional, reinforcing this identity by arriving at their home by bicycle, by bus, or on foot, by not wearing makeup or jewellery, and by dressing casually.) Or did they focus on my membership of a local church, seeing me as a representative of that congregation? Did my relative youth and my unmarried status (i.e. "inexperience" in life) give me less status than themselves? I never explored these questions with the interviewees. In the end, it may have been my identity as a woman that was most important, for Finch notes that this 'provides the entrée into the interview situation' (1984:79), and the subsequent ease in getting women to talk (78).

Finally, being an outsider caused me to question words and ideas (such as cultural references) frequently, checking for understanding; thus, I may have picked up on subtleties that an insider would not have noticed. I took nothing for granted.<sup>8</sup> This, I believe, is what Jaffee is getting at when he says that '*[n]o matter what religion or irreligion we personally pursue, and no matter what religious tradition we study, we are as scholars outsiders to the thing we are trying to grasp... Our achievement... depends primarily on the disciplined exercise of curiosity*' (1999:281; author's emphasis).<sup>9</sup>

### **6.2.2 Preparing to investigate**

When considering how best to investigate the research questions, I was, in the first instance, strongly influenced by feminist methodological concerns and values. These affected all stages of the research. The key features and goals of feminist research have been identified as: valuing and foregrounding women's experience, the researcher's as well as the researched; a recognition that gender is an important feature of women's experience; allowing women's voices to be heard and to be heard accurately; recognising women's diversity as well as women's commonality; taking a collaborative approach; working to overcome hierarchical relationships between researchers and researched, so that researched persons are not objects but have their own subjectivity; consciousness-raising; advocating for women, working to overcome forms of oppression, and taking steps that lead to social change; empowering women; encouraging reflexivity on the part of the researcher; and employing multiple methods, often incorporating

---

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Martin Green, Chief Executive, Counsel and Care, for this suggestion.



quantitative and qualitative forms (Thompson and Priestley, 1996; Foltz, 2000; and Hill, et al., 2000). Therefore, as Campbell and Wasco write, ‘the process of research is of as much importance as the outcome’ (2000:783).

Despite these very specific features and goals, there is no “cookbook” or “tick list” of particular feminist research methods. Rather, ‘[i]t is perhaps more accurate to speak of “feminist approaches to research”...as opposed to “feminist methods”’ (Campbell and Wasco, 2000:783). Lather writes, ‘to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one’s inquiry’ (1988:571). Adds Luff, ‘[u]nderstanding the specific experiences of differing groups of women as women in all our diversity is therefore essential to a feminist project’ (1999:690).<sup>10</sup> She goes on to caution that these experiences, however, are ‘insufficient in themselves’ to construct feminist knowledge, and that what is needed is interpretation (690-691). One possibility might be to take experiences, interpret them, and build up a theory, as is the emphasis in grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1999:74). However, that is not my intent in this project. Rather, I am taking as my starting the point the theories/theologies of certain feminist theologians, and examining them in relation to the responses of a sample of older women.

As this chapter develops, I will discuss specific feminist concerns relevant to the various stages of the project. Here, I will concentrate on demonstrating and valuing community, connection, and caring and how this led to a choice of qualitative research methods. I will conclude by detailing the characteristics and parameters of the interviewee group.

#### i. Demonstrating and valuing community, connection, and caring

As noted in Chapter 2, the concepts of community, connection, and caring are very important to feminists and feminist theologians. For this reason, and because these themes are central to this project, it was important to me that I demonstrate principles of community, connection, and caring in selecting and employing my methods.

Campbell and Wasco comment that ‘[a]t a methodological level, the process of examining [women’s lived] experiences must reflect an ethic of respect, collaboration, and caring’ (2000:775). My project established a temporary community of two with each interviewee. We forged a connection, and caring was demonstrated in the way we helped each other in the

---

<sup>9</sup> Jaffee does not clarify what he means by “disciplined”, although later on he uses the word “informed” (284), which may offer a clue.

<sup>10</sup> There have been debates among feminists as to what constitutes feminist methodology (Luff, 1999:689). Post-feminists have challenged the category “woman”, resulting in ‘changes in feminist epistemology [that] have cast doubt on the idea that there can be a feminist knowledge and, by implication, feminist research’ (Franks, 1998:86). De Groot and Maynard believe that ‘defusing the concept of “woman” [risks] undermining the Women’s Studies project’ (1993b:155).

process. Listening uncritically at the time an interview was conducted, sharing my relevant experiences and feelings, and providing helpful information and resources in response to topics raised in an interview were all ways I demonstrated caring. During the course of the pilot interviews, I brought gifts of tea and coffee to the interviewees, harvested rhubarb, and collected a prescription. In return, I accepted three evening meals and several cups of tea with biscuits as a demonstration of the various interviewees' desires to fulfil the office of hostess. These exchanges allowed both the interviewees and me to assume the dual roles of giver and receiver of care in our interactions. Because I came to this country and my church as an outsider/newcomer and had worked hard to establish connections in my personal life, I had a heightened sensitivity to the interviewees' discussions of (not) belonging.

Another area where feminists have placed themselves at opposite poles from traditional methods of research is when it comes to the openness and involvement of the interviewer. Traditionally, interviewers were instructed to be as neutral and "faceless" as possible, so as not to contaminate the data collected. If asked a question, the interviewer demurred or gave a noncommittal answer. One of the ways this 'artificial distance' (Hill, et al., 2000: 762) is created and maintained is by withholding information, either about the project or about ourselves as researchers, from the informants. This sets up an unequal power relationship where the researcher has information that the researched do not. Oakley debunks what she terms the 'masculine model' (1981:31) of the interviewing process, wherein the interviewer is detached and somewhat mysterious and where uniformity between interviews is desirable, in favour of non-hierarchical relationships and personally invested interviewers (41). Feminists believe that the masculine model is contrary to the value women place on relationships (in which both parties, researcher and researched, possess subjectivity), and that the traditional approach also maintains the hierarchy of interviewer over respondents.

For a true partnership to develop, truthfulness, openness, and a willingness to share of herself are valuable qualities on the part of the interviewer (Oakley, 1981). When asked a question, researchers should answer it as openly and honestly as they feel they can in the given circumstances. Particularly regarding interviews, feminist researchers value 'interactive, reciprocal self-disclosure' (Lather, 1988:572). It is possible to use self-disclosure in a manipulative (Davies, 1999:101) or even dishonest way (if what is disclosed to interviewees is not truthful). The object of self-disclosure (in the feminist view) is not merely to increase the likelihood of participants' trust and sharing, but to enhance the collaborative nature of the encounter, to "connect" with participants (Campbell and Wasco, 2000:786). Although I never gave false answers to questions and I tried to answer every question asked of me as honestly as possible (without taking up valuable interview time), I did not always express everything I was



thinking. I was much more open about my research and myself as a student, which was the context for the interview, than I was about the particulars of my personal life.<sup>11</sup>

A potential problem in an interview, especially a face-to-face encounter, is that the interviewer may appear to be judgmental, either in the wording of her questions or in the manner in which they are asked (Dillon, 1990:145). I tried to avoid this in preparing the questions and in the actual interviews themselves, although there were certainly times when I showed approval or support for an interviewee, as when Mary mentioned that she was thinking of mentoring a schoolgirl. In fact, my concern was not to show any disapproval; I felt that to show approval would be encouraging and reinforcing, not only being truthful (as I only showed approval when I felt it) and open of myself, but also would encourage the interviewee to say more on the same subject. Conversely, by not showing agreement or approval of other views with which I disagreed, the interviewee may have been left thinking either that my silence meant consent or that my silence itself was disapproval.

Even when establishing a connection is a goal, as it was for me, and despite valuing reciprocal, non-hierarchical relationships, both researcher and researched hold various forms of power. While Finch suggests that ‘a female sociologist doing research on women actually shares the powerless position of those she researches’ (1984:86), there are other levels where this is untrue. For example, a number of feminist researchers have discovered that informants often have more power than the researcher (Oakley, 1981; Franks, 1998; Luff, 1999), especially when it comes to withholding information the researcher wants—or would want, if she only knew it existed. We will see other examples as the chapter—and the journey—unfold.

For example, we are, ultimately, researchers, whether or not we are also friends. The power to determine the subjects of interest and of study is entirely the researcher’s (with some involvement, of course, from supervisors). Thus, though a very talkative interviewee might spend a great deal of time on topics which are of concern to her, if they do not fit into the researcher’s scheme, then they may be lost. Even if the researcher is able to account for these new directions in some fashion, they most likely will not dominate or change the overall direction of the project. This is certainly true in the case of a PhD as student researchers are largely expected to adhere to the proposals they submit. Subjects may refine the questions and topics under discussion (Pawson, 1996:306)—and we hope they will in order to generate new knowledge—but are unlikely to alter them entirely. Shaw reminds feminist researchers to be aware of the differences between themselves and the women (if it is women) they study, in order not to reproduce existing power differentials and a ‘colonizing discourse’ (1999:112).

---

<sup>11</sup> I took this cue from Mauthner (1998:50-51).

A modern conceptualisation of the interview is that it is a process, ‘a meaning-making occasion’ (Gubrium, 1993:181), in which the interviewer is actively engaged in working with the interviewee to understand the ideas and feelings the latter is offering. As DeVault notes, ‘[when the] researcher is actively involved with respondents...together they are constructing fuller answers to questions that cannot always be asked in simple, straightforward ways’ (1990:100). Part of working collaboratively is being able to trust the people you work with. The interviewees—depending on whether and how well they knew me previously—had a varying degree of trust they could place in me. They trusted me not only to honour my promise of confidentiality and anonymity, but also to represent them fairly and honestly in my work. I was surprised when a number of the women I knew well (prior to this research) said that they trusted me implicitly. This was gratifying, but also added to the sense of responsibility I had towards them. Being conscious of this responsibility was another way for me to demonstrate caring.

My concerns about demonstrating community, connection, and caring, about working to elicit the richest possible material, and about representing women’s experiences and views faithfully (along with a recognition of my own experience with research methods) led me to choose a qualitative framework for data collection—specifically, semi-structured interviewing.

## ii. Qualitative research

Feminist methodologies, while not neglecting the value of quantitative methods, have placed a considerable emphasis on qualitative methods in research. There are several reasons for this. First, quantitative methods often force researched persons to place themselves into pre-determined (i.e. researcher-determined) categories that may not accurately reflect those people’s experiences. Also, ‘[q]ualitative methods...help to give the voices of participants a primary place in research results’ (Hill, et al., 2000:765). (We will return to this later in the chapter.)

The goal of this project is to produce a portrait of experiences and understandings of community, connection, and caring among older churchgoing women. Because these concepts (as I have defined them) are subjective rather than objective in nature, and because my interest is in ‘interpretation rather than measurement’ (O’Brien, 1996:4), a qualitative research technique is preferable. Further, Gee and Kimball suggest that ‘more naturalistic and qualitative methodologies...are appropriate to the study of women and aging, given that women may define their social world in a way that emphasizes the quality of interpersonal relationships’ (1987:14).

Quantitative methods, such as questionnaires and structured interviewing techniques, would be appropriate for collecting statistical data from a large number of women, but would leave little or no scope for the women’s own interpretations of their experiences. Also, when working with older people, qualitative methods are usually more effective than requesting written responses to



questions (Keats, 2000:116). Interviewing allows people to speak at their own pace in their own words (rather than in the words of the interviewer, as with multiple choice or closed-ended questioning). Interviewees may be inclined to reveal more in an extended conversation than they would either in a structured survey or on a paper questionnaire.<sup>12</sup> Further, persons who have less formal education than the researcher may feel disinclined to complete a written questionnaire, but be less worried about their verbal articulation skills.

To collect data from older women themselves, I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. I used a schedule with open-ended questions, with some additional use of first-person documents (i.e. letters and autobiographical writings) supplied by some of the interviewees. As Davies notes, the purpose of such interviewing ‘is to obtain a variety of interpretations rather than to seek consistencies in responses in order to develop statistical generalizations’ (1999:98). Anderson and Jack state that, in the interview, we must make ‘a shift in methodology from information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction, where the focus is on process, on the dynamic unfolding of the subject’s viewpoint’ (1991:23). However, while statistical generalizations may not be the aim, I will be presenting the findings in such a way as to show both ‘the variability [and] the generality’ (Blaxter, et al., 1996:184) of the data.

### iii. Determining interviewee characteristics and parameters

The first decision to make was exactly how to determine what “older” would mean for this project. As we saw in Chapter 1, older age is not a monolithic category. Women between 60 and 75 have been variously called “the young-old”, “the third age”, and “the creative retired”.<sup>13</sup> They are the volunteers, the workers, and the active do-ers of the older population. In contrast, those over 75—variously termed “the old-old” or the “the frail elderly” (Brierley, 2000:14)—are more likely to have worries about dying, to have a dwindling circle of awareness, to have bereavement issues, to experience isolation and dependency, to feel not valued, and to see change as bewildering.<sup>14</sup> For the practical purpose of selecting interviewees, however, I had to choose people in some objective way that would result in a cohesive, recognisable group. I settled on age 65 as a lower threshold. While arbitrary, it was not whimsical. It allowed me to select a pre-WW2 cohort.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> This is not necessarily true for all people, however. Some sensitive topics may be avoided or downplayed in face-to-face situations, where the interviewee is known to the researcher, rather than on paper, where the interviewee can remain anonymous.

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Rev. Phil Hoar for this last term.

<sup>14</sup> Again, thanks to Rev. Phil Hoar for this list.

<sup>15</sup> Jerrome, referring to Mannheim, discusses the differences between cohorts and generations, saying that the term cohort ‘is used to describe a group of individuals born in a particular time interval. A generation consists of people who may make up only part of a cohort but are a unit by virtue of their historical consciousness and sense of common interests’ (1992:149). Thus, cohorts can cover a longer, more flexible period of time, one based on external events; a generation is generally understood to be about 30 years, the time it takes for children to replace their parents (Tulloch, 1993:623). (See Mannheim, K, 1952.

As noted in Chapter 2, the women I interviewed were all born prior to the outbreak of WW2, and some of them before WW1. Although there were different generations within this group, there were certain characteristics they all shared. They were, for example, all raised by parents who themselves lived before WW2, and therefore were brought up with certain values and expectations, such as respect for established authorities. Further,

*Pre-war* generations in Britain...grew up under the influence of the churches, or, at least, under the influence of a wide network of para-church organizations. By no means all British people practised their faith with regularity, but they possessed, nonetheless, a degree of religious knowledge that had some sort of connection with orthodox Christianity (Davie, 1994:122; author's emphasis).

The idea that 'religious beliefs and practices differ among generational cohorts' is widely argued (Zech, 2000:545). One of the key theorists in this area is Douglas Walrath (1987). Although his perspective is American, there is much that is strongly similar to the British experience, particularly for the cohort of women I am investigating, and I believe it is quite helpful.

The women I interviewed fall into Walrath's cohort named "Strivers", born between 1901 and 1931. For them, '[t]he years that formed and followed their primary acculturation were dominated by massive efforts to survive against nearly overwhelming odds' (1987:40).<sup>16</sup> War and economic depression were key life events (40). Strivers 'see the basic institutions of life—the family, nation, and church—as inherently good, to be protected, not changed' (81). Obeying moral absolutes and fulfilling one's duty are the proper way to live (82-83). God is a given (84), and 'the church is central, an essential, stabilizing force in...society. Going to church and Sunday school are good for you' (86). Walrath concurs with Davie when he says that '[t]he Strivers' framework assumes a basic belonging [to a Christian church]...The core act of believing, for Strivers, is belonging' (91).<sup>17</sup>

I was unable to find an equivalent British study,<sup>18</sup> so I have composed my own list of formative influences on this cohort: WW1, WW2, rationing, economic depression, peak of British empire,

---

'The problem of generations' in K Mannheim, ed, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, New York.)

<sup>16</sup> Again, keeping in mind that Walrath is speaking of America. In Britain, I would propose that the Strivers cohort extends to those born through 1945—the end of WW2—because of the loss of civilian lives and domestic infrastructure during the war, the continuation of rationing, etc. There was certainly a slower economic recovery in Britain than in the United States, delaying the optimism Walrath writes of until at least 1951, the year of the Festival of Britain, which marked a formal end to years of austerity.

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, 'many Strivers think that to belong and know that one belongs is faith enough' (95), and they '[look] for a way to fit in' (96). We will see how this comes out in the following chapters, when the interviewees speak for themselves and the various communities, church and non-church, to which they belong.

<sup>18</sup> However, Richter and Francis (1998) do discuss Baby Boomers and Baby Busters, their cultural differences with older generations, and the type of church life they seek—and avoid.



beginning of Commonwealth, peak of authority of church and state, decline of importance of the class system, introduction of welfare state.<sup>19</sup> I think it is important to highlight the last item I have named in the preceding list: the introduction of the welfare state. The interviewees (and their parents) were part of ‘an era when few formal sources of support were available and neighbors and friends depended mutually on one another’ (MacRae, 1995:162). This, I believe, has a strong influence on how the women view community, connection, and caring and how the three processes are related to one another.<sup>20</sup>

I chose York as the fieldwork site because I live there, and also because it is virgin territory for a project of this kind. (It is also a mid-size urban centre in the north of England, which contrasts with Hubbert’s work in a semi-rural village in Cambridgeshire.) I sought women who were church members and churchgoing, living in three settings: their own home (ambulatory), housebound (able to attend church with assistance), and living in a local Methodist residential home (either ambulatory or attenders with assistance).<sup>21</sup> I deliberately did not seek to interview persons who were, for whatever reason, not able to communicate their thoughts to me; thus, I did not interview persons with dementia. Although some of the interviewees had serious health problems, they were coping well (at least in their estimation) and felt able to participate.

The women I selected were all either Methodist or Anglican.<sup>22</sup> I did not interview any women of other denominations because I did not want to stray too far afield into the traditions of other denominations. In a relatively small sample, I thought it best to have consistency in this area. And, by studying mainly Methodist women, I built on work done nation-wide by the Methodist Church through its arm, Methodist Homes for the Aged.<sup>23</sup>

I did not include a control group of non-churchgoing women because I was not concerned with making a comparative study.<sup>24</sup> (In the future, however, it will become increasingly important to look at such women—see Chapter 11.) For the same reason, I did not include any men in my study. I did not focus on “difference” as a concern with this project, and I readily admit that the overall homogeneity of the group of interviewees—a result of the snowball sampling method of

---

<sup>19</sup> I informally checked the list with various people, who said they thought it was reasonably accurate.

<sup>20</sup> An important caveat: My project is cross-sectional, looking at a group of women at one point in time, rather than longitudinal, which would follow specific individuals over a number of years. This raises the issue of whether observed characteristics are due to the ageing process itself or instead due to the era in which the women were born. ‘Since most of the research on women and aging is cross-sectional’, write Gee and Kimball, ‘confounding of age changes and cohort differences is an ever-present problem that must be considered when evaluating research’ (1987:11).

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix II for a demographic profile of the interviewee group.

<sup>22</sup> One interviewee was Baptist, but this did not emerge until well into the interview, so I continued. (She had been recruited by a gatekeeper, who either did not know she was a Baptist or did not know this was important to me.)

<sup>23</sup> See Age Awareness Project (1998), Jewell (1998, 1999b, 2001), Sanger (1999), and Brierley (2000).

<sup>24</sup> However, Brierley (2000), a quantitative study of older churchgoers, also includes some data on older non-churchgoers.

selection and my own biases in selecting the first several interviewees (they ‘[reflected] my own social network’ [Miller, 1998:63] of predominantly white, Anglo, heterosexual persons)—is a limitation of the project (Zorn and Johnson, 1997:217).

As an American, the British class system is foreign to me. Ever since I came to the UK, I have been struck by the emphasis on social class and curious as to how it is determined. It was apparent that some of the interviewees were financially better off than some of the others—either because they said they were well-off, or because they lived in nicer homes in better neighbourhoods. But, class was not a factor that concerned me in terms of the project; so, for the reader who would wish to know more on this subject, I must disappoint.

### **6.3 Setting off and travelling: piloting and fieldwork**

In this section, I will review the mechanics of the interviewing process, beginning with the pilot stage and continuing through the fieldwork. At each point, I will bring in the methodological issues borne in mind. In essence, I will show how I got older women to talk about community, connection, and caring, and the role these play in their lives.

#### **6.3.1 Piloting**

The first step in the interviewing process—and this is often the most challenging—was to develop an interview schedule. In addition to listing all of the questions that came to mind that I might like to ask older churchgoing women, I also considered questions that had been asked by others who had done research among older people, some of it related to church or religion (e.g. Hubbert, 1991; Gubrium, 1993; and the Sir Halley Stewart Age Awareness Project<sup>25</sup>). These other interview schedules and questionnaires helped clarify what I wanted to ask about and, importantly, what subjects I did not want to address. For example, I decided early on that, although interesting, I would not ask about “feminist topics”, such as women’s ordination and inclusive language, nor about adherence to doctrines and creeds. Even so, the first iterations of the interview schedule (the ones I used for the pilot interviews) contained many more questions than the final version I used in the fieldwork phase. For example, I asked some general questions about religious belief and about corporate and private religious activities and practices. I asked the pilot interviewees about their ideas regarding God and Jesus. All of these came at the start of the interview, before I asked about specific communities, connection, caring, or being older.

I conducted five pilot interviews in the Spring of 1999.<sup>26</sup> Once these were completed, I typed the transcripts, verbatim, and began to analyse them. I looked not only for instances where the

---

<sup>25</sup> Unpublished questionnaire; supplied by MHA for reference.

<sup>26</sup> These are included in the data I analysed.



three main themes were discussed, but also for additional topics that emerged from the pilot interviews. I then grouped these topics into categories, which corresponded with the three themes of the project. These are listed below, along with some of the subcategories I identified:

- Community
  - Family
  - Church, Christian faith, the afterlife
  - Home
  - All other communities
- Connection
  - Relationships
  - Identity
  - Roles
  - Belonging
  - Friendship
  - Principles, moral standards
  - God
  - Paranormal and unconventional experiences
  - Isolation, exclusion, and other problems
  - Dealing with change: the past, the present, and the future
  - Ageing and being older
- Caring
  - Giving and receiving caring
  - Various forms of caring
  - Benefits of caring
  - Problems with caring
  - In/dependence
  - Health issues (physical and mental)

After this analysis stage, I was able to refine, rework, and condense the interview schedule to have it focus on the key themes and issues of the project and eliminate extraneous questions. In the final interview schedule used for the fieldwork,<sup>27</sup> I began by asking about older age, in order to get the interviewees immediately focused on this. I added a list of common assumptions society has about older women in order to provoke reaction and kick-start the conversation. After this, I asked questions about communities, connections, and caring, often picking up on topics that had been significant in the pilot interviews. I asked about families, friendship groups, and important individuals; homes, neighbourhoods, and local churches; and whom they cared

---

<sup>27</sup> See Appendix I.

for/about and who cared for/about them. I asked about belonging, isolation, and dependence; the principles they lived by; their concerns for the future; and their views on the afterlife (with respect to connections with the dead). Finally, I asked them to share wisdom or advice about community, connection, and caring.

An important thing I learned from the pilots was to allow sufficient time for the interviewee to collect her thoughts and answer my questions. Whether this was due to the interviewees' ages or to the subject matter, in any case the pace of conversation needed to be slower. In any interview, silence and pausing are useful ways to give someone space to think and respond. Also, on occasion I was satisfied with an answer, but paused to think about what I wanted to ask next—and the interviewee would add an interesting remark. As one older woman told me in private conversation, 'Now that I'm older, I need more time to think, read, absorb, and understand things'.

Another early decision I had to make was whether to reveal my own opinions to the interviewees. I found that they tended to assume that I shared their views on many things, from Judgement Day to popular television. This was evident from their use of verbal constructions such as 'isn't it?', 'doesn't it?', 'wouldn't it?', 'aren't we?', 'don't you?', and 'you know?'. If not indicating tacit agreement, these phrases at least signalled the assumption that I understood their views. In reality, I mostly kept silent when they said something I disagreed with, as I did not want to take time to debate topics (such as their opposition to unmarried cohabitation or their literal interpretation of the bible) that were tangential to the interview. This made me uncomfortable, but it served to keep the interviewees' views at the forefront of the conversation. Luff (1999) writes of her own sense of deceit in suppressing her opinions: 'Listening to views, nodding or saying simple "umms" or "I see", to views that you strongly disagree with or, ordinarily, would strive to challenge, may be true to a methodology that aims to listen seriously to the views and experiences of others but can feel personally very difficult' (1999:698). I felt that if I challenged the interviewees, it would lead either to a debate or to the rapid end of the interview. And so I censored myself, which kept the interviews going, but felt dishonest.

Analysis of the transcripts led to some final adjustments to the interview schedule. For Q3, Q7, and Q14, I had created index cards with typed lists or scripture verses on them. I quickly discovered that the women either found them hard to read or else they were not interested in reading but in talking and thinking out loud. The cards seemed to be a distraction rather than an aid, so I ceased using them. With respect to the scripture cards (Q14), all of which contained bible verses referring to old age, the reactions were 'this doesn't speak for me—I'm not old yet'. Even for interviewees that I personally know read their bibles daily, these passages were not the ones they turned to. Instead, they looked to scripture that had guided, challenged, or comforted



them all their lives. This raises the question of just how many older people may be interested in hearing what the bible has to say about old age. So, I stopped asking these questions.

Another question I quickly dropped asked about the BBC television programme, “Songs of Praise” (part of Q14). I had assumed that older women might find a sense of community from watching this programme; however, this was not borne out. “Songs of Praise” was never brought up by them, and when I raised it as a topic, it was quickly dismissed. Brierley sheds some light on this. It seems that although 87 per cent of churchgoers watch the programme at least ‘sometimes’ (2000:34), it ranks a distant fifth (out of nine offered possibilities) as a source of spiritual nourishment (32).<sup>28</sup>

One question that I neglected to include in my interview schedule was, ‘Do you attend St Sampson’s Centre for the Over 60s?’ St Sampson’s is a social meeting place and day centre for people over sixty, whether or not they are York residents. Founded in 1974, it operates in a redundant church in the heart of the city centre. When I did think to ask one interviewee, she dismissed the centre with, ‘I should imagine that the people that you’re talking to have more to do with their time than going into the St Sampson’s Centre’. Finally, Q9 I asked only in a few cases, as it did not (on the surface, anyway) ask about the interviewee’s own experience of belonging.

In March 2000, I ran into one of my previous interviewees at a church service. She asked if I had received her message (through an intermediary) not to use the phrase “old women” but rather “older women” in my questions. She said that she and her friends (whom I had also interviewed) did not like the word “old”. Although I had not received her message, I had already made this change in my questioning, as a response to the fact that none of the women were accepting the label “old” for themselves, feeling that it either did not apply to them or that they would not like it applied to them. “Old” had negative connotations with virtually all of the interviewees; therefore, about one-quarter of the way into my fieldwork, I started to use the phrase “older women” and to ask not “Are you old?” but instead “What makes a person old?” Then the women could chose to identify themselves as old or not, without a sense on their part that I had already labelled them thus. The new question made the category “old” one that could be discussed in abstract terms, before moving in closer to talk of themselves personally.

### **6.3.2 Fieldwork**

The main (post-piloting) phase of the fieldwork took six months, from November 1999 through April 2000. In this section, I will discuss how I “recruited” interviewees, the preliminary steps I

---

<sup>28</sup> After church services, hymns and songs, prayer and meditation, and the bible.

took with each interviewee before the actual interview, the interview situation itself, how I closed each interview, and what follow-up steps I took with the interviewees.

#### i. Recruitment of interviewees

My plan was to recruit 25-35 interviewees; I ended up with 40, including the five pilot interviewees. This greater number was because I decided early on that I would never refuse to interview any woman who presented herself to me, because refusing an offer of help would make it harder for the next researcher to find willing participants.

I used four different approaches to recruit interviewees: personal requests, notices in church service sheets and magazines, referral slips, and gatekeepers.<sup>29</sup> I asked certain women to participate, based on my assumption that they met the criteria. These direct, personal requests resulted in nine women agreeing to be interviewed.

I sent the following notice to 11 local Methodist churches (one of which is a Methodist/Anglican ecumenical partnership) for inclusion in their December 1999 and January 2000 service sheets and magazines:

FOR WOMEN ONLY. If you are 65 or over, then an American student could use your help. Janet Eldred is interviewing older Methodist and Anglican women in York about their experiences of community life today, particularly in churches. If you can spare one to two hours for tea and conversation, please ring Janet on xxxxxx. She'll be delighted to hear from you! (Biscuits optional!)

I ran a similar notice (but more personal) at my own church. As far as I know, seven of these 11 churches ran the notice, although some others may have done so and simply not followed up my request (with SAE) that they send me a copy. I know anecdotally that some of these notices were passed along to friends at Anglican churches. This process yielded 10 interviewees.

After the first several interviews I conducted, I sent two "referral slips" to those interviewees inside their thank-you notes (see below). Each slip had the "FOR WOMEN ONLY" text shown above. These slips were designed to require minimal effort from the previous interviewee, who could hand them to women they thought were suitable and leave it to those women to decide whether or not to contact me. This approach yielded eight more interviewees.

Finally, I "employed" several gatekeepers, including the warden and assistant warden at a local church-affiliated residential home, my minister, and a handful of friends and friends-of-friends, to seek out potential interviewees on my behalf. Each gatekeeper had a version of the "FOR

---

<sup>29</sup> Although the term "gatekeeper" is most accurately applied to those individuals who provide access to research participants we could not approach directly, I am using the term in a more general way to mean those persons who help find and recruit potential participants, even in cases where we might negotiate



WOMEN ONLY” notice. The gatekeepers used one of two approaches. Some referred women to me directly, so that I received telephone calls from women saying that so-and-so had mentioned my project and that they were willing to participate. Other times, the gatekeepers gave me the details of women who had given them verbal agreement, and I telephoned them to set up an appointment. This final method of recruitment yielded 13 women, all of whom agreed to proceed.

The most successful method of recruiting interviewees was through a personal contact, either by the previous interviewees, the gatekeepers, or me. The previous interviewees were especially useful, as these women could claim that they had been through the experience and survived—and even enjoyed it. Because we do not want participants to feel coerced, the use of gatekeepers is often helpful, as potential interviewees may feel freer to say “no” to a gatekeeper than to the researcher (Miller, 1998). However, gatekeepers can be a mixed blessing. Without them, we might not find all of the participants we need; with them, we may encounter persons who are unsuitable for various reasons. Miller discusses the problematic aspects of using gatekeepers, one of which is that some participants may be unable or unwilling to speak freely to the researcher if they feel, despite any assurances, that what they reveal will be reported back to the gatekeeper (1998:64). To Miller’s list, I add the fact that gatekeepers do not always represent a project accurately, and thus some women are incorrectly approached (or not approached) or have misunderstandings that need to be corrected at the outset.<sup>30</sup>

In all recruitment scenarios, I explained what my project was about and what would be involved in the interview. I used this initial conversation to prepare the interviewee for the topics and the mechanics of the interview, and to secure an initial consent from them. One of the important ethical considerations of the project was that I be as transparent as possible with the interviewees with respect to anonymity, confidentiality, access to data (i.e. tapes, notes, and transcripts), and the various uses I would make of the data: this thesis, conference papers, a task group, and, potentially publication. I also sought and confirmed verbal consent at the beginning and the conclusion of each interview. All of this was part of negotiating the interviewer/interviewee relationship (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998).

---

with them ourselves. Thus, I am using “gatekeeper” to speak of any intermediary, because there were subtle differences in how my gatekeepers functioned.

<sup>30</sup> Some women, when approached, did decline to be interviewed. Only three women that I approached directly did not respond positively. One woman’s name was given me by a mutual acquaintance. After two telephone calls in which she expressed interest but was unwell, I sent this woman a follow-up letter; she did not respond. A woman at the residential home initially agreed after contact through a gatekeeper; however, when I approached her in person at a coffee morning, she said she had changed her mind. The final woman was a member of my church whom I wrote to; either she did not receive the letter or she chose to ignore it. One of my gatekeepers told me that she approached many women on my behalf, but only about half agreed to be interviewed.

I also made sure that I only sought women who seemed capable of understanding my purpose and of what their consent meant. I informed them of the possibility of emotional reaction to questions (anger, sadness).<sup>31</sup> I told each interviewee that she could choose not to respond to any question, without explanation on her part; that she could ask for clarification at any time; and that she could halt the interview at any time, either temporarily or for good. My aim was to have the interviewees be as informed as possible and to let them know that they had power and control in the interview, no less than I did. The standard view is of researchers as powerful ‘bad guys’ and older people as exploited ‘victims’ (Russell, 1999:415). Russell takes a different view, writing that her interviewees were not vulnerable at all. Many of them, she says, exercised ‘considerable power...[and] participated very much on their own terms’ (1999:414).

For example, my roles, in the eyes of the interviewees, were multiple. At any one time and for any one person, I could have been perceived to be a friend, church visitor, fellow congregant, audience, interviewer, and student, as well as the more sinister exploiter, spy, and judge. Therefore, it was important that I be clear about my key role of interviewer and my intentions in the interview situation.

## ii. Preliminaries

All of the interviews were conducted at the interviewees’ homes.<sup>32</sup> When I arrived, there were certain steps I took prior to using the interview schedule and tape recording the conversation. As just noted, I re-stated the purposes of the interview with respect to the project as a whole and how I intended to use the information collected. (Several of the women were pleased to learn that I planned to make their views known to a wider, popular audience in addition to the academic one.) I also asked, again, for their consent, both to the interview itself and to tape recording and note taking.<sup>33</sup> A few of the interviewees seemed to misunderstand why I was interviewing them, either because my gatekeepers had misrepresented the project, because I had not been clear, or because they had not been attentive during our phone conversation. This preliminary discussion was a chance to clear up any misconceptions.

Although in many ways interviewing older people is the same as interviewing people of any age, there are certain physical, personal, and social differences that should be taken into

---

<sup>31</sup> Thanks to pilot interviewee, Barbara, who suggested I do this.

<sup>32</sup> There is an interesting angle to the interview setting that harks back to the public/private debate discussed in Chapter 3. Edwards and Ribbens note that interviews often take place in interviewees’ homes, which are, by the above definition, private spaces (1998:14). Those interviews also (usually) discuss private topics (2). However, do those spaces and those topics then become public when the researcher enters, especially as she represents the world of universities and publication, a world with a (potentially) large (public) audience? Certainly the fact that the interviews were conducted in their homes, rather than in mine or on some neutral territory, may have given the women a power base of working from “their own turf”.

<sup>33</sup> Only one interviewee asked not to be tape recorded; all of the others were perfectly at ease with it and with the note taking.



consideration. Keats (2000:115-119) lists a number of these, which I will summarise here. On the physical side, some older people will have problems with one or more of the following: hearing, eyesight, mobility, and memory loss. (Regarding hearing, eyesight, and mobility problems, I was not as prepared for these as I should have been. But, I quickly fell into step, asking interviewees at the start if they could see and hear me clearly and positioning myself where they suggested I sit.)

On the personal and social side, respect and politeness, patience, and an appropriate use of verbal and body language are all helpful tools to bring to interviews with older people. I always began by addressing the interviewee as either Miss or Mrs So-and-so, until and unless she asked me to use her first name (and not all did). I used a slower, louder, and slightly more formal manner of speaking so that the interviewees could understand my accent and the meanings of the words I chose. I also did not use any extreme body movements or gestures, and made sure that I was relaxed and smiling throughout—showing I was pleased to be there, just as I felt I was. I allowed ample time for the interviewees to say as much as they wished, and tried to let them complete their thoughts without rushing on to the next question.

One of the concerns I had was how I could compensate the women for their time and, I hoped, openness in speaking with me (Scanlon, 1993:640). I wanted to choose some method of “payment” that would not be insulting or demeaning, or imply that this was a mere business transaction. I wanted to signal to them that I knew that what they gave me through their sharing was of value and truly appreciated. I did not want to act as though a “visit from Janet” was sufficient payment for access to their homes, time, and thoughts. I finally settled on a token gift of a packet of biscuits and some tea bags, neatly wrapped with ribbon. This would be inexpensive enough not to be refused. As many of the women offered me either tea or coffee and biscuits or cake as soon as I entered their home, I always stated that this gift was a treat for them to have some other day, to either share with friends or to have as a reminder of our time together. Although some of the interviewees had a bit of difficulty accepting even such a small gift, after a bit of persuasion, none of them refused it.

### iii. The interview

The interviews lasted from one to two hours. The subject matter of the interview schedule was always addressed, although sometimes a comment from an interviewee caused me to reorganise the order of questions to pick up an idea at the point it was introduced. The older women I spoke with may have been concerned about their articulation of ideas, especially to a researcher working towards a higher degree.<sup>34</sup> Finch writes of the enthusiasm with which female

---

<sup>34</sup> However, a low level of articulation does not equate with a lack of wisdom on the part of the interviewee. (Thanks to Rev. Andrew Martlew, Diocesan Director of Education, York Diocese. Church of

respondents open up to a female interviewer, 'even if they have some initial anxieties about the purpose of the research or their own "performance" in the interview situation' (1984:72).

For the seven interviews I conducted in residential and nursing homes, I made the schedule shorter, aiming for a one-hour maximum interview, as I had been informed by my gatekeepers at the home that some of the interviewees did not want to go beyond this time frame. Because the home is a different sort of living arrangement from a private/council house or flat (where all of the other interviewees lived), I wanted to focus on this arrangement as a particular sort of self-contained community. Therefore, I focused on four key areas: (1) being older, (2) the residential/nursing home as a community, (3) the church as a community, and (4) the afterlife and connections with deceased persons. Connections and caring were discussed within these contexts. The fact that these women lived in residential homes was not a significant factor in their discussion of the topics. Therefore, I have not singled out their comments from those of the other interviewees.

Privacy, though desired, may not be possible in communal living settings such as a nursing home; however, I was able to interview each woman alone in either her own home or in a private room. Occasionally, the interviews were interrupted by others (i.e. friends, neighbours, family members, and staff) coming into the house, flat, or room to visit or to ask questions. When that happened, I turned off the tape recorder until the interviewee had finished her business and was ready to resume.

Keats mentions that for older people, especially those who live alone, interviews can be 'a pleasant social interlude...[offering] companionship and stimulation, however transitory' (2000:116). This was certainly the case when I conducted my interviews. Either the interviewees said as much in so many words, or they indicated it in other ways by offering refreshment, displaying relaxed body language, and inviting me to return on a social basis. One problem with interviewees who view the event as a social occasion, however, is that the interviewer might lose control of the interview, and that it will then degenerate into following the path of interest set by the interviewee. This did happen with a handful of the women I spoke with, women who either spoke so quickly that they could not be interrupted or women who had a "set story" that they told about their lives regardless of what I asked. Usually I was successful at bringing the interview back on track, but even where I was not, I have included these women in my sample because, upon reading the transcripts, I found they always had something useful to say.

---

England, for this observation.) Being able to communicate is not the same as being articulate. I was not unduly concerned about this, although some of my gatekeepers were, and deliberately "selected" women



#### iv. Closing and follow-up

At the end of each interview, I asked the woman, now that she knew what she had said for the record, if it was all right to use her words. Everyone gave her consent. As I usually stayed for a chat and another cup of coffee before leaving, the interviewees frequently made further comments that were relevant to what we had discussed on tape. I noted these, and included them in the data. That evening, I wrote a thank you note to the interviewee. The thank-you notes were genuine; but, they also provided a means of helping me recruit more interviewees (see “referral slips” discussion above) and of giving the women my telephone number and address. Some women did contact me, either to thank me for my interest, to mention additional ideas related to our conversation, or to suggest potential interviewees.

The final payment I plan to offer the women I spoke with will be indirect but I hope still beneficial: ‘advocacy work on a larger scale’ (Scanlon, 1993:645). I informed each interviewee at the time of the interview that I hoped to be able to promulgate the findings of my research more broadly than just in the thesis itself. My hope, echoed by a number of the women, is that the information they gave me about their experiences will be used by church members, clergy, and other interested parties to enhance their own understanding of older churchgoing women—their concerns, needs, and contributions to the communities of which they are a part, and the roles connection and caring play in their lives.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, feminist scholars believe it is not only ethical but imperative that researchers use their work to redress women’s oppression under patriarchal systems. Taking a stand in support of less powerful groups is also a tenet of practical theology. Therefore, I have two solid foundations on which to rest my advocacy. I cannot be neutral, as I am passionately interested in supporting and advocating for older people, especially older women, and because I am a Christian who is concerned about the life of church congregations. Although I could not divorce myself entirely from an “us versus them” mindset with respect to “age”, I did feel a sense of solidarity with the interviewees with respect to gender, faith group, and the fact that I am becoming an “older woman” myself. Both for these older women and for my own future, I ask, ‘What lies ahead?’ and ‘How can I make it better?’

One question for theological methodology is, ‘[i]s theology merely a theoretical exercise accomplished on the basis of a given set of theoretical presuppositions, or should the very approach to its subject matter be necessarily rooted in concrete human experiences?’ (Jeanrond, 1992:482). Liberal theologies say the latter, and liberation theologies (such as feminist theologies) further stress that ‘the praxis of liberation’ must be part of the methodology (485). The same is true of pastoral theology, which is ‘seen as offering models for transformative

---

that they believed to be quite articulate and thoughtful.

action, rather than purely theoretical reflection' (McGrath, 1997:150). This answers the question of "why do this, why a *practical* theology" (already answered in Chapter 2): because I believe in action, not just reflection. Why not just discuss community, connection, and caring in older women's lives without this added piece? Because feminists believe research should lead to social change.

#### **6.4 Arriving and unpacking: transcript analysis and reflection**

Once the journey's initial destination—that of having data in hand—is reached, it is time to unpack and sort through what has been gathered. Here, I will describe how I analysed the transcripts, and conclude the chapter with a reflection on the methodological process as a whole.

##### **6.4.1 Transcript analysis**

I transcribed each of the interview tapes myself, verbatim and in its entirety, typing once through and then re-playing the tape to check and correct. The first step after each transcription was printed was to read it through and to write a single-page summary of the content, including my reaction to the overall mood or feelings expressed (following Hycner [1999]). This included a few sentences on how the three key themes of community, connection, and caring were exemplified in each interview. I then created a free-hand diagram of the relationships between the interviewee and the persons and communities in her life, which helped me picture (literally) the connections that existed (or in some cases, no longer existed) in her life.<sup>35</sup>

The final, and most complex and intellectually challenging, stage of the analytical process was to code each interview. I use the term "code" loosely. Working with the list of key topics that I had developed after the pilot interviews, I assigned a colour to each topic and subcategory, and then read through each transcript again, marking passages by colour(s) and handwriting notes next to each colour to indicate specifically what relation the interviewee's words had to the topic. In this way, I would not only be able to draw comparisons across interviews (by matching colours), but also be able to maintain the individuality that each interviewee brought to the topics concerned. The categories were broad enough that I could account for everything that a woman discussed with at least one colour (and sometimes two or three) and not skip over statements that did not fit into preconceived notions of what was important. In this way, I sought to '[delay] the reductionist stage of data analysis when transcripts are cut up into themes and aggregated' (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998:134). This approach allowed me to continue to see each interviewee as a complete, unique individual as deeply into the analysis process as possible (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998:134). By organising the data in these different ways—verbatim transcripts, single-page summaries, diagrams, and colour-coded topics—involving four separate encounters with the complete texts of the interviews (not counting the actual interview

---

<sup>35</sup> See Appendix III for a reproduction of one such diagram.



interaction itself), I was able to pick up on particular meanings and nuances that I might not have if I had only created transcripts and plucked out the words that discussed my key themes.

We saw earlier that a feature of feminist research is collaboration. This can take the form of seeking comment from interviewees on transcripts and even on our interpretations of the data. In this project, I chose not to carry collaboration to that extent. ‘Research is the art of the feasible’ (Blaxter, et al., 1996:145), and with 40 interviewees and a limited time frame, I did not feel that I could go back to each woman—or even to a select few. Also, as the researcher, it is my responsibility to interpret the women’s experiences, not a task to be shifted onto the study’s “subjects” (Borland, 1991:64). Finally, this process of “verification” is not without difficulties, as the interviewees may suggest different interpretations for reasons that may be justified (the researcher was off-the-mark), benign (the interviewee may think she meant something different on the day, but her views have altered a bit since the interview), or devious (she wishes to appear in a different light to the future readers of the report, or she wishes to change the outcome of the report). In any event, none of the interviewees requested to see either a transcript or the finished PhD; had they done so, I might have had to revisit this decision.<sup>36</sup>

Merrick observes that ‘it is possible...to achieve a considered internal sense of truthfulness about one’s representation of Other when review by participants is not feasible or desirable’ (1999:52). I tried to maintain a heightened awareness that the interviewees and I did not necessarily share ‘a likeness of mind’ (Borland, 1991:72),<sup>37</sup> and I caution the reader of this thesis to do the same—to recognise that my interpretations are not the last word on what older churchgoing women think, feel, and experience. I hope that I have been able, throughout the analysis and interpretation processes, to not simply ‘fit [the women’s experiences] into [my] own paradigms’ (Borland, 1991:73), but to maintain an open mind and to seek possible new (either additional or replacement) paradigms.

One way to achieve this is by being sensitive and truthful to the interviewees’ voices. Mauthner and Doucet state that ‘the issue of listening to women, and understanding their lives “in and on their own terms”, has been a long-standing and pivotal concern amongst feminist researchers’ (1998:120). Women’s voices—long neglected, ignored, or discounted—should be heard and recorded just as they present themselves.

In a recent interview, Carol Gilligan notes that ‘[t]he ethical problems of the research [become] how we use our power as researchers to orchestrate these voices in the presentation of the work,

---

<sup>36</sup> One interviewee asked to borrow her tape to listen to, after I had transcribed it. She returned it without comment or request that I not use any of the data on it.

<sup>37</sup> Even so, it may have appeared to us at the time of the interviews that such a likeness existed, as we sought to ‘establish a footing with one another and find a common ground’ (Borland, 1991:72).

realizing that we [do] have the power to be absent or to override, to colonize, the voice' (Hamer, 1999:180). And, despite our best efforts to let women's voices show through in our final (written) products, we as researchers and writers 'are in the privileged position of naming and representing other people's realities' (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998:139). As scholars, we often do this by using ideas and terminology to interpret research subjects' worlds in ways that they would find alien.<sup>38</sup> The most immediate example of this is in my understanding of feminism and feminists, versus the interviewees' understandings (which I did not explore). 'We have to accept that the entire research process is most often one of unequals and that, as researchers, we retain power and control over conceiving, designing, administering, and reporting the research' (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998:139).

An important concern for me was representing the interviewees' "voices" properly (i.e. respectfully of their intent and meaning) to avoid misinterpreting them. Was I able to hear their voices? I do not necessarily share all of the views—religious or social—of the interviewees; but I believe that did not impede my empathy or understanding. I function with the view of my own cohort ("Calculators"), which may have coloured how I viewed these women ("Strivers"). This is another way of being an outsider to the women.

Most feminist theologians working in the 1970s through the 1990s, however, would be in Walrath's "Challengers" cohort, born 1932 through 1954. He describes the Challengers as having their 'basic acculturations in time...from 1945 through 1976, a thirty-one year period that began with victory, dreams of general affluence, and optimism but that concluded with economic and social retreat, and, for many, general disillusionment' (1987:39). Consequently, Challengers question, rather than accept, institutions and forms as Strivers do. I am from a cohort that Walrath calls "Calculators". Born from 1955 through 1987, 'most of them have experienced the world more soberly...as a place where only those who are able to make wise choices thrive. Perhaps even only those who are privileged, or fortunate' (1987:39). Thus, will I be able to understand the interviewees accurately?

Because of experiential differences, claims Walrath, it is impossible for one group to fully understand the other. However difficult it may be, though, we as researchers should listen to and try to understand people (in my case, older women) from their experiential perspective. A key question of this project is whether feminist theologians have attempted to understand older women as potentially different from themselves, as having unique outlooks, or whether older women have been assumed to share theologians' views—or, worse still, whether feminist theologians have not even thought about older women at all. Not sharing a common framework,

---

<sup>38</sup> Thanks to Rev. Andrew Martlew for this observation.



feminist theologians may have developed theologies that are remote and unhelpful to older women.

I wanted to preserve as much of the uniqueness of each individual as possible, while at the same time preserving each woman's anonymity. Also, I have been faithful to the actual words and phrasing used; I have not "smoothed out" the interviewees' words, because this is 'often a way of discounting and ignoring those parts of women's experience that are not easily expressed' (DeVault, 1990:107). In the transcriptions, I indicated hesitations, speech volume and emphasis, laughter, tears, and other non-verbal 'clues to emotion and meaning' (DeVault, 1990:109) to help me remember not only the "what" but the "how" of the words.

In our down-to-earth conversations, we discussed such things as beliefs in concrete terms, using examples from real life, rather than in the abstracted, theological language of (for example) "redemption" and "justification". (I did not use such terms and they did not bring them into the conversations.) Similarly, Gillespie writes that '[a]t first glance, the interview transcripts appear totally mundane because they have no "church words" such as *salvation* or *discipleship*' (1992:209; author's emphasis).

When presenting findings, I have emphasised the interviewees' voices, 'include[ing] rather fuller statements and sections of dialogue rather than...isolated quotations' (Davies, 1999:116) whenever possible, without revealing so much of the interviewee's identity by doing so as to break my assurances to them of anonymity. There is necessarily a tension between honouring both anonymity and the truth of women's lives as expressed in their own words. Women should be able to own their words and not be "disembodied voices". I have addressed this by including enough particulars of the speaker's experience to link that experience with her words; however, in an effort to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, I may have fallen short of this goal. I justify this approach because I do not think that this thesis requires an in-depth presentation of each interviewee's life history in order to understand the nature of her experience.

Feminists share a deep concern about 'how to keep respondents' voices and perspectives alive, while at the same time recognizing the researcher's role in shaping the research process and product' (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998:119). It is not enough merely to place women's words on the page verbatim, without any analysis; yet, neither should the analysis be so intrusive that what shows through in the product (in this case, the thesis) is the heavy hand of the researcher/writer. My voice—another woman's voice—is that of the interpreter. I believe it is important for me to be present as intermediary between reader and interviewee, placing the words of the interviewees in context of the overall project, and offering my interpretations and

conclusions for the reader to accept or reject. I do not see myself as “in the way” but as a knowledgeable guide to the world the interviewees inhabit.

Indeed, as Mauthner and Doucet point out, the research process is ‘a balancing act between three different and sometimes conflicting standpoints’ or voices: those of the respondents, that of the researcher, and those of the ‘existing theories or frameworks’ in our various fields (1998:140)—in this case, feminist theologians. I hope that all three voices are represented clearly in this thesis.

#### **6.4.2 Reflection**

For feminists, understanding one’s own role as researcher in the research process requires self-examination at each step, from selecting the topic of inquiry, determining how to pursue it, encounters with informants and resources, analysis, and reporting:

Reflexivity means reflecting upon and understanding our own personal, political and intellectual autobiographies as researchers and making explicit where we are located in relation to our research respondents. Reflexivity also means acknowledging the critical role we play in creating, interpreting and theorizing research data (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998:121).

A key feature of feminist reflexivity is that it goes beyond the internal process, which benefits the particular researcher and project, to encourage ‘shar[ing] those reflections in professional discourse’ (Campbell and Wasco, 2000:787), for other researchers’ reflection and use.

At the start of this chapter, I presented my personal background and my position with respect to the areas this project covers. I have also indicated how I see my role in the process of analysis and interpretation: that of intermediary. In the final chapters of this thesis, I will engage with the empirical data and the concepts of feminist theologians to theorise and, ultimately, to advocate for change.

According to Gross, ‘feminist theology is unapologetically personal and subjective; in fact, it glories in the openly personal and subjective, combined with rigorous critical thinking’ (2000:173). The particular, the individualised, the subjective, and the value-laden, it is believed, ultimately lead to a richer yield of information about women’s lives than do the rational, the scientific, the objective, and the value-free. Thompson and Priestley cite Alvin Gouldner as arguing that ‘total objectivity [is] neither possible nor desirable’ (1996:259). For example, even stating that I am a Christian implies that I have certain values: at the very least, it implies that I value the importance of having a set of beliefs or a faith.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> However, as Birke cautions us, to discount objectivity entirely in favour of a glorified subjectivity is to ‘leave the terrain of rational thought, including science, to men, thus perpetuating the system which excluded us in the first place’ (1986:157).



Conversely, Byrne says religious studies is neutral (though not on the terms of the natural sciences) because, unlike theology, it does not examine the truthfulness of informants' beliefs, but rather their content (1999:253-254). Jaffee attempts to resolve the potential struggle faced by religious studies scholars who are also adherents of a faith: '[O]ur common intellectual life is a thing distinct from the cultural forms in which the "faithful" pursue their projects (even if some of us are the "faithful" as well)' (1999:283). But Gross says that

our personal interests and standpoints do influence our choices of subject matter, the data we see, and the conclusions we derive, [but that] does not turn us into unbalanced, fanatical zealots and proselytizers. Nor does it mean we become sloppy scholars; good rules of argument and good use of evidence remain important. But we do become more honest—and more humble (2000:167).

Because this project is involved with my particular faith—Christianity—I found it impossible to be neutral and detached. But, I do not think that this made it impossible to be rigorous in pursuit of the truth of older women's experiences.

My interest in the subject matter of this project extends beyond religious faith, however. I have wishes and goals that are in a number of ways wrapped up in the women interviewees. I have studied women who, although they have differences from me, are in some ways akin to me. I tried to see myself as becoming like them, and in some ways I failed but in others I could visualise it. I found myself comparing my own circumstances as a midlife woman to those of the interviewees, searching for clues as to how I was doing so far, how to age well now and in the future—and worrying if I already felt older than the most energetic of the older women. I was relieved that I still had time to act on their wisdom and experience. I also found myself making decisions about how I would like to be as I age. As a prospective older woman, the discussions I had with the interviewees yielded not only much rich information for this project, but also much food for personal thought.

Hill, et al. state that 'we must adopt research practices that require us, as researchers, to challenge our own view of the topic and of the people involved in the research' (2000:762), not just at the outset but 'continually' (763). For me, this meant confronting my own ageism and ageist assumptions time and again. I am not immune to practising ageism in my daily life and, as Bytheway (1995) suggests, in the very nature of my research and how I report the findings. He has observed that 'much gerontological research is undertaken by younger people with a degree in some discipline other than gerontology....[T]heir publications have tended to enhance the sense of their subjects being of a different world, a different age....Discussions of these kinds of research all too often reduce to the question of: "What have we learnt about these older people?"' (97-98).

Before the start of this project, I did have some of the ageist views held by society in general. My exposure to older women during the course of this project encompassed many women besides the interviewees, and not all of these were churchgoers. I sometimes felt frustrated, helpless, and defeated because the wisdom and practical ideas that I was learning from my research proved to be of little or no value in particular situations. I found it difficult to see them as anything other than the typical “old women” that society chooses to disparage, neglect—or worse, view with contempt. What I have learned from these personal connections is that, no matter how useful the ideas presented in this thesis, there will be older women for whom completely different approaches will need to be found. And no matter how enthusiastic I am about older women in general, and the interviewees in particular, I may continue to harbour certain ageist attitudes and prejudices towards particular individuals. Working to grow out of these will take continued effort.

I do care about people who are older *now*. I have asked myself throughout the research, ‘Is my caring paternalistic? Is it ageist?’ On some levels, I have to accept the charge—I wanted to undertake this research in order to find ways to help older women. But as a Christian, I (like many of the interviewees) also see caring as a loving response to God’s love for me, something I am called to do and freely choose to do. Despite my self-identification as a Christian reformist, I am not seeking to identify older women as reformist, womanist, or post-Christian; rather, I hope that their words will create a tension between these categories and bring forth new insights for feminist theologies.

As for mistakes or choices that I would make differently now, I would (next time) focus on one denomination, either Methodist or Anglican.<sup>40</sup> Further, the differences between high-, low-, and middle-church Anglican experiences are distinct enough that these three groups could well be investigated separately, rather than as a unit. Finally, it would be good to do a consciously comparative study between two or more denominations—but not at this early stage of knowledge.

This was a study of particular people in a particular place at a particular time,<sup>41</sup> and therefore only limited generalisations should be made to the British population of older churchgoing women as a whole (Wolcott, 1990:30). Nevertheless, ‘even the small survey shows up patterns’ (Fennell, et al., 1988:70), and the number of women interviewed will still be large enough to compare their comments with theories of community, connection, and caring put forward by feminist theologians. Helpfully, in 1999, the Christian Research organisation (UK) undertook a

---

<sup>40</sup> Were I to do this, however, I might have to discount the body of work published and undertaken by one or the other of these two key denominations; I would be reluctant to make this choice.



study of older people and the church, employing both quantitative (Brierley, 2000)<sup>42</sup> and qualitative approaches (Sanger, 1999). My findings are consistent with these, and therefore can be taken to be a reasonable base for further research as well as immediate action by churches.

One of my assumptions at the outset was that the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of the interviewees will be largely similar, as they are part of the same cohort, live in the same city, and all attend either Methodist or Anglican churches. I did not anticipate that they would be identical, as all persons are unique; but I was continually surprised at how different each woman was from the others. This added a new perspective to the topic of difference and diversity (see Chapter 2). Here, we have the slant of difference versus *similarity*, which creates a tension. We know that all women are unique individuals; yet, there are commonalities between women. When is it sensible to look at older women as a group (e.g. a cohort) and different from other groups of women, and when do we want them to retain their individuality? How do we strike the right balance of difference/diversity with commonality? This is a fundamental question that feminists (and others) continually struggle with; I hope I have found that balance for this project.

Had I a more extensive background in the theoretical and theological side of the project, I could have come to grips with my topic more quickly, thus saving myself time overall. Still, I believe that the serendipitous nature of such ignorance led to as many “pots of gold” as to dead-ends. The education I gave myself—in theologies, the key issues, methodological schools of thought, and research methods—has been a valuable part of the process.

Rita Gross writes, ‘the academic study of religion challenges one’s personal beliefs more than the study of other academic subjects’ (1996:5). My own beliefs underwent changes during this project. As I read feminist theologians’ writings, and as I listened to the interviewees’ thoughts and experiences and analysed the findings, I examined my own experiences and understandings of community, connection, and caring, and of my faith, and developed new understandings.

As a Christian feminist, this project has affected my own beliefs about Christianity. I continue to be excited by the ideas emerging from feminist theology, and these shape my own ongoing spiritual journey. I was impressed that so many older women had passed through faith struggles and come to a place of satisfaction or peace; I was also intrigued that a few women seemed to be still working at their faith, questioning things and seeking answers. This latter has given me a

---

<sup>41</sup> As a number of the interviewees commented to me on later occasions (e.g. at church services or when meeting socially), their answers would have been somewhat different had I interviewed them even a year later.

<sup>42</sup> The report’s author states that the sample was ‘wide and randomly selected’ and that ‘[the] conclusions may therefore be taken as representative of the million plus older people currently attending church’ (Brierley, 2000:40).

feeling that I can relax—that I do not have to have all the answers to my own questions very soon. But from those women who were terribly disturbed by the wars and natural catastrophes in the world, who questioned where God is in all of this, I also learned that having a faith can be painful, and that seeking answers can be harrowing as well as intellectually stimulating.

Perhaps the effect of the project as a whole is best summed up in this remark by George Sand:

The old woman I shall become will be quite different from the woman I am now. Another I is beginning.

### **6.5 Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the various methodologies I engaged with in the course of the research, which specific methods I chose, how I employed them, and how I worked with the data itself. I drew an overall picture of the interviewees as a group, discussing them as a particular cohort. Referring back to the metaphor of a journey, which I used to organise and present this information, we can see that the process of this journey was not a clearly bounded 400-metre racetrack. Rather, it was more like a countryside path, with diversions and discoveries en route to the destination.

Now, we turn to the fruits of this journey. In the next three chapters, we will hear from the interviewees themselves about their experiences, respectively, of community, connection, and caring.



## Chapter 7—Community: A social place where meaningful things happen

Well, the truth is this. I enjoy going to the [names a church-based society] to a degree. But I don't feel part of the group. I think I'm maybe hesitant in taking part in conversations—but again, the group is long-time friendships. They know each other and each other's families. And it doesn't include me.

One group I was with, a lady said to me, 'I've known you several years and I don't know anything about you'. And I thought well, nobody's made any effort to know anything about me. So I gave her just an outline....And she told me what her husband and her were doing, and where they were going, and it hurt a little....And I thought, they have no idea. No idea. They may be good Christians, but they haven't a clue what it's like to have had somebody and then...just to be on your own and adapt to that....It's being with people that makes me happy. Anything else is secondary. But just being with people.

I don't always feel part of the group. But then again, I'm possibly to blame. Because you have to meet people halfway. And I sometimes go there and I haven't said anything very much to anybody....And of course, I'm very happy that they all have their husbands. And it isn't anything to do with me. Maybe feeling sorry for myself, yes, to some extent....But I'm not the only one. There's so many people in the same boat....So what we're talking about and what they've been doing and everything doesn't—I mean, I'm not part of the conversation because I'm not part of that set-up. That's how I see it....But everybody's very kind and nice. But it's just I can't really say that I feel part of the group. (Dollie)<sup>1</sup>

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter and the two following, we will have an opportunity to listen to the interviewees discuss their experiences of community, connection, and caring. We will also begin to see the elements that move us towards a Christian feminist practical theology of older women. In this chapter, the focus is on community. Recall that, at the end of Chapter 3, “community” was defined as a social place, real or imagined, involving (at minimum) an individual person and something or someone else. A community might be either given or chosen, small or large, formal or informal, temporary or long-lasting. There are generally both positive and negative aspects to membership. We learned that communities are important to older people, but that older people may have more problems with inclusion and exclusion than younger people do. We saw that feminist theologians view “community” as an ideal model for human society, though there is no consensus on the nature of this ideal. Finally, a number of questions were raised that we hoped the data would shed light on. These addressed the sorts of communities older women

---

<sup>1</sup> Details about the interviewee group as a whole—age group clusters, marital status, living arrangements, etc.—appear in Appendix II. In order to preserve anonymity and confidentiality, I have not presented these details by individual, with the exception of listing which interviewees are in each age group. This latter information will help the reader identify each woman as either “young-old” or “old-old” (see Chapter 1).

Wherever I have quoted the interviewees, I have preserved their speech as accurately as possible. Therefore, non-standard grammar and syntax reflect their speech patterns and are not typographical errors.

are members of, the benefits and responsibilities of membership, what changes the ageing process has on community membership and interaction, and older women's particular experiences of their local church communities.

Dollie's report of her experiences with a particular church-based society illustrates several of the topics discussed in Chapter 3 (and Chapters 4 and 5 as well) and also offers some answers to the questions raised. She identified key communities (e.g. spouses, family, friends) and discussed their importance; she related the phenomenon of insider/outsiderness and named some of the associated problems, such as marginalisation; she tried to apportion responsibility for moving an outsider from the margins into the community; and she queried the nature of a "good Christian" with respect to this responsibility.<sup>2</sup> This latter indicated a heightened expectation of Christians—and, by association, of churches to facilitate such incorporation of persons into communities. Overall, Dollie seemed to be asking, What does it take to be an accepted member of a community? As this chapter progresses, we will see that Dollie's experiences represent those of many of the interviewees. At the same time, we will also see that, when membership in a community is assured, these social places are very valuable for older women.

## 7.2 The interviewees' key communities

When I asked the interviewees to tell me what collectives they felt a part of, and what organisations they were affiliated with, they named family, friends, neighbourhood or home, groups centred around shared activities, interests, or history, and the local church. A few named larger communities, such as the nation, the worldwide church, or humanity, but these women were the exception. The various communities named encompass given and chosen, and formal and informal types of different sizes and duration. They reflect the 'diversity and variety' typical of older people's social networks (Phillipson, et al., 2001:265).<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter 3, we learned that the family is a key community for older people.<sup>4</sup> However, there have been changes in the structure of family life over the past several decades so that today, for many older people, friends are of equal or even greater importance than family (Phillipson, et al., 2001). Indeed, certain friends can become surrogate family members. This is often the case when children live at a distance and therefore are not available to lend help in an emergency.

---

<sup>2</sup> Dollie would appear to be drawing on the teaching of Hebrews 13:2, which requires that a Christian show hospitality to strangers.

<sup>3</sup> I will address the local church in detail later in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Because this thesis is primarily theological, rather than sociological, I am not going to dwell on a discussion of family and friends. These are very extensively covered in the social gerontological literature. Interested readers may pick up the discussion of family and older people in Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, and Ogg (2001) and of friends and older women in Jerrome (1981). By no means should my less in-depth review be interpreted to mean that family and friends were of less significance to the interviewees in this study than in other studies of older women. On the contrary, family and friends were very important.



(However, children and other family members are usually involved in key decisions and broad caring concerns, such as financial and accommodation decisions, which may occur on a less frequent basis.) Further, we saw that older people today tend to grow old as part of a couple rather than as part of their wider family. From these ideas, I suggested that a married older woman would experience the loss of her partner to be particularly difficult. At the same time, she would be more likely, in general, to enlist the help of friends, neighbours, and other close associates when immediate help was needed rather than to call on her children or grandchildren if they were not nearby. How did the interviewees construct “family” and how did they negotiate their membership in their families?

Nearly every interviewee named her family as one of her most important communities. Sometimes family members lived nearby and were seen frequently; for other women, distance separated them. Most of the interviewees in either situation, however, spoke enthusiastically about their families:

We’re a big family....We’re scattered [around the globe]. But we’re all close. We all keep in touch....We all write to each other and when we’re flush with a bit of money, we phone them (laughs). (Winnie)

I don’t know what I’d do without them. (Betty)

Photographs were tangible evidence of the women’s communities. Most of the interviewees had family photos on display in their homes, showing that they were a part of this larger community.

However, a few spoke of internal strife within their families. Mavis told of a quarrel that had her children not speaking to one another:

I’ve said to them now and again, ‘It’s all right for you. But I am piggy-in-the-middle’. It’s very hard....I can’t have a family party. I can’t celebrate anything with a family party because of it.

Several women expressed the view that they disagreed with how their children were raising *their* children or running their households. Most of these women chose to remain silent about this to preserve family harmony. Those who had spoken their minds had experienced strained relationships, some of which continued to be unresolved.

Not all families were related by blood or by marriage. One of the ever-single interviewees—Eunice, who had virtually no living relatives—had created a community of friends a generation younger than herself. She referred to them as her “family” (many of them knew each other), and she kept in touch with them all regularly in several ways, including letters and visits. One of these friends was also her primary carer (albeit long-distance), fulfilling a role undertaken by the children of other interviewees who were mothers.

Dollie herself noted the importance of long-term friendships, which are very important for women on the inside of these friendships but present a barrier to those on the outside ('The group is long-time friendships. They know each other and each other's families. And it doesn't include me'). Her statement also provided a clue to how such friendships work, in that intimate knowledge is one important component—the preliminaries can be dispensed with (Jerrome, 1981:190). And, Dollie recognised that she was not the only outsider ('But I'm not the only one. There's so many people in the same boat').

An older woman's satisfaction with her living arrangement seemed to dictate the location of "home". Some interviewees lived in their own homes, some in council flats or sheltered accommodation, and some in a church-affiliated residential home. We discussed whether there was a sense of "community" where they lived and also whether the city of York felt like home. Along with many of the interviewees, Fran—who lived in a bungalow—felt a sense of comfortable familiarity about her neighbourhood:

It's lovely to have shops at the bottom of the street, and to never go to them without seeing somebody that you know...or somebody that you speak to anyway.

Ruth, who moved from a house in a village to a flat in sheltered housing five years ago, tried to overcome the lack of neighbourhood feeling in the complex:

You can live in complete isolation in a building like this...Now having said that, I feel that because I live in a community, I should be part of that community. So 'A', I join the bingo group on a Friday, I play cards sometimes on a Tuesday afternoon...I enjoy playing Scrabble on a Thursday afternoon when I'm in, more than any of the others because again that's stimulating for myself.

Finally, at the opposite end of this continuum of neighbourhood feeling was Dollie, who lived in a block of flats, but one without organised social activities (such as at Ruth's complex):

Living in a complex like this, you're completely anonymous, really. It's not 'That's my house'. It's just a little box. You know, everybody's in their little boxes.

Without the structure provided by formal activities (and perhaps because she appeared to be shyer than Ruth), Dollie felt isolated in her living arrangement.

As friendly, active neighbours, 'older people can help bind people into the life of the street' (Phillipson, et al., 2001:109). Barbara and Tess were examples of this, introducing newcomers into their friendly, caring circle of neighbours. (Such a person in Dollie's complex might have



made a difference to her life.) Barbara and Tess, however, only targeted newcomers who were their own age.<sup>5</sup> The beneficial outcomes of their efforts could be expanded to include younger people, if these particularly gregarious older women were able to overcome the schedule differences in the lives of younger and older people—or if they believed that younger people wished to be included with older people.

On the subject of York as home, the reactions were also mixed. Only a small number of the women had been born and lived most of their lives in York. The majority had moved there at some point in their lives, either as young to middle-aged wives or as older, retired and/or widowed women. Long-time residents universally felt “at home” in the city. Phyllis, who moved to York upon marriage, said:

York is home. All my friends are here, and family....And friends are just as important as family, I think.

Most or all of the family ties such women had to their hometowns had long been severed through people dying or moving themselves, as the interviewees had. A couple of the recent newcomers had made a successful transition to their new city. Ruth said that such a move could be successful if a woman made strong communities within the larger city:

I’m very happy in York. It’s opened quite a new sort of avenue for me. It certainly hasn’t got the confined feeling that village life has....It’s so easy to live in York. Everything is so convenient. And there is so much to do.

But Winnie, a recent transplant from down South, said:

I find that the North Yorkshire people are a little hard to get to know. (pauses)  
Not meaning it unkindly, but they’re more reserved.

With reference to their communities of interest, interviewees named art classes, U3A,<sup>6</sup> charity shop volunteering and community-service committees, former work associates or schoolmates, and walking clubs as important communities in their lives. Some one-off events had also created a sense of community. Janet named the bereavement group she attended when her husband had died some years ago, and how she was still very close to those individuals and met them regularly. Nancy mentioned a national religious gathering she had attended a few years previously that had been a very special community of like-minded people. In a similar vein, although Songs of Praise was not mentioned by many interviewees (in any context), Ella, a regular viewer, put her finger on why it became a community (and a virtual one) for her:

---

<sup>5</sup> Barbara deliberately targeted older widows, as she said that they were in exceptional need of community and social activities. Because most men (in her view) had cars, widowers could fend for themselves in this regard. See section 7.3.1.ii in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> The University of the Third Age (see Chapter 1).

Ella: I suppose you're on the same wavelength, and you like to feel that you're joining in with other people in other places. (pauses)

JE:<sup>7</sup> All doing the same thing at the same time.

Ella: Yeah. And thinking of the same thoughts, as the words of the hymns.

Only a few women directly named very large collectives such as humanity, the ecosystem, or the planet as communities they felt a part of. Even so, many interviewees mentioned global issues that concerned them, which could be an indirect way of signifying that they felt a part of these larger groups. Elsie spoke of her frustration at trying to understand why Muslims and Christians fought one another, and of the troubles in Northern Ireland. Ada was worried about the victims of flooding in Mozambique, and Frederica was concerned about asylum seekers. Quite a number of the interviewees commented on major news items of the day, thus showing that they were connected to the larger national and world communities, even if they did not directly name them. As Lillian said, 'I think we're aware of what's going on in the world today—you know, media, television, the newspapers. I like to keep abreast of the times'. Some also named the regional, national, or world Christian church as a community that they felt a part of, but this, too, was infrequent. Ruth was the only interviewee who spoke about being a member of a worldwide body of believers of all faiths:

I have never ever felt it wrong to go into any church to pray no matter what the denomination....It's never worried me, because I've always felt that we all worship the same God, so what does it matter? And I'd like to think that this, you know, could be accepted by everybody....If you look upon it as the world all speaking different languages. What a dull world it would be if we all spoke the same....And we're all saying the same thing....That in actual fact, no matter what or who, the basic need of humanity is for somebody to love and care for them. And I think this is what Christianity is all about. So from that point of view, I have no qualms at all in the saying that, you know as a Christian, I accept other people's beliefs, too. Because they are feeling the same as I do if they have a belief a 'tall.

Finally, only Fran expressed the idea that she was a part of the Christian tradition of believers, of the witnesses to the faith through the ages—the 'community of saints' (Ramsey and Blieszner, 2000:50).

It is important to remember that I asked the interviewees to name the communities that they felt a part of, which assumes a level of importance for those communities. Even when the women expressed a lack of association (such as Dollie did with both the church-based society and her housing complex), it was apparent that these were communities that they wanted to be members of—else, why mention them? Family, friends, home, and local church were important communities (in fact or in desire) because they were places where the women could interact

---

<sup>7</sup> This refers to myself, the interviewer.



with significant or like-minded others and where good things—meaningful things—could happen. Being a member of one or more meaningful communities was an important aspect of living and shaped the activities of a woman’s daily life—and in some instances, as we will see shortly, gave a reason for living. We shall now turn our attention to the subject of membership.

### **7.3 Membership within key communities**

In this section, we will consider what the interviewees said constitutes “membership” in a community (as opposed to “belonging” a topic of connection in the next chapter). We will learn of the benefits they named as well as the responsibilities and contributions older women make to community life. We will then move to a discussion of the problems associated with membership, especially those that the women identified as age-related.

#### **7.3.1 What is membership?**

Having a role to play is important, almost a given, in order for a collective to “count” as a community. Examples of some roles the interviewees had were being “the boss”, the “hub”, or the “web-master” of a community; being a cross-pollinator of various communities; being a facilitator within a community; and being a rank-and-file contributor. Simply attending a meeting, even regularly, was not sufficient for a group to be named as a community.<sup>8</sup> A woman needed to feel that there was a distinct position she occupied and that without her the community would be different somehow. Often, “tools” or “accessories” became a part of how an older woman defined her position. Tools and accessories helped a community function, and various ones mentioned were cars, houses, cooking skills, and communication and entertainment skills.

For some, their communities overlapped (e.g. church and family for Ada and Dolores, friends and neighbourhood for Barbara and Tess), while other interviewees kept most of their communities separate (e.g. Dollie and Janet). A feature of all community types was that most of the women persevered in maintaining their membership, even if there were unsatisfactory elements within the community. If it was important to her, then an interviewee was reluctant to give it up. If a community ceased to be significant, however, then she had no qualms about dropping it. Barbara, for instance, had deliberately not kept up certain communities as she had aged, either because she was no longer interested in the people in them or because the founding reason for the group (e.g. a neighbourhood baby-sitting syndicate for families with young children) had passed. Likewise, some interviewees kept up with their former workmates after retirement (those who had become friends), while others did not.

---

<sup>8</sup> With the exception, as we have just seen, of those communities where a deeper association is desired but does not (yet?) exist.

### i. Benefits

Many membership benefits were named or implied by the women I spoke with. These included, but were not limited to, being valued by others (Phyllis); being known as an individual with a name (Sarah); awareness of others' lives and viewpoints (Barbara); an enriched life, boosted optimism, and enhanced self-esteem (Eunice);<sup>9</sup> structure, activities, and human contact (Hope); being looked after when necessary (Veeve); support for faith (Rebecca); strength for living (Ella); and an outlet for caring (Muriel). Community membership enhanced their sense of individuality (via their roles and "being known") as well as their sense of being part of a larger, important whole. During our interview, Sarah spoke of how she hoped to move to another home nearer to some friends and to a church she wanted to attend so that she would be known and have an identity:

I feel I would be in a community that do know me. They do know I'm Sarah and I'm someone.<sup>10</sup>

A key positive feature of communities was the fact that they offered comfort and security, a "home" for individuals to share themselves openly so that they were not or did not feel isolated (Ramsey and Blieszner, 2000:49). Amelia, who lived in a church-affiliated residential home, found that particular community a place of mutual caring:

As I say, in here now...I suppose each person probably has somebody that they're just watching a little bit, that's needing a little more help.

For Edith, a woman striving to maintain her Christian values in our so-called secular society, the right sort of community gave her support of a different kind, helping her to avoid the seemingly ever-present danger of being led astray.

Interestingly, temporary communities also provided benefits for some interviewees. Nancy enthused about her hospital stay. There, she had been able to reach out to non-Christians on her ward, to get along with them, and to see it as an opportunity to gain something herself ('Having to meet other people with different ideas—I think it teaches you an awful lot'). Thus, communities did not have to be of a long-standing, or even permanent, nature to offer benefits to older women. Nancy's example also showed that some (possibly most?) older women were actively forming new communities, in addition to engaging with those they were already a part of.

---

<sup>9</sup> 'Being able to take part in our local community is important for maintaining our self-esteem' (Peace, 1993:143).

<sup>10</sup> A few months after this interview, Sarah successfully moved near to the residence where her friends lived.



## ii. Contributions and responsibilities

According to their testimonies, older women maintained communities, keeping them functioning and active. They offered their talents, skills, knowledge, and experience. For example, several interviewees owned cars and provided transport for other older women (e.g. Kate, Lillian, and Phyllis). Some of the more housebound offered their homes as gathering places (e.g. Veeve, Nancy, and Alfreda) and those who identified themselves as good listeners became outlets for the lonely (e.g. Amelia and Dollie). There were pianists (Mary and Karen), a flower arranger (Barbara), and a speaker for meetings (Mavis), and numerous interviewees provided willing hands for whatever projects were going at church (e.g. Fay, Betty, and Winnie).

Women created, organised, and recruited members for communities (Barbara, Tess, and Muriel), and occasionally gave a community their own personal touch or stamp as a result. A few of the women (the very oldest—Dolores, Florence, Hazel, and Frederica) had decades of social and church knowledge and experiences they were able to share. Like the respondents in Hubbert's study, my interviewees did not claim to possess wisdom, but they did claim to have experience. They saw their experiences as a rich resource for their communities—one all too infrequently tapped into.<sup>11</sup> Contributions came in many forms, depending on what an older woman had to offer, what she was capable of offering, and crucially, whether she was invited to make a contribution. There was a definite sense of responsibility to the community, whether in general to the whole group or very specifically to individuals:

What I do in [these groups] is based on the fact that God loves me and I am still of some use to him here. (Aleen, a representative to local and regional community-based groups for older persons and for the health service)

I feel I have a big influence around here....I mean, my friend [gives name] says I have completely changed her life. And if you get told that, you feel you've done a little bit of good, don't you? (Barbara, who organises outings for widows in her neighbourhood)

One-on-one commitments, such as Barbara's, have a cumulative effect and are an essential complement to larger-scale efforts such as Aleen's. Both affect a community's overall health and ability to function for the benefit of all (Biggar, 1997:129). Also, both of these women viewed their contributions as part of their Christian duty to those around them.<sup>12</sup>

### **7.3.2 Problems and challenges within key communities**

In addition to finding many benefits from their associations with communities, the interviewees also named a number of problems or challenges that they had to confront. Some of these were

---

<sup>11</sup> Hubbert believes that it is just such experiences, 'garnered through decades of living and learning', that is truly the wisdom of age (1991:48).

independent of age (e.g. struggling towards being accepted into membership and becoming an insider), while other problems were attributable to growing older (e.g. deterioration of vision, hearing, and mobility). Occasionally, these latter problems meant having to drop out of groups.

As a woman ages, the number of communities she is a part of may decline in both quantity and in overall membership numbers, and the types of communities may change. For instance, a housebound woman may have few external communities, but have gained communities of nurses and personal helpers. Fiona Williams also cites lack of access to transport, lack of time, and 'fear of violence' (1993:35-37) as limiting women's freedom of movement, and some of these were named by the interviewees. If membership in a community might hold off the ageing process (as felt by individuals themselves) because it offers activity and involvement, then rejection and discrimination might damage older persons' self-esteem and willingness to "go on". Phyllis pleaded, 'There's nothing worse than feeling that you're not useful anymore. And it can happen that older people do get overlooked....We just want to be part of a community, and wherever possible to be a useful member of that community'.

When important communities are broken up or when one's membership comes to a forced end due to retirement or to moving home, older women may feel hurt, at loose ends, or deeply troubled. Even when the end is anticipated and prepared for, such as when moving home, a loss of one's location in a defined, desirable community can be disturbing as it upsets an older woman's self-identity (Peace, 1993:130). This was the case with Winnie, who came to York recently and at her family's insistence:

Everything [at my former home] was so near and lovely. And I thought, well this is lovely because I'll spend the rest of my days here. But [the family] had other ideas....If you're younger, it's quite different. When I used to move with [my career], it never bothered me. But this one was so traumatic....I didn't want to leave everybody. And that Saturday, I'll always remember, it was a dreadful day. It was a lovely day, but it was a dreadful day for me. (pauses) Anyway, it's over with now. And I'm here.

Winnie had tried to put a good face on the situation, however. When she was deciding whether or not to move, she 'prayed about it and I felt that, yes, I must come up [to York]. I thought, well, perhaps there's something for me to do up there'. Winnie drew on her faith to help her come to terms with a very challenging situation.

Even interviewees who had not moved in older age felt the impact of our mobile society as their neighbourhoods changed around them, leaving them feeling isolated and cut off—outsiders from neighbourhoods that used to be close-knit:

---

<sup>12</sup> There will be more on this in the discussion of local churches, below.



I feel now I don't belong in a way. You know because I feel they didn't—they get together very often as young people with children, and they sort of cut you off in some way. You don't sort of feel that you belong in the same way.  
(Mary)

Mary, once very involved in her neighbourhood, now found herself on the margins. This leads us into the subject of insider and outsiders and the especially awkward state of being on the margins: neither fully in nor fully out of a community.

Returning to Dollie's report, we see that community membership is not always experienced smoothly. In the church-based society she referred to, Dollie was an official member: she had paid her dues and her name appeared on the group's roster. This entitled her to attend various meetings and functions held throughout the year. Nevertheless, Dollie said, 'I don't always feel part of the group'. She frequently felt an outsider to the conversations of more established members, both because those women had 'long-time friendships' with each other and because 'they all have their husbands'. Dollie felt that these established members had a responsibility to make an effort to get to know her—though she acknowledged that 'you have to meet people halfway'. She desired a deeper level of interaction, but there was a disjuncture between Dollie's needs and expectations and what the group's other members felt was necessary and appropriate.

It is difficult to know whether increased effort from either side might have made Dollie an "insider" or if the group wished to keep her on the margins. Did Dollie fear rejection and was she therefore holding back? Did the group expect members to be outgoing? Were the other members unaware of Dollie's feelings and therefore unaware that a problem existed? (As Tess said, older persons had to make their needs known, otherwise a willing congregation—or other group—could not help.) Should Dollie have sought out another, more compatible community? In the end, Dollie will have to take some form of action, possibly meeting people more than halfway, confronting some individuals with her views, or dropping out of the group. If she continues on as she is, Dollie is likely to remain on the margins of this particular community.

Simply being an older woman was not enough, then, for Dollie to be (or to feel) fully accepted into this group of (primarily) older women. On the other hand, for other older women, being forced into groups made up exclusively of older people can be as bad as being overlooked. Sarah said that an older woman could find herself unwillingly thrown into an associative community of older people, rather than a mixed-age group. She found groups of all-older people to be ageist:

I try not to associate with too many older people, but it's difficult....I don't want to be thinking about the past. It's gone. Had it....The entertainment that you get when you go to some of these meetings is geared for the older people.

You're expected to like, "Roll Out The Barrel" and all the wartime stuff....Why do they think we want that sort of thing?

Once again, we see the need for society to recognise the uniqueness and diversity of interests of older individuals and not assume that older women will necessarily easily and happily slot into groups together. As with any age or type of person, marginalisation can be a problem and its causes and solutions unclear.

#### **7.4 Local churches and other Christian-based groups**

As stated early on in this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the local church as a particular community of importance for older women. Here, we will look at what the interviewees had to say about their experiences of local churches, both the good and the bad.

##### **7.4.1 The local church as a satisfactory community**

After family, the local church was the most important community the interviewees named.<sup>13</sup> Whether an interviewee's experience and concept of "church" was at the congregational level or on a community, regional, national, or global scale, many older women I spoke with were very enthusiastic about their church membership and gained a strong sense of community there. Sometimes an interviewee could point to a particular event that illustrated this. For example, Dolores's church made a special presentation to her on her birthday. For other women, their Christian upbringing—at home, at church, or both—was an important foundation for their lives, which had continued up to the present. Similarly, Hubbert's respondents who had been life-long participants in their churches noted a feeling of continuity (1991:59). Going to church was such an important part of Sundays that, as Doris said, 'If I didn't go to church, I don't know...how I would fill in Sundays'. Although she joked about it, this touched upon something that was important in the lives of some interviewees: the fact that they have time on their hands, especially if widowed and with children living at a distance. Church, then, can fill a gap in a meaningful way.<sup>14</sup>

Another study of older women in churches found that,

[b]elonging to and being active in a congregation provided collective experiences that helped these older women overcome hardships, gave them a chance to sustain and form friendships, and provided a vehicle through which they could contribute to their community (Neill and Kahn, 1999:328).

---

<sup>13</sup> The significance of church in their conversations is probably because I targeted churchgoing women and because I made it a focus of the interviews.

<sup>14</sup> However, this is not the reason the majority of women gave for why they attended church. This will be discussed further in Chapter 8.



Betty's church community supported her in just these ways. For these reasons, she saw her church as a good community for older women, in contrast to the larger non-church society. Dora, a member of a different church, confirmed this:

We aren't valued by younger people [in society today] I don't think....We're dismissed as we've had our life and that's it....Luckily, it isn't so in the church as much. The attitude is different, I think.<sup>15</sup>

Speaking of leadership roles, Jerrome also points out that 'the heavy presence of elderly women [in churches] gives an impression of power and influence not available to elderly women in society at large. But elderly women do not, in fact, achieve office in proportion to their number in the congregation' (1985:63). However, Walter and Davie (1998) propose that it is not traditional forms of power that women seek in their churches. Citing Ozorak's research,<sup>16</sup> they report that,

many women valued their churches for the social and emotional support which existed irrespective of the women's exclusion from formal power; for women more concerned with connection and relationship than with hierarchy and power (Gilligan, 1982), *the female fellowship of the church empowered them* even though the office-holding men monopolized the glory (645; emphasis mine).

This seems to support Jerrome's argument that 'participation in church-based activities provides the social status, solidarity and sense of personal significance not available to old people in the wider community' (1985:64). She then poses this intriguing question: 'Can we say that religious institutions are attractive to older people because they are among the few age-mixed institutions in our society where age is not a handicap in the attainment of high status?' (1985:64; author's emphasis).

The church, as it was represented and enacted in her residential home, was an important community for Hazel because of the support it provided for her faith:

We have some really lovely speakers come. Give you something to bring back and think about....[Which is] what you want, even when you're getting old....It helps a lot...just if you've been a little bit (pauses) on the down side, shall I say, put it that way. Not feeling ill. But just a little bit on the down side....You've got to think things. Because sometimes, if you don't watch out, your faith can dim a little bit.

---

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Dora was one of a few interviewees who stated that they felt more "at home" in a family member's church (that of a sibling or child) than they did in their own church. This could be an instance of having an automatic connection to a congregation that an older woman lacks when she joins a new church "cold".

<sup>16</sup> Ozorak, E W, 1996, 'The Power but not the Glory: how women empower themselves through religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35(1), 17-29.

Building up faith and supporting the work of the church are processes that older women contribute to as well as benefit from. One of the respondents in the study by Krause, Chatters, Meltzer, and Morgan stated that older parishioners can help to guide a younger pastor as he or she deals with certain problems for the first time. The authors note that ‘elderly people can bring many years of cumulative experience to bear on a problem’ (2000:527). As Gloria told me, ‘Older people have the experience that hopefully brings a bit of stability [to the congregation]’. Rebecca was relieved that younger members of her church felt the same way:

We went into this...[fellowship] group. And I thought, ‘We’re going to be years ahead of everybody else’. Really. And we didn’t know the people in this group. And I sat next to a young lad; he’d only be in his 20s. Early 20s, I think. And at the end, we’d been talking about something, and he said, ‘Isn’t it lovely to have older people in the group! They can tell us such a lot’. (laughs) I could’ve hugged him!

Where older people, especially older women, are recognised as being the “backbone” of a church, both parties benefit:

You see, in the churches I’ve been [in], it’s always been the elderly, the grey-haired people that have kept the churches going. They’ll do the cooking, they’ll help wash the dishes, they’ll lay the tables. They’ll do all these jobs....It ’tis the older people that do all those things. And we all love doing it....It gives us an incentive. It gives us something to look forward to. So it is helping us, you see....It kept us alive. It kept us living. It kept us feeling that we were wanted, we were needed. (Winnie)

Winnie added, though, that older people want to have their contributions acknowledged, especially by clergy. As we saw in Chapter 1, very often older people’s (i.e. women’s) contributions are taken for granted.<sup>17</sup>

For many of the Methodist interviewees, gone are the Bright Hours, Women’s Fellowships, and luncheon clubs of years past. As numbers have declined through death and attrition due to illness or mobility problems, and as no younger women have come along to build up the ranks, these groups have disbanded, leaving the interviewees to seek Christian community in new ways. This is not always easy to do, as we can see now that we turn our attention to some problems older women have with their local church communities.

---

<sup>17</sup> There is another, deeper aspect to this involvement. In an American study where she interviewed older women about their work in the church, Brown found that the spiritual dimension of “feasts and festivities” (the sacramental and social activities of churches) was very important. The work by the women involved in such projects ‘builds devotion and community among those who gather together, a devotion to a God who in turn sustains the community of believers’ (1992:260). This was not directly commented upon by my interviewees, but I do not think it would be wrong to infer it.



#### 7.4.2 Problems with local churches

As with people of any age, not being welcomed initially and not being known by members of the congregation (if one stays on) can make an older woman feel she is not a valued member of a church community. Although some newcomers to churches (such as Eunice, who retired to York from a city in the South) were quickly made welcome and given responsibilities, more common were painful experiences. Karen felt a reluctance to accept what she had to offer:

You've come into a new church...as an older person, moved from somewhere else....And then perhaps somebody will put you onto a committee....And they say, 'Oh, but they're new to the church'. But you're not new to the church. You're new to THAT church, but you're not new to the CHURCH as a whole.

This points up the possibilities of freshness of ideas and attitudes that older women newcomers can bring to a church, increasing opportunities for flourishing and avoiding stagnation.

Another relative newcomer, Ruth had not completely adjusted to her new church in York. Despite being involved in a number of capacities, where a small number of people knew her and her contributions, Ruth felt that she was not generally accepted as a member of the congregation because she was frequently away, either visiting family or attending another local church with a friend. She asked in frustration, 'How much of yourself have you to give to really be accepted'? Even a long-time member like Barbara could feel estranged at church:

If you aren't going regularly you can still be treated almost like an outsider. And outsiders should be welcomed but they're not always. And I think it should be less of a sort of clique and club. I find even [my church], where I should be feeling at home, can feel an alien place, especially if you haven't been for a while. If you get yourself in a situation where you aren't familiar with what is happening that particular day because you haven't been there for a while, you can feel a total stranger....You can feel vibes as much as to say that, 'Oh well, if you'd been coming, you'd know all this. And you haven't been coming, so you don't. So why should we bother with you'?

Because Barbara (and others) warned against making the church one's sole source of community, she was troubled by this attitude. Too much focus on one community—in this case, church—created a "cosy" atmosphere, which she perceived negatively as too much "insiderness". Clergy were often (though not always) praised for their efforts to make older female newcomers welcome. But as for ordinary members of congregations, many interviewees shared Hilda's reaction that they 'should have been doing their stuff'—and they were not.

Many churches take the view that if they are providing services specifically for older people, such as luncheon clubs, then they are meeting those people's needs. But, most of the interviewees spoke in terms of wanting to contribute to the church rather than receive from it. They wanted to be acknowledged and valued as (older) persons *who participated in reciprocal relationships with their fellow members*. The question arises then, should churches segregate or

integrate age groups? Here again, we encounter the reluctance of some older people to be “lumped together” for the (often well-intentioned) convenience of the congregation:

I would like to be considered as a person. Not particularly in a category as an “older person”... Particularly in the church, we are really all one in Christ Jesus, and there should be that unity. And there’s danger if we split people up (pauses) into categories. (Rebecca)

The “danger” Rebecca referred to was that younger people in the church would not have role models for how to “be older” if they were not part of mixed age groups at least occasionally. She pointed out the benefits to herself as an older person and to younger people when the age groups mingle.

Jerrome suggests that ‘[t]he models of ageing held out to elderly people in the church’ are unambiguous, and that ‘[t]he old person in the church enjoys the security of a highly integrated and purposeful existence’ (1989:156-157).<sup>18</sup> But is this idealised picture upheld everywhere? We saw in Chapter 1 that many churches ignore or even denigrate older persons in their desire to attract young people. And, are “highly integrated” older people merely assigned roles they do not wish to have? For example, in non-church communities, Jerrome found that ‘[t]he pressure upon [older people] to remain in office is backed up by an ethic of service to the community, the need for a purposeful existence, the importance of activity, doing rather than being (especially in old age), and other cultural values’ (1989:158). For these individuals, retirement is not an option.

Ageing brings about its own problems with church community membership, such as shifts in importance. For interviewees who were affiliated to a church that was not physically located in their neighbourhood, issues of transportation and safety came into play. In Barbara’s case, this meant that her neighbourhood had gradually taken on more importance than her church community, and it was her neighbourhood where she was able to undertake most of her Christian activities. Likewise, Winnie lived at some distance from her church. Her physical limitations made walking too difficult, especially in bad weather, and bus timetables were not always convenient. Thus, she depended on lifts from other members to get to services and to housegroups. Failing health could also cause a decline in attendance, as Hubbert found in her study (1991:59).

For many older women, ageing brings widowhood. We heard from Dollie that losing her partner made it emotionally difficult for her to participate in groups of women with husbands. The practical aspects, too, of dealing with solitariness, after having had a partner, could make some tasks loom large:



When I was first on my own, it physically was very difficult to go [to church at night]. To get in a car, which I'd never driven at night before by myself. And go there and lock up a home and all the rest of it....But I made myself do it on certain occasions. (Barbara)

Finally, having their past contributions to a church community forgotten as other members died or moved away saddened some interviewees. As Barbara said, 'A lot of people don't know what you've done, do they, in the past? They find it very difficult to believe that you have done something like [help set up an outreach programme]'.

One common thread throughout the interviews was a feeling that the world had changed dramatically in the women's lifetimes, especially with regard to morals and values, and that they looked to the church—not always successfully—to help them understand this. For instance, Nancy was opposed to mothers going out to work, while Elsie was unhappy with co-habitation and single mothers with children by multiple partners. Florence, in her 90s, said that the three worst problems to hit the church, particularly, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were 'motor cars, television, and Sunday shopping', sentiments echoed by several of the most senior interviewees. These women felt a 'sense of moral siege' (Jerrome, 1992:156). Hope's attitude was one of resignation ('But you can't turn the clock back, can you? You've got to go with whatever's happening now'), while Hilda felt strongly that older people had to change to meet society as it is today:

The older person MUST, absolutely MUST, realise that times have moved on. And things have changed....And you really must throw some of these old ideas out the window.

Some interviewees, such as Doris and Barbara, were making attempts to learn about what they might have condemned in the past—homosexuality, co-habitation, divorce—in order to understand young people, including members of their own families. Elsie, however, felt that the churches were lax or compromising their Christian teaching:

It's supposed to be a Christian country. But I think a lot of Christian principles and whatnot are falling by the wayside. I don't think we've (pauses) we haven't got much backing from the church as a whole.<sup>19</sup>

Her sentiments expressed the view that older people have made enough adjustments to "the way things are today" and that is time for society to accommodate *their* principles, to see *their* values as a 'cultural resource' (Jerrome, 1992:157) to be benefited from. Too often, they implied, it is society (and the churches) that expect older people to change, and in the wrong direction.

---

<sup>18</sup> She contradicts this a bit, though, as we saw in Chapter 1.

## 7.5 Discussion

Older women's experiences of being affiliated with a local church highlight the complexities of insider/outsider statuses. The seemingly obvious categories of "newcomer" and "long-time member" can mask complex and frustrating experiences. Nevertheless, there was a strong feeling among the interviewees that being affiliated with a local church, with a particular congregation of fellow Christians, was an important part of life. There were benefits to be gained, contributions to be made, and responsibilities to be lived up to—just as in any key community. Even as difficulties with physical ageing arose, the women strove to maintain their memberships. As Ramsey and Blieszner found in their study of older women and churches:

Community for these women is more a world of meaning than a form of social activity...[I]t is a many-faceted jewel, reflecting deep friendships, both practical and religious assistance, love, safety, power for social action, strength through ritual and symbolism, and the place where a full range of human emotions is affirmed and accepted (2000:58).

In the case of the local church, there is the added belief (or at least hope) that this community will not reject people as they age. For the interviewees, when such rejection appeared to happen, frustration and sadness were the result.

Returning to my operational definition that a community is a place: from the interviewees' comments community is a place in the sense that it can be identified. However, for these women, it went beyond this. For them, community primarily meant a group of people that they had something in common with and to which they felt an attachment beyond merely having their name on a membership list. It was a social place *where something meaningful happened*. Commitment to a community meant continuing to be involved, to be present, and to sacrifice other opportunities in life in order to keep it alive, functioning, and meaningful. This chapter has introduced key findings about older women's experiences of community. We will return to the issues raised here in Chapter 10, when the three key themes of community, connection, and caring are drawn together.

One of my challenges with this project has been to understand "community" using definitions given by those who are members of communities. This is over against my own views as an outsider to the individual lives of the interviewees and to most of their communities. (Although there are a few communities that I am a part of and share with the interviewees, such as living in York and being a member of a particular church congregation, along with several of the women.) I did not set myself up as either an observer or a participant observer of their communities. Instead, I asked direct questions to elicit descriptions of community from within. The answers given were not from people at a distance but from people "on the inside", or at

---

<sup>19</sup> These views were echoed by participants in the Sanger (1999) focus groups, as cited in Wraight (2001a:115).



least on the margins, making their own observations. These were not people trying to create abstract theories of belonging and outsidersness. They were women living the life of the communities of which they were a part, and influencing and being influenced in return.

### **7.6 Summary**

All of the interviewees were able to identify at least one primary community and several secondary communities that they were part of. For them, a community was a place of meaning, and being a member was knowing one's location within that community. Being established—even for a short time—allowed a woman to contribute to the community and to extract benefits. However, a number of the women felt a disjuncture between their desired role and what they perceived it to be in reality. This was especially true for women who saw themselves as newcomers or as marginalised—and if this was the situation in her local church, then the experience was particularly painful. Exactly why it was painful was linked to the phenomenon of connection, which we will examine now.

## Chapter 8—Connection: Coming together in relationship

JE: When you came to York, were you living near [that church]? Is that how you happened to attend that church?

Dolores: Well, of course...my niece was there...and my sister...They introduced me. And so, of course, I didn't have to worm my way through.

### 8.1 Introduction

If we are aiming to move towards creating a Christian feminist practical theology of older women, then understanding how older women experience the connections in their lives—and the meaning these have for them—is vital. As we will see, “being connected” is an essential part of living for older women, and when we know how to enhance connectedness for them, we can enrich their spiritual lives. In turn, churches and other communities can learn about how relationships might be improved across the age spectrum. In this chapter, we shall see that my data corroborates Hubbert's, which showed that ‘[t]he primary motivating force for these women was the network of relationships which shaped their lives and their world’ (1991:6).

As we saw in the last chapter, communities are social places where people find meaning for their lives. Being able to make contributions to and to extract benefits from membership in a community is important. So, too, are the bonds that exist between community members. These bonds are, in my terminology, connections. My definition of connection, as stated at the end of Chapter 4, is that a “connection” is a relationship between two people or between a person and another entity. Having and maintaining these connections is important to older women. Yet, as we also saw, there are changes that can occur as a woman ages and particular concerns that an older woman has. These will be explored in this chapter, as we hear from the interviewees themselves.

The data will reveal who and what the interviewees feel connected to and which are their most important connections. We shall learn how the women establish and maintain their connections, especially as they grow older, and the functions these connections serve. Significantly, the women will tell us how connection works when the relationship is with a challenging individual. We will discover how the women define old age, and learn whether they view themselves as old(er). Throughout, the local church will be a focus of these ideas and experiences. Finally, and very importantly, we shall see that a number of the interviewees think theologically about the meaning of connection in their lives, and raise points that resonate with the feminist theologians' ideas we reviewed in Chapter 4.

### 8.2 Types of connections older women have

What kinds of things are older women connected to? What purposes do those connections serve? How is connection performed and demonstrated? There were five general categories of



things the interviewees had connections with: people, places, God and the Christian faith, various other things, and their local churches. I will present each of these categories in turn, and then move on to discuss in detail how the interviewees identified the purposes the connections served and how they functioned.

Connections with people were the most important for most of the interviewees. As Barbara said:

My relationship to people is huge, and it's...truly important to me. I think it's the most important thing, particularly with my family.

Nearly all of the interviewees named family members as very important people, which is a logical outcome of "the family" being named as one of their most important communities. Dora, for example, was devoted to her husband, a feeling she said was mutual. Edith, Frederica, and Sarah had male companions that were very dear to them. Children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews were also frequently mentioned. Friendships were another special kind of connection. Family members could be friends, as could neighbours and people at church. Friends from the past were particularly valued because of a shared history, both good times and bad, a finding also recognised by Jerrome (1981, 1992) and Phillipson, et al. (2001).

The desired degree of closeness, even to family and friends, varied, however. Janet enjoyed the company of others, but was highly independent. Like some (though not all) of the other women who had geographically distant family, she was content to maintain her connections with family via phone calls, letters, and occasional visits. June liked a balance of company and solitary time. Hope preferred to keep her relationships with her neighbours on a less demanding level:

You get to know them, in just a light sort of way, not involved too much with any of them, really. But they're all there if you wanted them. They're all a good crowd, you know.

Hope had struck the right level of connection and available reciprocity that suited her as a very active and independent woman in her late 70s.<sup>1</sup>

Several interviewees spoke of their strong continuing connections with deceased loved ones. Most often, this was a husband; but many of the women also mentioned parents, siblings, or, in two cases, a deceased child. Ways that the women continued to feel these connections were via memories; objects such as photographs, newspaper cuttings and letters; special music; values and teachings; and visiting places associated with those loved ones. However, not every woman had felt this sort of connection, either in the past or ongoing. For those who had, the connection had changed in form with the passing of the years. Phyllis addressed this in a thoughtful way:

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah and Mary did not see their neighbours in a positive light, a finding of Phillipson, et al., too (2001:94). Also, Phillipson, et al. found that some older people value 'complete independence from neighbours' (2001:115). I found this, too, with Hope.

I think whenever you lose anyone, that person is still with you. Very, very much with you...immediately after they die. And it's only as time goes by that they're not so close to you....When they die...you accept that you're not going to see them anymore. But it's just as though...they were still around you somehow. (pauses)...It takes time to suddenly accept that you're not going to talk to them, that everything you touch or everything you think is still connected with that particular person...(pauses) That's why the tears come so often because they're just there all the time, but you can't touch them.

Many of the women I spoke with hoped to reunite with their loved ones in an afterlife, although they were unclear as to exactly whether and how this would happen.<sup>2</sup> Bennett (1987) found these same sorts of beliefs and reported experiences of deceased loved ones among her sample of informants (who were very similar demographically to the interviewees of this project).

As for places the interviewees felt connected to, the place most talked about (after the local church, and because I specifically asked about it) was "home". Almost all of the women spoke of "home" with strong feelings. Hazel talked of the house she grew up in (and lived in almost all of her life), and how she had brought many objects from that house into her flat at the residential home and thus made her flat "home". For many, York was home, either because they had always lived there, or because after many years it had become the place where their friends were, or because they had chosen it as their retirement "base". June, a relatively recent resident, felt connected to past generations of York residents, to which she added her own story and became part of the fabric of the city:

At night, that tower [indicating York Minster] is lit up, and I used to sit and look at it for ages. And I would think, 'All the thousands of years....Those stones are full of other people's tears, other people's prayers, other people's sadnesses. So there's my bit, if you like'.

Women who had lived in other parts of the country or the world occasionally spoke of these places as having particular attachments for them. Interestingly, no one mentioned a particular holiday spot or a special area of their neighbourhood as having significance. For instance, I was surprised that the women who spoke enthusiastically about nature did not mention a favourite view or retreat.

Unsurprisingly, for these churchgoing women God and faith were important connections. Gloria went so far as to say that 'the Christian faith is all about relationships'. A majority of the women named their Christian faith, God, and their idea of "church" as important "intangible" connections. Millie, for example, worked hard daily to maintain and to strengthen those connections. She called her bible 'the most precious book I've got' and saw it not only as a

---

<sup>2</sup> See Eldred (2000) for a further discussion of the interviewees' conceptions of an afterlife. (A copy is bound into the back of this thesis.)



source of connection to God and her faith today, but also a reminder of a lifetime of such connections:

JE: You said that you meditate on the bible. So are there things that you read in the bible that cause you to sit back and think about that?

Millie: Yes, and that's when me underlining [of passages] come. (pauses) And I write it down [in the margins] because when you get old you can't remember it. So I write it down, and...I think, 'Now why did I put that'? And I read it.

In this way, Millie could think about what was important to her in the past and then see what meanings these scriptural passages had for her today. Alfreda said that Methodism was 'bound into' her and her siblings at a very young age, due to its strong presence in their family background, and that throughout her life it had proved to be one of her strongest connections. A few of the interviewees mentioned their particular attachment to forms of Methodism that they had practised in their childhood (e.g. Primitive Methodism) and that they regretted some of the changes they had witnessed as these branches merged into the larger body of Methodism today.

Mary's connection with God appeared to be the primary connection in her life, which she pointed to via faith, teachings, the gospel, and personal experiences. For Nancy (and several other interviewees), God was always present, particularly in difficult times:

The more problems you have and the more things you have to face, the nearer it brings you to God....I mean, I've needed him so many times in my life; I don't know what I'd do without him.

Indeed, Hazel had had a personal sense of her connection with God at a family wedding, which she attended shortly after a bereavement:

I just don't know really how to explain it, but a quiet peace came over me from top to bottom. And since then, I've been different. Now, when I say my prayers at night, I thank God because I felt sure that was a message from God strengthening me....And I shall never forget that lovely feeling. Just as if...God was right next to me, with his arms around me.

Phyllis said that her connection with God, as with those with people, cannot be taken for granted but must be worked at from her side, that there is mutual accountability:

If you have no contact [with God], it's like (pauses) a family. If you have no contact with each other, you lose that sort of caring. And I think it's the same with God. If we let go, then we lose our sort of input really. You know, no one to hold on to.

A few of the interviewees felt connections to both past and future generations of Christians. For example, Lillian had been a Sunday school teacher for more than fifty years and said, 'I think it's a big responsibility to be teaching small children...Christianity....I feel that's a big responsibility'. Fran felt this sort of connection both forwards to her grandchildren and also

backwards to her Christian forbears. Faith and fellowship were continuous threads in her family, a 'goodly, Godly heritage' to be thankful for and to pass on. And, as we saw in the last chapter, Ruth felt part of the one body of the worldwide church *and* of all believers of any faith.

A handful of other types of connections were named. Eunice and Aleen were both strongly attached to their former fields of work, and actively kept up with developments. June had a strong, proprietorial sense of connection to the various volunteer groups she associated with. Her sentences were peppered with "we" and "our" as she told about the plans and activities of each group. A few interviewees named animals, wild flowers, the natural world, singing, and music as significant connections in their lives. However, when it came to life beyond Earth, Barbara said, 'I don't see myself in relation to the cosmos a'tall. No. My horizons are very limited. I've no conception of infinity a'tall'.

Time was an abstract concept that also came up in conversation about connection. Some women felt connected to the past, via their memories. For example, Mavis had very strong connections to particular events in her life, many of which were during the war years, and these events were retold with panache. Likewise, Florence cherished her memories.<sup>3</sup> But Barbara dispelled a common assumption that older women live solely in the past:

They obviously have a greater past to fall back on, and they think of it more than younger people do. But it doesn't exclude thinking about the present and the future.

Hilda concurred, as she, like most of the women, looked to the future:

Time is valuable. It never comes back....I think it's the best thing God's given us, really, isn't it? Apart from our health.

Of course, the local church was named by nearly all interviewees as a significant connection. Where do an older woman's church connections come from? They gave numerous sources. Those from childhood days included parents; inspiring figures, leaders, and preachers; and youth activities when growing up (e.g. clubs, Sunday school). In later years, connections came via spouses; their own children, through their Sunday school memberships; and activities such as choir, committees, and outreach work. The women's parents may or may not have been churchgoers, but they themselves attended Sunday school (in some cases from the age of three), ran youth clubs, and served as church leaders (either in youth, adulthood, or both), both locally and nationally. In their older age, many of the women were still teaching Sunday school, stewarding, organising meetings, doing pastoral visiting, writing and editing church magazines, running bookstalls, and playing the piano and organ.



Ada and Florence had ties to their respective churches that reached back many decades—family, friendships, and experience were the root of their connections. In Rebecca’s case, where her local church connection was established fairly recently, it was strong due to like-mindedness with her fellow churchgoers. Yet, connection could also be as simple as Mavis’s contribution to her church, where she had instigated the placement of potted plants in the sanctuary. This was her particular, permanent “touch”, something she was quite pleased with.

Dolores’s story of past and present church connections was representative of those of several of the interviewees. Although having lived in York for many years now, Dolores still felt very attached to one of her former church “homes”, one she and her husband had joined as retirees. She said that they had been able to establish themselves as older people in this new church in a new town because they took on several roles at the church and in the local church circuit. This former church “home” represented happy times, good friends, partnership with her husband, and responsibilities taken on and done well.

As we saw at the opening of this chapter, Dolores’s transition to her present church home was smoothed by the fact that both her niece and her sister were already members. Dolores was immediately honoured with a fond nickname, by which she was known to all ages in the congregation. Even so, her sense of belonging was mixed. If she missed a service or a meeting, or was not visited by someone from the congregation, then she felt detached from the happenings at her church. Her story illustrates how an older woman can feel on the margins of a church community when she does not know ‘the lingo’ (her words) and the inside stories and history of a place—even when the community’s members are welcoming and full of goodwill. Also, it shows that the “currency” of social capital that she had accumulated in her former church—her ‘lingo’, her history, and her contributions—could not be spent in the new church. Dolores, like other older women in her situation, had had to develop new reserves and new forms of social capital.

### **8.2.1 What are the purposes of connections and how do connections “work”?**

There are different purposes connections serve, many of which confer benefits upon the older women involved. There are also different aspects to how connection is “performed” and demonstrated by older women.

As we learned in Chapter 4, one key purpose of connection is to experience a feeling of belonging. Jerrome comments on the purpose of certain “reinforcing-type” activities in the structured communities of older people’s social clubs:

---

<sup>3</sup> Private correspondence, April 1999.

[R]ituals of greeting and parting and tea drinking...applauding, singing, and collective reminiscing, underline values and express important allegiances—to the age group, to the moral community...to friends, and to members of one's personal network....The recurrent themes and phrases, the prescribed responses, and modes of participation provide security, a sense of personal location in time, a link between the individual and the collective' (1989:154).

The activities and the links that result from them serve to create a sense of belonging for community members.<sup>4</sup>

As well as the good feelings and the security that came from belonging, the interviewees gave a range of reasons for why they had formed and maintained their various connections. The most commonly named purposes of connection were to exchange caring and love; for the social contact, pleasure, and fun of being with other people; to continue to be involved in life and to be stimulated by new ideas; and for friendship, with its associated benefits of being known and having a unique identity. Most of these churchgoing women also named two other important purposes for their connections: to live God's plan for their lives and to do God's work, making the world a better (and, for some, a more Christian) place, and also to benefit from fellowship with other Christians in order to strengthen their faith and uphold their principles.

The social side of connections was very evident in Hope's numerous activities, which included the U3A, sequence dancing, and bowls. Barbara got a mental "high" from her social connections:

I need contact with other people. I need to talk with other people of like mind. I like to think that I can touch another person's life for good. Again, it sounds so sanctimonious when you say it but, those contacts give me a buzz. And I need a buzz most days.

She illustrated this with the example of a recent outing with a friend, where they had stopped to chat with another woman they had never met before:

We only talked for no more than five minutes at the most. But we were enjoying the day and she was enjoying the day. And that enjoyment was infectious. And it passed like a triangle around the three of us.

It was particularly important that connections with churches be maintained, because as a number of interviewees indicated (e.g. Millie, Veeve, Barbara), older Christian women are still growing in their faith, still discovering nuances of meaning and insights into God's actions—both in their own lives and in the bible. There was surprise and delight in this discovery, and sometimes a desire to share such things with others. Here is a clear instance of where churches could encourage older women to contribute to and to build up the life of the church, by sharing these

---

<sup>4</sup> We will return to "belonging" a bit further on in this chapter.



experiences and insights. Faith and church friends were not only a support in times of need, but also a means of sticking to one's principles:

Certain of us need the support of the church to keep to [our] morals....To keep those and to hang onto those principles. (Edith)

Edith said that going to church also helped her learn to tolerate, accept, and understand people who were different from herself. (This will be discussed further, below.) Several interviewees expressed that they enjoyed talking to younger people—often their own grandchildren but others as well. Contrary to the ageist stereotype, they did not wish only to talk with other older women but rather across the generations, in order to keep up-to-date and to understand the issues young people face today.

Getting involved in whatever was happening in a community was one key to becoming and staying connected. For Lillian, changing churches in midlife had been a major event, but she offered two practical suggestions to smooth such transitions:

It's a big thing after all those years...to suddenly uproot. And you have all sorts of fears and 'Oh, dear, what if I don't settle in'?...And a lot of your fears are groundless, you know. I think you've got to be prepared to be friendly to people, and they'll be friendly back, you know. And I was made most welcome....[Also,] get your hands in the sink. Yes, that was a real bit of good advice that old lady told me [when I joined the church].

Here we can see useful advice for other newcomers: be friendly and “get your hands in the sink”—show a willingness to join in without waiting to be asked. Lillian implied that an older woman must be prepared to take the initiative when entering a new situation, something that Dollie suspected (see Chapter 7), but did not readily act upon.

For some interviewees, being connected to communities through others was more obvious than the connections they had in their own right. Ella had been attending her church for many years, but felt she belonged more via her late husband and his roles:

It was lovely to sit by him. He was a singer as well, and he [had] so many jobs in the church that I felt [belonging] through him....And...when I lost him, I suppose I was floundering a bit.

Fay, who had been in a similar situation, felt ‘spurred on’ to continue her late husband’s level of involvement at church.

Phyllis’s words (below) show that people have a responsibility to maintain good relations with others. Like many of the interviewees, Phyllis said that one of her guiding principles was not to harm anyone. She spoke from personal experience of being deeply hurt by others’ comments to her when she had a family difficulty:

We don't know...how much we hurt other people. (cries) Sorry, I was trying to guard my feelings. When I was quite young, my father once said to me—I'd

said something, and I said 'I'm sorry'. He said, 'Don't be sorry. Just think before you speak. Because you can never take a thing back once you've said it'. And I think I've tried to live by it.

Karen added that honesty must be present for connection to work, and Veeve said that her guiding principle for human relationships was to 'never sacrifice fellowship to efficiency....[and never take an attitude of] "I must get this right, I don't care who goes to the wall"'. Barbara worked to develop connections for herself and for others. As we saw above, she viewed connections as being very important and felt that she had improved her relationship skills with age:

When we get older, it becomes easier [to get along]...partly because you've had years and years of experience at it, and partly because we make allowances for each other and we're not afraid that if somebody says something that you don't agree with, you'll fall out with them. Because we know it's a discussion, it's not an argument. And there's a great difference between the two.

Yet, even when they recognised the skills needed and the possible positive outcomes, the women granted that it was not always easy to show concern for and interest in one and all equally:

I like being friendly with people but I don't like being friendly to people I don't like. (Barbara)

Several of the interviewees talked about how they worked to get along with and understand people who challenged them, either by their behaviour or by their ideas and ways of living. They did this through staying connected and showing tolerance, understanding, acceptance, and Christian love—and they felt they gained as a result:

The more you do get involved with somebody with whom you disagree, you can begin to understand their point of view a bit better. (Doris)

Wherever you go, you're not going to agree 100 per cent with everybody, you know....I think sometimes I'm perhaps too laid back. And somebody else who feels real strongly about something, well that's important because probably they're stimulating my mind to think, 'Well, really, I should be more concerned about that'. (Lillian)

[Other people] have to live their life as they see it. And even if you don't agree with it, you've got to keep friends with them. You haven't to give them up just because of [a disagreement over the appropriateness of divorce and remarriage]. (Verity)

If other people want to do things they want to do, I wouldn't condemn them. If it wasn't the same as I wanted to do. I wouldn't stop...loving them or befriending them or (pauses) helping them or supporting them or whatever. (Edith)

This ability to stay connected, said Edith, had come with the years:

I think that's one good thing as I've grown older. I have become more tolerant. Of others' views, in outlook on life, what people get up to, what they do, and



things like that....Yes, my view of life has kind of broadened, rather than...narrowed. Whether it's the things you see on television, or whether it's the things you hear about, [or] the things you come into contact with [yourself that causes it].

The message from these women was that maintaining a connection requires commitment and communication, that a connection is not something you end when it starts to become uncomfortable. Here is another way that church communities could learn from the example and wisdom of older women.

Getting along with people can sometimes be a major challenge, and the interviewees were, largely, willing to do the work:

I pray so hard that I don't think wrong things about people....I want to see the goodness in them. And sometimes it's very hard and difficult, but you do....I think you (pauses) have patience and tolerance (pauses) and (pauses) not get angry. And...you must forgive. Forgetting's a little harder. Especially if you've been really hurt...It takes longer (pauses) But forgiving I find very easy. If I didn't I couldn't go on. (Winnie)

The basis for this deep commitment to maintaining connections with people appeared (for a few of the interviewees) to have much to do with the women's understanding of their relationship with God. God was at work in human relationships, either as the source of them or as responding to human behaviour in them. We see this in their discussion of how good outcomes could arise from broken or strained connections. Veeve, whose thinking on the subject went to a deeper level than Winnie's, said that relations could be mended and restored by confessing our sins to each other. Forgiveness, she said, comes not only from God but also from each other, and both are necessary for living in community:

I need to sort things out. I need in a way—I suppose to put it religiously—I need to make my confession to the other person concerned as well as to God. I don't believe that I can sort it out just by confessing to God and asking for forgiveness. If I've offended somebody else, I must make my confession to them. And try to sort things out with them.

Later on, she added:

[There's] a bit of the divine in everybody. If you feel separated from your fellow human beings, you can't help but be separated from God. And if you're separated, if you feel separated from God, I think that as a Christian...I would automatically feel separated from human beings because the two go together: love God and love your fellow human beings. And if you're not on good terms with God, how can you be on good terms with your fellow human beings?

Barbara commented on this in the context of sin (prompted when I asked her to tell me what she thought "sin" was):

I would think of sin as first of all with other people, but resulting in that it displeases God. Because you are meant to treat other people how God would treat them. And so it's a triangle, isn't it? If you do something that hurts your

next door neighbour, you have hurt your relationship with God. Because he wants you to be good with your neighbour.

For Veeve and Barbara, an understanding of Christian teachings and of one's own relationship with God served as a model for human connections. Although this does not go as far as Sölle, Heyward, and some of the other feminist theologians we met in Chapter 4, there are links to the concept of God-in-relation as expressed by those theologians.

Referring back to my definition of connection, that it is a relationship, is this definition supported by the data? Yes, for these older women connections *are* relationships. Older women are related to the other members of their communities by various sorts of bonds, and those bonds tend to have more than the superficial quality of "membership" that we saw with community. In fact, connections take on an emotional quality, and this is what, in my view, raises them to the level of relationships. If community is a place where something meaningful happens, then this is because the connections within communities have meaning.

We have seen what types of connections the interviewees had and the purposes they served, and learned a bit about how they were established and maintained. We have also seen how a few of the women gained understandings about God and connection one from the other. Now we will explore the benefits of connection in more detail.

### **8.3 Benefits of connection for older women**

As discussed in Chapter 4, the benefits that can accrue from connection are identity, autonomy, belonging, friendship, fellowship, and assistance. We will see now that the data support these ideas, and that older women do indeed receive these benefits from their connections.

#### i. Identity and autonomy

For Griffiths (1995), the processes of loving some and resisting other communities (and their attendant identities) are part of how one's self-identity is created.<sup>5</sup> Griffiths compares the individual self to a web, one woven from different threads of identity which originate from memberships in both given and chosen communities (91).<sup>6</sup> The web of self-identity also contains threads made up of the connections a woman has with individual members of her communities. For example, a significant part of the identity of many of the women I spoke with was their role as "mother", an identity based on connections with one or more children in the family community.

---

<sup>5</sup> I would add that these processes also determine a group's identity, as the group interacts with a diversity of individuals.

<sup>6</sup> Compare this to Gilligan (1982), who talks about women being in webs of relationships. Taken together, Griffiths and Gilligan demonstrate that there are both internal and external complexities and connections in a woman's life.



Sometimes one role in a community eclipses all others, and a woman may seek to re-position her self-identity, as Alfreda did in her church:

I think that becoming a local preacher is “A” [emphasised] landmark. Because I was no longer known only as the minister’s wife. I was a person in my own right. And I can’t explain how much difference that made. But it did you see.

Another interviewee, one who had retired from a career as a missionary, said that that identity had created a barrier between herself and her fellow churchgoers upon her return from overseas, a barrier that took a number of years to wear down:

They regarded ME as somebody different....They regarded me as being an authority, and in that sense I didn’t properly belong. But all that has worn off quite a bit now....I’m quite sure I belong now. I really do belong.

It was clear from talking to the women that the mix of given and chosen communities in their lives both created a sense of who they were *by chance* (e.g. Alfreda’s being born into a Methodist family) and of who they wished to be *by choice* (e.g. Hazel’s wish to be known as a relaxed hostess). They were continuing to weave threads of connection to fashion their self-identities, whether as busy social organisers (Barbara, Tess) or as resourceful, independent women (Janet, Hope).

For most of the women I spoke with, being connected to other people did not prevent them from being separate and autonomous individuals. Rather, it did the opposite, as Hoagland says: ‘I argue that my ethical self emerges from pursuing my own integrity and goals *as well as* relating to others; it comes from my perceiving myself as one among many’ (1991:256; emphasis mine). For example, choosing to adhere to her primary principle of honesty both sprang from Karen’s concern for proper connections with other people and also enhanced her ability to connect with both her church and non-church communities. Fischer extends this idea by observing that ‘recognition of dependence, even deep and extensive dependence on another, need not mean loss of personal originality, autonomy, and influence’ (1998:70). Dollie, who values having people in her life (see Chapter 7) also remarks that

[Older women] want to do [things] when and where their ideas come from, rather than somebody else telling them.

Being able to make one’s own choices is a hallmark of autonomy. The older women I interviewed had no problems reconciling their individual identities with their understanding of themselves as connected persons. On the contrary, it was those connections that helped them clarify who they were and who they might be, thus supporting Gilligan’s thesis that women know who they are, as differentiated individuals, by being in relationship with others.

## ii. Belonging

Belonging was a key benefit of connection for many interviewees, and they had many ideas of what it meant to them. Feeling “at home” (Lillian); being recognised as an individual with a name (Dollie); and being cared about (Veeve) were all passive ways of experiencing belonging. A woman could also foster her own sense of belonging by being committed and involved with her community. This was true of Rebecca and Elsie. Each woman had invested many years in service to her church and felt a deep sense of belonging as a result.<sup>7</sup> Being active was what they pointed to as why they “belonged” to their particular church or to the larger Christian church.<sup>8</sup>

However, Mary hinted that one’s sense of belonging in the church could change with age. Whereas in the past, being active, having well defined roles, and knowing what values the church stood for all signalled “belonging” to her, now things were less clear:

JE: Does belonging have the same meaning for you now that it did years ago, in years past?

Mary: Oh, yes. And more so. And more so....You can’t live in isolation. You’ve got to belong. That’s part of your Christian faith. You have to belong. You can’t live out a Christian life as a sole unit. It just doesn’t work that way. You’ve got to belong. Even though it may become more difficult as time goes by, and you find you don’t belong in the church (laughs)....I mean for me, well without any church connection, it would be like spring without flowers.  
(laughs)

Mary’s somewhat contradictory remark seems to indicate that belonging was important to her, but that she was less sure, with age, of her place in the church. Belonging, then, may not be a once-and-for-all-time benefit. How an older woman experiences belonging can change, and that may have something to do with external events and processes or with her own internal growth and changes.

Brown observes that sometimes separation is necessary and a good thing to have happen, in order for new connections to form (1992:243). Thus, “not belonging” can pave the way for “belonging” elsewhere.

---

<sup>7</sup> However, belonging may have little to do with time put in. It may be gauged by others by the value you contribute to a community or the trust they can place in you: ‘It was not the length of stay but whether or not I was “integrated.” There was a difference in members’ eyes between being a member and being fully accepted’ (Reinharz, 1997:17). It would not be possible to belong without being accepted by others already in the community in question.

<sup>8</sup> Florence expressed particular concern that the organisational, practical activities her generation was used to doing at church be valued equally with the individualised, meditative, and devotional practices receiving so much attention from clergy today. (Private conversation). This would indicate that the church may have a hard time selling the worth of “being” to some older women!



### iii. Friendship, fellowship, and assistance

As the interviewees expressed it, fellowship was a particular kind of connection between Christians. The word was mentioned frequently, and, as Jerrome notes (Chapter 4), had a quality that distinguished it from friendship. Fellowship implies a foregrounding of the Christian faith, perhaps as a reason for the gathering of a community or perhaps as an outcome of it. It was something that Alfreda found in her denomination:

If you were to ask me what one thing I valued most within Methodism, I would say it's fellowship.

Fellowship does not only happen at church or in church-related groups, however. Veeve discovered it in her lip-reading classes, where there was a level of connection that went beyond friendship. Although the other members of the class may or may not have been Christian, Veeve recognised their bonds as fellowship.

A final key benefit of connection named by virtually all of the interviewees was assistance when needed. Tess said of her husband's death some years ago:

It was an awful shock. And it did take time to get over it. But, without the church and without the Lord Jesus Christ, and my friends and family, I don't know how I would have coped.

Here, Tess named four important connections in her life, all of which provided assistance at a crucial time. The next chapter will discuss assistance, in the form of caring, in detail. I have introduced it here to signal that it was a benefit almost universally acknowledged as coming from connections.

## **8.4 Maintaining connections as a woman ages**

As we learned in the previous chapter, transportation and mobility were issues for older women with respect to ongoing membership in communities. From the data, it appears that women who shared a home with a driver (e.g. spouse or child) or who were themselves drivers found it easier to stay connected than did those who depended on public transport or lifts from others. But, psychological as well as practical issues must also come into play when maintaining connections. There must be a mutual sense that older women should continue to be involved in order for their connections to communities to thrive; one-sided commitment will not hold connections in force forever. In their study, Ramsey and Blieszner found that older women's lives in community 'might better be described as *interdependent* because they give and take in an atmosphere of mutual support and acceptance' (2000:55; emphasis mine). As long as the other party (i.e. non-older-woman) to a connection benefits in some way, or recognises her/their dependence on the connection, then interdependence with an older woman can operate.

Something unexpected for me was the way many of the interviewees extended their own strong connections outwards to me. For example, Fay spent a large portion of our interview showing me old photos of her family and of people at church. This was obviously very important to her, as it gave her a chance to share images as well as thoughts about her late husband and about other important people in her life, several of whom were also deceased. This activity was a way for Fay to bring me into the picture of her important connections. These two communities—family and local church—were the most significant in her life, and her sharing extended the relationships to include me. A number of the interviewees who were happy with their churches invited me to attend services or special events at those churches, and I took up many of those invitations. They wanted me to witness or receive various things: Christian teaching, good music, fellowship, caring, warmth of welcome, food, or more material for my research project. I think that they might also have wanted to show me off to the rest of their community as a new friend, a younger friend, someone who had taken a particular interest in them and whom they had helped.<sup>9</sup>

Extending a web of connections can have its negative consequences, however:

Sometimes it can be almost overpowering because you can't get anything else done for it. But it's mostly to my advantage that I have this great crowd of people that I'm with. And it's a crowd that's ever increasing. (Barbara)

Despite the work involved in running her communities and in developing and maintaining connections to people, Barbara felt that the advantages she gained (e.g. her “buzz”) outweighed any disadvantages.

The ultimate endpoint of extending connections to include others is to include all others in the world. Although this was not a goal mentioned by any of the interviewees (except Gloria, an evangelical Christian), the evidence I saw of older women working to create connections and to extend feelers to new persons provides a supporting argument for the Christian feminist viewpoint on the interconnectedness of creation.

#### **8.4.1 Older women and problems with connection**

As a woman ages, certain difficulties with maintaining connections may arise. Problems with mobility and transportation (already mentioned) and with hearing and eyesight limit which activities, if any, an older woman can participate in. For example, Kate, despite her keen interest in her church's governance, was prevented from participating in the church council by her severe hearing loss, which made following conversation in groups impossible. The general slowing down that accompanies older age for many women can mean that the physical demands

---

<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon was suggested to me on other occasions when I visited with older women who were not interviewees.



of certain tasks, such as setting up and serving meals or constructing major flower arrangements can be too taxing for some older women.

Older women who are still mobile, but who have certain physical disabilities, may find it difficult to attend small group meetings in private homes (Chester and Smith, 1996:38). Lack of hearing-loop systems and of wheelchair-accessible toilets are just two such problems. Hosting an event in one's home also becomes out of the question, unless others are willing to make the tea and move the furniture (Chester and Smith, 1996:39). The completely housebound face isolation on several levels. Alfreda said that the intellectual isolation that accompanied her housebound state was as bad as the physical isolation because she had little stimulus of conversation.

Finally, many older women impose a form of social isolation on themselves due to safety concerns. Unfortunately, these concerns may have as much to do with being female and living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they do with being older—although they may certainly be heightened by age. Vulnerability, or at least a 'sense of vulnerability' (Peace, 1993:142)—whether because of frailty, older appearance, or increased crime rates—is a major issue with many older women. As Millie said:

I attend meetings when I can. But I can only go when I get a lift nowadays, you see. 'Cause you daren't go out at night.

Dependence on others was a concern for some of the interviewees. Although being dependent upon someone—knowing that there is someone who will be available to help you—is often desirable and makes one feel good, for some older women it was a word with only negative connotations. It was desirable only when they expected to need help rarely. When help on a regular and increasing basis is a necessity, then dependency becomes undesirable:

Old women like to be independent as much as possible. They resent being cared for until they absolutely have to, I think, in general. (Doris)

There are a lot of older people...who if [other] people started overwhelming them with care would think, you know, this is getting a little bit much. (Edith)

As discussed in Chapter 1, the disengagement theory of ageing has long been discredited. What seems to be disengagement to an outsider may well be something else in the eyes of the older woman involved. Florence, for example, felt that there was an appropriate time to step back from her involvement in day-to-day tasks at her church:

'[O]ne morning I awakened and the voice inside said retire!...I retired....As the days go by it is easier to accept the situation but the first waves of shock and frustration were hard to bear. There was a feeling of isolation in the early days when I would have liked to be involved again but I realise that this would cause me more problems and it is better to stay on the fringe, supporting in anyway

[sic] in which I feel able...[I]t has been a wonderful blessing that only last year a casual comment led to a change in the services'.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than disengage from her church, Florence made a conscious decision to hand over the reins to a younger generation, while continuing to be involved in other ways. This observation is supported by the research of Ainlay, Singleton, and Swigert, who noted that a decrease in organised church participation among older people is not indicative of a desire to withdraw from the life of the church as a whole (1992:184).

A changing world can cause connections to weaken or be called into question. What several interviewees saw as the decline in moral standards in today's society made them question how they could cope with or understand these changes, and also caused them to question what the church can and should do in response. Social change may also cause an older woman to wonder if she truly belongs to the modern world. This is not a desire to disengage, but a questioning of one's place and value in present circumstances.

As friends and family die, an older woman can feel that fewer and fewer people are left who know her history, who know her 'inside out' (Dollie). As Jerrome noted, '[m]eetings with [old friends]...are marked by a comfortable absence of preliminaries' (1981:190). Kate agreed, saying that she tried (and often succeeded) to make new friends, but that it was a challenge to do so:

It is harder to make new friends. You see, you haven't got the background and the time, have you, for new friends? You have to start now. And people's lives are sort of fixed to a certain extent with things. And then you have to go to all sorts of things and join in to do this. And this is difficult for me. So from that point of view, that is quite difficult.

If physical decline is part of the picture, then forming new connections becomes an even greater challenge.

Death breaks connections in many ways. The death of a close friend particularly grieved Dollie, and she had not yet found a new 'special friend' to fill the gap. Death can also break the connection one has with a sense of self:

[My husband and I] just were as one...I still haven't felt really complete (laughs) since he died. Because we were so together, you know. (Gloria)

Also, as we learned earlier, surviving the loss of a spouse—another person with intimate knowledge of oneself—in our society that values coupledness can be difficult for a woman (Phillipson, et al., 2001). This was another factor in Dollie's situation.

---

<sup>10</sup> Written statement, October 1998.



And, not only human death breaks connections. Ella had had an additional bond with her neighbourhood through daily dog walking. When her pet died, she didn't get out as much and thus was out of touch with people she used to see and talk with regularly.

#### **8.4.2 Identity and old(er) age**

In Chapter 4, we learned that one of the greatest challenges women face as they age is a struggle with the label "old". Social stigmatisation and seeing ageism at work in our society causes women to resist seeing themselves (or being seen by others) as "old". This was overwhelmingly true of the interviewees.

Hurd's study (1999) of members of a seniors' centre in Canada showed that older women strove to identify themselves as being among the general community of the "not old", and that the age aspect of their identities was formed by focusing on what they were not (i.e., "not old") rather than positively on what they were (perhaps "ageful"?). This was because they had no positive associations with the category "old". If illness or frailty forces a woman to have less or no contact with a particular meaningful community, then she is very likely to begin to see herself as old (Hurd, 1999:431).

This resistance was also evident among my interviewees. They were not being disingenuous in denying the "obvious" (to me) fact of their old age. Instead, they were saying that society's, and their own, definition of "old" was something other than what they were. To these women, old age meant physical decay and needing to be cared for (Barbara, Ruth), poor health and loss of mobility (Edith, Hope), or at best, slowing down (Nancy, Aleen). One of the signs of old age (in others) was a lack of interest in things (Dollie), having nothing to look forward to (Verity), and in general a poor attitude to life (Phyllis, Lillian, and many others). They saw older persons as being stuck in a rut (Hilda) and not wanting to let go of old habits (Dollie, Hope). Such people were either no longer prepared to change with the world and disparaged it (Lillian, Karen) or else felt they could no longer keep up and that they were powerless to control or manage the changes (Ruth). There was a belief that people became old when they lost their confidence (Nancy) or, worse still, gave in to physical and social problems and started saying 'I can't do this anymore' (Tess, Karen). Old age was something to be struggled against.

Overwhelmingly, the interviewees said that "old" was something they were not (only Veeve willingly accepted the term for herself), and offered various reasons why: people today live longer so old age comes later (this view was common among the "young-old" interviewees); they were active and didn't need help; they looked forward to events in their lives; and they generally felt "young". The women also discussed how they were "keeping young". For example, Edith led a full and busy life; Hilda organised her time productively and continued to

learn new things; Karen was willing to change her views and habits; Betty kept in touch with the world around her; and Verity maintained a positive outlook. Dollie spoke for many of the women when she said, 'I like to think young, dress young, be with young people, and keep up to date'. They did not deny their frustration with physical decline, but they continued to push through such obstacles in order to enjoy life and, importantly, to signal to others that they were not to be sidelined.

Sensing continuity of her identity—knowing herself as the same person despite various changes—was an important help to Phyllis's managing age-related changes:

We accept our age (pauses) and the limitations that come with it. But so long as we have our health (pauses) we just carry on....We never feel any different. We feel physically different, we look physically different. But mentally (pauses) memory-wise, we're a little slower. But otherwise we feel just the same (pauses) as we did years ago....I never think of myself as an old person (pauses). But I know that I am.

Yet other people may not always recognise an older woman's uniqueness. In the last chapter, Sarah noted her frustration with being thrown in with groups of all-older persons and being expected to enjoy the same things. Mary, too, disliked being seen as "just another old lady":

You've been individual all your life and you continue to be so, as you get older. You don't just fall into (laughs) a group all playing bingo or whatever it is, you know....They don't give you credit for having your own level of intelligence....They rule that out.

As Zappone says, 'all human beings have individual identities and should be free to become themselves. Interdependent living requires that women and men have a strong sense of self in their relationships with others' (1991:25-26). This is challenging enough for younger persons; Mary's statement shows that it may be even harder for older people.

Dollie pointed out that other people should deal with older women with 'respect and understanding, a certain amount of sympathy, and a great deal of patience':

And I think understanding is one of the things that we should have for the older lady, who perhaps has come through a great deal....Because what you are as an old person isn't always the person you were....And we maybe look at a person and judge them on how they are in their old age and never realise...they were young women, beautiful women. Maybe contributing in many ways to their community, their church, their country.

The life experiences older women have had put them in an excellent position to impart their knowledge. (We discussed this in Chapter 4 as having the roles of teacher and grandmother.) This wealth of experience, often described as wisdom (as discussed in Chapter 7), was something most of the interviewees believed older women possessed and wanted to see shared. Older women, they said, could reassure others during difficult times because they could 'take a long view' of events (Doris). They could 'support and encourage' younger people as they



assumed tasks and roles previously undertaken by the older women (Phyllis). They could ‘set an example’ (Mary). Importantly, sharing experience was viewed as one means of helping others, which was an appropriate way of being involved in people’s lives. Veeve did, however, sound a cautionary note:

You have to be terribly careful. I would say, share your experience with wisdom. Because it’s so easy to share your experience in a way that condemns everything that isn’t within your experience.

Perhaps it is exposure to such negative uses of “wisdom” by some older people that makes some younger people reluctant to seek out other older people’s experience:

Older people have a lot to offer. They have a lot to give. They’ve got a lot of experiences in life. And it is worth something. It’s worth a lot. But it isn’t always recognised. (Mary)

Not being known—lacking a distinct identity within the groups and communities they were a part of—was a problem for many of the interviewees. Frequently, the women commented on this phenomenon going hand-in-hand with being a newcomer or with being marginalised by cliques within the communities. Breaking into established communities within York was experienced as hard work by several interviewees. Sarah attempted to integrate into various local church and non-church groups, all without success because the groups, in her view, did not actively seek to incorporate her, resulting in her sense of rejection and her decision to move house to be near people who did know her:

I’ve found it very, very difficult to get a foothold and become known for (pauses) who I am and what I can give them....And I’m still battling my way in [to York].

For Dollie, retirement brought about the loss of regular contact with former work friends. She missed them ‘because they’re somebody from my past, who knew me, knew my family, and knew me inside out. And you do feel...[that] although you’ve always [got] friends and acquaintances, there’s nobody [now] that really knows you’.<sup>11</sup>

### **8.5 Local churches, connection, and older women**

From the interviews, there is considerable evidence for the existence of both positive and beneficial as well as negative and harmful connections between older women and their local churches. We have already heard examples of both as we analysed other issues in this chapter. I want to examine the local church in more depth here, as we look at particular positive and negative consequences of older women’s connections. A sense of belonging is one of the most important benefits a connection can offer an older woman. The reverse side of belonging is a sense of alienation, of not being wanted—and the local church is the site of each experience.

### 8.5.1 Belonging, identity, and self worth

We have seen that belonging and fellowship are very important to older churchgoers. These experiences were an ‘essential’ part of Millie’s life:

I think you help one another....I think you need other people....I think you need fellowship.

One way to experience belonging at church, as Dollie noted earlier, is to know people—and be known. Another way is to be the church historian. Ada had been a member of her congregation for more than 60 years:

If they want to know anything [about the church] they come to me (laughs)....And I mean, you can go back so many years, you know. You know people nobody else does, nowadays.

The reasons given for attendance will shed light on why the local church is so important a connection for older women.

The fellowship they found, and a strong sense of belonging, were reasons many of the interviewees attended church. Friendship and social interaction were also found at church and could be very important, too, but fellowship was a common chord struck by the interviewees. The church family as a source of support and practical help was also mentioned (Betty). And, the church could be a base for social and pastoral outreach to others (Muriel, Karen). For the interviewees who identified themselves as evangelical (both Methodist and Anglican), the church was important as a source of ongoing teaching, for reinforcing their faith and beliefs, and for gathering with other like-minded Christians. In fact, some of these women travelled some distance across York to attend their particular churches.

Contrary to Neuberger’s suggestion,<sup>12</sup> church attendance among the interviewees was not necessarily or primarily for social reasons. Nancy, for example, did not want the social pleasures of church attendance to intrude on her time of worship on Sunday morning. For Kate, a high-church Anglo-Catholic, finding a church home where the mass was respected was very important. Overall, I got a mixed reaction when I presented the interviewees with the assumption that older women attend church primarily for social reasons. Some women felt that this was absolutely true, some partially true, and some disputed the idea. What Neuberger dismisses as only social contact had a deeper meaning for Phyllis:

I think the time we spend together talking to others is as important you see as anything else. Because that’s the time when you really get to know people. It’s not much good just going into a church and sitting through a service and walking out again without having a word with someone....I don’t mean once

---

<sup>11</sup> See Jerrome (1981:190; 1992:xii).

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 3.



the service is going. A service needs to be a service. But I think the time that you can spend with people before and after is very, very important....People will tell you not only about themselves, but maybe about their family. And if they have problems. Then it becomes an ongoing thing. Maybe they need a lift sometimes, to go and visit some people in their family. And if they're not very mobile...it's the only way they can find out. Because many people are extremely proud. And will not ask for help. And it's only by listening to what they say that if you get the opportunity to offer any help, where otherwise you wouldn't know....When you go to church...you're aware of the need of other people. And it's one place where you find or hear of the need and can act on it.

Social contact, especially talking and listening, can be a means of (1) getting to know people as individuals, and (2) finding out their needs—practical, emotional, and spiritual. This then allows older women the chance to enhance another's sense of identity and belonging and provide (or find a source for provision of) suitable support. As Phyllis says, you might never know about a person's needs if you do not go to church and “socialise”.

### **8.5.2 Negative experiences at church**

As we saw in the last chapter, being a newcomer to a church community can have its problems. If there are difficulties, it may be due to more than just a case of “insider/outsider” statuses. A less-active older woman may have problems re-establishing her previous church identity when her new fellow congregants do not know her past but instead see only a woman who is minimally active—or even “old”—today. Even when a woman is a long-time member, ageing can be a problem. When circumstances such as changes to mobility cause an older woman's attendance at church to decline or cease, she feels left out, perhaps superfluous—as though the church can go on functioning without her. Yet she, on the other hand, cannot go on functioning (at least in a religious or spiritual way) without it. She needs to continue to engage with her church, to stay connected, in some form—whether through visits, phone calls, and letters from members—in order to feel she still belongs to this particular community and to continue to feel her Christianity. This need is taken for granted by and satisfied for those church members who can regularly attend, but is keenly felt in its absence by housebound or institutionalised older women. This is what happened to Dolores, who lived in a nursing home and was dependent upon others for lifts to and for news of her church:

Of course they've been doing this [major event at church]...I don't know very much about it, actually. You see, if you don't go to the meeting, or you don't meet people, you don't know.

Whatever the purpose of their connections to their churches—fellowship, teaching, family, friendship—the interviewees who were currently fit and mobile worried about losing those ‘benefits’ if they had to leave their churches sometime in the future (perhaps due to physical changes, moving to be near family elsewhere in the country, or giving up driving). Rebecca had this concern:

I would feel that if we couldn't get [to our church], then we should have to go locally.... You see... I have sometimes thought, well, should we—it seems a bit off to say to the local church, 'Well, we can't go to [names church]. We've given years of service and giving there. Now that we can't go there, we'll come to you. [Now] that we need looking after', sort of thing (laughs). I have wondered really whether we should start going somewhere (pauses)... before it comes to that. But we are loath to make the break.

This worry seems valid, based on the experiences of the interviewees who made that break and have not been entirely satisfied with their new church homes.

The women who attended churches located in their neighbourhoods (i.e. within walking distance) felt the greatest sense of connection to those churches. Women who lived at a distance, and had to drive or to depend on transportation from others felt less strong connections:

If I don't get enough out of church [it's] because I don't put enough into it. And I have sort of drawn the curtains and said, 'I am not going to spend any more time than I do getting to that place that's two-and-a-half miles away'.... I just find that such a stumbling block, the getting there. (Barbara)

Older women can be psychologically isolated from others even when they are physically present with them. Well meaning others may hold back establishing relationships due to someone's current or former status, either professionally (e.g. a missionary) or within the church (e.g. as a minister's wife). And of course, persons may be isolated by prejudice against older people or against certain racial, regional, or national backgrounds. Sharing unpopular views (or those considered too private, such as religious doubts) can also isolate someone from her church community. One interviewee spoke of her reluctance to share her problems with her much younger minister.<sup>13</sup> This can weaken connections an older woman has with her church.

We heard from Brown (Chapter 4) that changes at church can disrupt an established sense of connection. Differences over policy or direction of a church can cause distress or anger, often because of a fear of disconnection:

This is a trivial thing really, but... we're now allowed to have tombolas. Well, to me... it's mindless for one thing. But it's also gambling, you know.... I feel sort of that I stand back from that. I'm not wholeheartedly in with that. They can get on with it if they want to. (Doris)

Doris also had a sense of disconnection at the institutional level of her church:

Sometimes I feel separate myself from the Methodist Church.... Decisions come down and you've got no sort of say in them a'tall somehow—the ordinary people.... One could start one's own denomination, but where would you start?

---

<sup>13</sup> See Nancy's remark, Chapter 1.



Krause, Chatters, Meltzer, and Morgan (2000) specifically explored negative interactions in churches, and looked exclusively at older adults.<sup>14</sup> Their focus-group study found that ‘troublesome social encounters [in churches] are prevalent, and that they are a significant source of distress for elderly people’ (527). They began with the notion that ‘unpleasant interaction in the church should be especially unsettling because it overtly violates deeply ingrained and widely endorsed beliefs concerning faith in others, as well as a sense of interpersonal trust that has been reinforced repeatedly by official church doctrine’ (512). One major type of negative interaction for the participants in this study was interpersonal conflict with fellow parishioners,<sup>15</sup> which took the forms of gossip, being let down by others, informal cliques, exclusion of outsiders, and intolerance of the views of others (519-521). When left unresolved, such interpersonal problems became increasingly harmful. In my study, Karen spoke quite feelingly of cliques at her church:

When you think of the coffee [hour]...you still see the groups of the friends all sitting together. They don’t — (pauses). And you’re standing up on your own...unless you make yourself go somewhere....Because you’re not in that initial group....It’s not that you want to have any special treatment. Or that you want to be noticed any more than anybody else. But you just felt that (pauses) I don’t know. You were sort of on the periphery somehow. And that however much you tried to get in and do things — (pauses; leaves sentence hanging).

This situation had definitely affected her sense of belonging, despite years of membership:

I never, ever felt that I really belonged to [that church]. As I have done in other churches. And that’s an awful thing to say, isn’t it? I think I’m getting there. But it’s taken me a long time.

Krause, et al. note three types of approaches used by their respondents for handling negative interaction in the church that mirror what my interviewees did. These were:

(1) Some group members tried to either put a positive spin on the problem or explain it away; (2) others relied on religious solutions, including prayer, turning the whole problem over to God, or being forgiving; and (3) yet other focus-group participants advocated the use of more active problem-solving approaches that are aimed at altering or eradicating the problem situation (2000:525).

Millie worried about friction within a church. Rather than confront it and work it through, she advised:

You have to put it away and put it aside because we’re all one in Christ....Because it’s water under the bridge. And this is where splits come. The best thing to do is let it go. For what it’s worth. Because after all, what is it worth?

---

<sup>14</sup> The people in their US study were Christians aged 65 and up, and approximately two-thirds were female.

<sup>15</sup> The two other forms identified by the authors are conflict between church members and their pastors, and conflict over church doctrine. The latter was an issue for some of my interviewees, most especially when they perceived their church (either locally or nationally) to be weakly adherent to traditional doctrine.

Clergy and congregations at churches often do not recognise that an older woman's connections to a previous church or churches can be very strong, perhaps stronger than to her new church home if she is a recent arrival—or even after many years (e.g. Nancy, whose former church merged with another and used the latter's premises). This does not negate the importance of the new church home for the older woman, but instead signifies the importance of a previous church home as a place of community, friendships, fellowship, service, and spiritual growth. The memories can be poignant at times. Dolores shed quiet tears as she told me of one special former church home, and her concern that a piece of her that remains might be lost or not properly maintained:

And now they tell me that the church...is being closed....And they're going to build a new one....I've been turning round in me mind, how to write a letter (pauses) to the minister....Because over the years, my husband and I had been responsible for the communion furniture....And one of the stewards there said it had not to be parted. Where it's going, it's got to go all together....So I mean...[it] really isn't anything to do with me....So anyway. I don't know the minister.

Dolores was torn between her strong attachment to her former church, and an understanding that she was no longer a member there and therefore perhaps not allowed to express an opinion.

## **8.6 Summary**

All of the interviewees were able to identify several important connections in their lives, the most important being family members and friends, home, and their Christian faith and local church. For them, a connection is indeed a relationship. Connections appear to have an emotional aspect for most of the women. The ability to sustain connections or to make new ones is often affected by the ageing process, and older women may find that they have to forego certain desired contacts or become dependent upon others' goodwill to maintain them. The local church is a particularly important connection for many reasons, with high emotional, practical, and spiritual investment. When disconnections happen here, the effects are felt especially keenly. Connections, when they function well, offer many benefits to an older woman, including a sense of belonging and identity. When they do not function well or become broken, we see painful, confusing outcomes. This will be looked at again in Chapter 10.

We now turn to the third and final key theme of this project, caring, and examine the interviews for what older women had to say.



## Chapter 9—Caring: The Active Realisation of Connection in Community

I feel life's terrible for a lot of people now. I think all the emphasis is wrong. Self-gain and self-glorification and money. And service has gone way down the list of priorities.... You're a sissy if you help somebody else because it's taking away from yourself. And that isn't the case when people who are not like that know very well that you only get happiness by giving it. (Barbara)

### 9.1 Introduction

As we saw in the last chapter, a connection is a relationship (either positive or negative) between two people or between a person and another entity. Connections are not static, however. What gives them life, meaning, and expression? At the end of Chapter 5, I proposed that caring is an activity that expresses the connection between members of a community. What is caring, as defined by older women, and what meaning does it have for them? What is required for someone to be caring, and what are the costs? Who should receive our caring? When is it acceptable to expect and to receive care oneself? Is caring incumbent upon Christians, and if it is, does the local church live up to its duty? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions.

As we saw in Chapter 5, caring is a complex subject, involving ideas of “caring for” and “caring about”, reciprocity, and costs. For feminists, there are the additional issues of an essentialist association of women’s “nature” with the work of caring and of the use of power. For the interviewees, all of these topics were reflected in their discussion of caring, along with the issues raised earlier about caring and older age: the challenge to identity, the lack of recognition of the older woman’s caring role, and care in the community. We will follow these issues through the course of this chapter, frequently hearing from Barbara as her voice is key to our understanding of older women and caring. Because practical theology emphasises the need to *act* for the benefit of ourselves and others, this chapter, which focuses on action, should help move us towards our goal of creating a Christian feminist practical theology.

### 9.2 The interviewees’ examples and meanings of caring

All of the women recognised caring as an important topic, and it was one that they spoke very thoughtfully—even passionately—about. We can see in Barbara’s statement above that to be a giver of caring was, for her, the only true source of happiness. There was nothing wrong, in her view, with being self-interested in wanting happiness; rather, it was the *way* in which people pursued happiness that was morally right or wrong. Phyllis, too, was disheartened by the way individuals put themselves ahead of their communities:

I feel very discouraged sometimes. (pauses) You know, not only my own immediate area but the world at large. I think we’re, as a whole, we’re growing more and more selfish. We’re thinking more about ourselves (pauses) and our gain rather than the good of the whole.

Women like Barbara and Phyllis had an internal drive to be caring. What was its source? For Aleen, it was often based on an attachment to a specific individual:

It has to have its root in a love for that [individual] person and a concern for their particular situation or their problems.

Karen said the source was empathy; she had suffered hurts when people had not cared properly about her, so she worked to ensure that others in her communities did not suffer the same feelings. For a number of these churchgoing women, the source of the caring impulse was their Christian faith:

I think Christians behave differently. You find that their ways of looking at things—they're very kind people. They're very thoughtful of other people, rather than just themselves. (Nancy)

[Caring]...becomes second nature. To think of doing things in this way. Thinking of anybody being ill roundabout. Even if they don't go to your own church or anything, you automatically think of going to call on them. And see if you can do anything for them, or take them a bunch of flowers or whatever....So I think that's part of your Christianity and...part of your makeup, to do a thing like that automatically. (Edith)

For Veeve, caring was the very presence of God:

All this caring that goes on. I'm sure it's God in those people.

Motivated by faith and a concern for others, caring was a worthwhile, honourable, and even self-beneficial activity.

### **9.2.1 Older women as givers of caring**

By virtue of being older, the women had extensive histories of caring. The interviewees who had been in paid employment named various persons that they had cared for in their careers: teachers had cared for students, nurses had cared for patients, and a city council worker had cared for the long-term unemployed. Several women had been volunteers for the Samaritans, acting as listening ears to numerous persons in desperate circumstances. A typical response to my question, 'Who have you cared for in your life, or cared about in your life?' was this:

Just about everybody I've met (laughs). And knew. (Dollie)

For women like Dollie, caring had been a large part of their identity, performed at least as much out of love as of a sense of duty. Further, giving caring had not ended as the women retired and/or added years to their lives.

Recall that "caring for" is distinguished from "caring about" by the practical, instrumental nature of the former, versus the intellectual nature of the latter. Both forms of caring were present in the interviewees' lives, as they engaged in many forms and expressions of caring. They visited neighbours, brought token gifts of garden flowers and vegetables, sent cards,



listened to problems, helped with errands and household tasks, and generally made themselves available when needed. As we saw in the last chapter, phone calls and cards and letters were a popular means of staying connected. They were also frequently used as tools for caring for other older women who were housebound or limited by mobility issues.

Some interviewees were able to go beyond caring for friends and neighbours to caring for strangers. Hilda offered a bed in her home to young girls who could not stay in their family homes, giving them a place to sleep for the night. Fran volunteered at a Christian café, welcoming visitors and listening to whatever they might have to say. Mary was a mentor to a local schoolgirl. Tess offered her hospitality to lonely, overworked university students. Frederica read the post to a neighbour with poor eyesight. All of the interviewees cared for this researcher by offering their time and access to their homes and hospitality.

Caring can occur at the level of community as well as the individual. Aleen cared for the larger community of York by serving as a volunteer on two community panels. Sharing the news of members' illnesses and holidays was a feature of Dollie's line dancing group:

At tea and biscuit time...it's the time to exchange news about your ills and your pills and your doctor, being to the hospital. But I think it's a good thing because you have to have an outlet for these things at times. And many of them are alone, and don't have anybody to just say the words to. And just saying the words to somebody can help, can't it?

Sharing one's personal life experience was a form of caring mentioned by virtually all of the interviewees. Here's an example from Lillian:

Somebody...who's facing bereavement, for the first time probably, [will] say, you know, 'How did you get through it'?...And hopefully you can help them....Even if it's just listening.

Kate said that caring for people could mean confronting problems:

If people are very difficult and get completely out of hand, one has to be firm in a quiet kind of way, and handle that. And that is easier for some of us than others.

This is exactly the sort of issue which Koehn believes that an ethic of care must address, that of 'confronting and resisting people when it may be appropriate to do so' (1998:44).

A few women mentioned prayer as a form of "caring for" others (or being "cared for" by them). Nancy spoke of her bout with depression some years back, saying,

That...taught me a lesson. Because I've thought of all the other people that get depressed, much worse than I was, and so I've always prayed for people that [are] depressed because I know what it's like.

Mary's neighbours acknowledged that her prayers had helped them:

I made it clear to them that I was praying for them [in their time of distress]. And a card, a little present that I got at Christmas said, 'Thank you for being so supportive over this past year'.

Prayer was a valid means of caring as far as these churchgoing women were concerned. Yet Phyllis and Frederica said that prayer should not substitute for action when action was possible:

I think...living your Christianity is far more important than talking about it. It's so easy to sit back and pray for somebody...instead of getting on with [helping them] yourself. (Phyllis)

You shouldn't waste time praying for things that you could do yourself...To do something practical, to me, is more important than praying for it. If you CAN do something practical. (Frederica)

Expressing caring through charitable donations was mentioned by several interviewees. RSPB, RSPCA, the National Children's Home, and the National Trust were all named as groups that older women joined, supported financially, or volunteered for in order to show their concern for people, the environment, and the future. Many of the interviewees also worked on charitable projects. Hazel knitted 'little tops' for Oxfam, and Barbara had volunteered for Christian Aid for many years, 'caring for people that I'll never, ever see'.

Giving money and time in this way also established a sense of connection, as women expressed empathy for people overseas who had leprosy (Nancy) and for Mozambican flood victims (Frederica). This evidence challenges Noddings's notion that we cannot care for people at a distance. Indeed, many of the women were deeply concerned about examples of suffering on a large scale. Various viewpoints could be discerned, as well as attempts at working out the most effective caring response. Phyllis talked about how her awareness of such suffering was a challenge and of how she responded:

I think it's so easy for us to be complacent. Because we're cared for, we're warm, we're looked after. But how do people in Ethiopia feel about things like this? How do people in Chechnya [feel] at present? And Bosnia? And these are the things that really upset me and worry me. This is so easy to say [to God], 'I have been cared for, and you have cared for me'. But they must say 'Where is God'?...These are the things that are my biggest problem now....You see, it has to start with individuals. Each individual is responsible for their own acts and for...their own little area. And it's a bit like a stone in a pond isn't it, that ripple (pauses) that somehow all the stones seem to get thrown in and the ripples get bigger.

Her method of "thinking globally, acting locally" was echoed by Edith:

I sometimes think that I stand on the outside sometimes, just looking in [at these bigger world events]....And I just feel there's nothing I can do about it. And I just do what I can in the circumstances that come before me. And I think that I try to do as much as I can...within my own city or within my own area and vicinity.



The principles and values that the interviewees held were expressed in the language of “caring about”: ‘Being honest...truthful...understanding...forgiving...considerate...[and] helpful’ (Ella). These were things that the women cared about very deeply, and they demonstrated this by trying to live by their principles and by sharing them (either overtly or subtly) with others. For instance, Barbara named ‘setting a good example’—for grandchildren, for friends, for the neighbourhood—as a principle, and did this by leading a caring, Christian life. She described the effect this had on a neighbour:

[My friend is] doing little things now that she would never have done two years ago. Which I’m not taking the credit for me, I’m taking the credit for being friends with my little group of people who all care for each other.... She’s totally different. And she’s enjoying life and she’s learning that you can be happy by serving....And they all love her, and she loves them now....This is something she has never had in her life before. So I think that’s great. I feel that’s having an influence...for good.

As a group, the interviewees engaged in both “caring for” and “caring about” activities and rated both highly. They “cared” via their intellectual and spiritual values *and* via their hands-on provisions for others. Some, like Barbara and her friends, ‘discover[ed] the joys of caring and create[ed] for [themselves] further obligations to care through concrete acts of reaching out to others’ (Koehn, 1998:173, note 43).

#### i. Inability to meet every need

The women sometimes had to accept that they could not meet the needs of all of the potential care recipients they identified. They also recognised that there would be times when their caring activities would be unwanted, rejected, or unsuccessful. When using her car to transport friends to social outings, Barbara expressed regret that she could not take everyone who might like to go, and that therefore she had to be selective. June found having to give up caring for the needy people whom she helped in her paid employment a very hard part of the caring process (and of the retirement process), particularly because no one would be taking her place. As Fischer rightly points out, ‘[i]t is not the caring itself that is the problem, but the dilemma of finding time and energy for all that is asked of us’ (1995:149). The time commitment in caring for a needy family member can be a barrier to an older woman’s involvement with her church or other groups. Even more, June said that you could care about people and be let down by them, if they did not correct their destructive habits, for example. As a Samaritan volunteer, she had found that her caring did not always succeed:

Sometimes, sadly, they do [commit suicide] and you lose them anyway. And you have to learn to live with that.

When a desire to help a friend conflicted with upholding her principle of honesty, Barbara faced an unpleasant caring dilemma:

[My friend] asked me about the afterlife, would she see her sister again, and I couldn't answer her. I let her down very, very badly. She asked me for help and I couldn't give it. I said 'I honestly don't know what I believe'. I don't.

Sometimes interviewees enlisted the intercession of others in order to perform their caring. Tess let her church's clergy know when there was someone in her neighbourhood who needed a visit from them, and perhaps a different sort of caring than she could provide. This was one solution to the problem of not being able to accommodate every need that presented itself.

### 9.2.2 Older women as recipients of caring

As well as being able to name numerous instances of giving caring, the interviewees were able to point to the many forms of caring they had received. Amelia told me about her lifetime of receiving caring from others, due to her parents' early deaths and the many serious illnesses she had had. All of the interviewees at the residential home named the wardens as people who looked out for them and helped them in numerous ways. Some interviewees named a large number of people who cared about them, including family, friends, neighbours, and fellow congregants at church, while Sarah had a special gentleman in her life who cared for her. Several of the women reported times when they had been ill, and family members or friends had stepped in to care for them. Betty's neighbour was an example:

I did ring her one morning because I was, oh I'd had an awful...stomach ache and how terrible it was for about three days (laughs)...And I just rang her up to say I weren't very well, would she pick me bread up, you see? And of course she was over in two seconds.

Other interviewees, however, could name few, if any, people who cared for them. For Janet, this was a point of pride:

I wouldn't ask anything of anybody. Even a lift. You know, I do get lifts here and there, but I don't ask.

But in Dollie's case, she expected more from people and felt the lack keenly:

I suppose I've a few friends that maybe care about me. I'm not quite sure (laughs). I'm not very sure a'tall...I wouldn't say that I have anyone that ever rings and says, 'How are you? How are you getting on'?...I wouldn't have anyone locally that would ever ring and check on me. No. Now, I may be doing some of my friends a disservice.

Most of the interviewees appreciated being able to balance their freedom and self-determination with knowing that there were people who cared about them and were available to help them. Being "cared about" was universally acceptable, but being "cared for" caused discomfort for some of the more able interviewees (e.g. Barbara, Ruth, Hope). This illustrates what Phillipson, et al. (2001) discovered, that a reluctance among certain older people to receive or to ask for help is the result of a desire to retain independence.



Those interviewees who were disabled or who had restricted mobility had largely come to terms with the idea of being a care recipient. For example, even though she was personally frustrated at needing help, Mavis said,

I'm quite prepared to accept people's help. And I always make sure I thank them, you know, because I do think it's very kind of people when they open doors and do things for you.

Being prayed for was graciously received as an appropriate means of being cared for:

[When my dog was dying, my minister] came and he said a little prayer and stroked her, and I was very grateful for that. (Ella)

If you're not at church and you're ill, you feel as if people are praying for you...and, I think, car[ing] in that way. (Edith)

The interviewees identified sources of help other than the people around them. God had cared for many of the women:

The few times I've prayed in real earnest, I have been helped straight away. Immediately. (Barbara)

God intervened in my life [by bringing about outcomes that were right for me]. (Veeve)

I can trace the hand of God right from the beginning in hindsight...He's always been there for me. And I think, 'Well, He's never failed me, He's not going to fail me now. I can trust Him with what's left of my life'. (Mary)

It was kind of a pull both ways [when my husband was dying of cancer]. 'Why do you allow it?' and 'Yet you're giving me the strength to cope with it'. (Edith)

A few interviewees speculated that departed loved ones were looking after them from the next life. Sometimes this was based on ideas passed down through previous generations; other times, a personal experience gave them this idea.<sup>1</sup> Hope told of visiting a spiritualist, who brought a particular message of assurance for her:

Hope: I did go to a spiritualist, one or two of their meetings one time. And the lady who used to lead it did say to me, 'Oh', she said, 'I've got a lady here with a message for you'. And she described this lady....I thought, 'Well, I know who that is'. And that lady had been dead, oh, a lot of years then....

JE: So, what was the message that [the spiritualist] had for you?

Hope: That [this lady] was there for [me], you know....That she loved [me].

We can see from the evidence that caring was a large and significant feature of the interviewees' lives, both in the past and continuing to the present. In particular, the role of carer—a giver of "caring for" and "caring about"—was one that virtually all of the women identified with strongly. Whether their caring practices stemmed from a sense of familial or Christian duty or from a belief that caring was the one sure route to personal happiness, these activities were taken on (mostly) willingly, even joyfully. Further, the women cited a wide variety of ways in

<sup>1</sup> Compare with Bennett (1987); see Chapter 5.

which to care, from direct, practical help to charitable donations, prayer, setting examples for others, and listening. This rich spectrum of caring would seem to support the notion that women are the caregivers of society and that they do the bulk of the caring work. There is not evidence here, however, to support an essentialist view of women and caring as *none of the interviewees said that caring was either her duty as a woman or that it was a part of her female nature.*

In fact, there was a power associated with caring that the women recognised and exercised at their discretion. The interviewees pointed to how, when, and in what circumstances they were able to choose and structure their caring activities—and for which recipients. For instance, Karen did not like solicitations from charities. For her, charitable giving was an expression of her interests and values as well as her ability to judge needs:

I don't want people to tell me where I want to put my money, or what to do. I want to be able to choose out of all the things, the things that I would want to do myself....I want to just quietly go on and do things (pauses) helping people...in my own way.

For Barbara, too, there was a power that came along with being able and willing to care:

I think you can have a huge impact on people's lives simply by showing an interest in them in the first place. Because then they assume they have an importance that they probably thought they hadn't got before. And that's very important. To [give] people a sense of their worth. The fact that other people can be bothered to talk to them, and recognise that they exist [does this].

Here is an example of an older woman using her power not to dominate another, but to build up that individual's self-worth. This fits with Russell's discussion of authority as partnership (see Chapter 5).

Even in cases where it might have appeared to outsiders that women had capitulated to external pressures to take on caring roles (e.g. Lillian and Millie had sacrificed personal goals to help ill family members, as we will see later), the women presented their actions as ultimately emerging from free choice, not coercion. Such self-determination is usually *not* part of the argument of women's "essential" caring nature.<sup>2</sup>

### **9.3 The pluses and minuses of caring**

The interviewees recognised that there were positive and negative aspects to both caring and receiving care. Beginning with the benefits, we will look at these aspects now.

---

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to ask if a "career" of caring was the only option for many (or most) of the interviewees. Because they came of age at a time when most women did not receive further and higher education and when jobs and careers often ended with marriage, was a life of voluntary or familial caring all that was available? (Thanks to Deborah Biggerstaff, research fellow, Centre for Health Services Studies, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, for this observation.)



### i. Benefits of caring

One of the key benefits of caring was a sense of satisfaction at being able to help others directly. Lillian, for example, received pleasure and hope from her passengers when she used her car to give lifts to hospice patients. In a similar way, the women who were connected to charitable communities benefited from new friendships and new interests, as well as a sense of doing something worthwhile for others. Because caring was such an important part of one's identity, simply being able to care for others in some way reinforced feelings of self-esteem and a continuing usefulness to one's communities.

For some interviewees, this very personal benefit was combined with a strong view of caring as a Christian duty. This supports the notion that 'even when the contributions we make are strictly social and material, they nevertheless possess a spiritual significance for the giver' (Rudd, 1988:8). For all of these reasons, Barbara admitted that she got a boost from her caring activities:

It sounds awfully smug, but doing things for people, that help people, certainly gives me a buzz. And I can live with myself better if I do that....You live how you find you can cope with life, don't you? And that's my way of coping with life.

Barbara consciously tried to maximise her caring activities. In fact, it was possible for her to do more caring with age:

When I was younger...I worked pretty hard at being just ordinary and...I didn't strive to do wonderful things. But I didn't do wicked things, so I was just keeping my head above water. Now I make a more conscious effort to do more good things, I think. They don't always work. But I do have time to think about more and to try to do them. And if I can think of something that I think is worth doing, I make a big effort to do it. And if I don't do it, I wish I had. Because then I have a tough time with myself. Mostly little things. Mostly very little things that make quite a big difference....Most days I come out with a sort of plus sign, or getting on towards a plus sign. And if I don't, then the next day I try to do a bit more.

Barbara wanted to end each day with a credit balance in the "Bank of Caring-For". My sense was that most of the interviewees, however much care they themselves needed, would strive towards this credit balance.

### ii. Reciprocity

Reciprocity was one means by which the women created this balance, and there are many different things they did for other people while receiving help in return. Elsie mentioned ironing and gardening for her daughter who worked outside the home. In turn, Elsie was helped with her shopping when she hurt her back. Reciprocity by the very old can be a gift of something personal in exchange for larger acts of help. For instance, Hazel baked treats for her family after they helped her with household projects and errands.

Reciprocity also occurred outside the immediate family. A larger community could be subdivided for the purposes of giving and receiving care. Reciprocity could be as simple as putting out the neighbours' rubbish bins and having your own returned by them. The interviewees acknowledged that the kinds of caring exchanged were not necessarily equivalent. Speaking of a friend, Tess said:

She would do for me if she could, you know. And she does things in other ways, you know. Because she can't sort of help me in the way I help her.

Barbara was unconcerned about other people's standards, as long as she gave more caring than she received:

Lots of little things you can do and people would say, 'Yes, but they wouldn't do that for you'. And that's probably true. But because you did that to somebody else, for somebody else, another person will pay you back. (laughs)...It doesn't have to be the person that you do good to....As my mother used to say, 'Cast your bread on the water'—she was always saying that—'and it comes back'. (laughs) And it doesn't come back as your bread. (laughs) And it comes back with jam on it! (laughs)

Reciprocity had its boundaries, though. Hope sold her car after her husband died because 'I find, if you have a car, you can be at people's beck and call'. Such was the case in the public housing project for the elderly where Jonas and Wellin conducted their research:

Most residents recognize three categories of persons among other residents—friends, neighbors, and co-residents...[C]omplaints are heard about neighbors or coresidents (i.e., persons with whom there is no prior intimacy or personal involvement) demanding too much help, or expecting it too frequently, or wanting one to provide what was initially a one-shot or infrequent service on a continuing basis (1980:235-236).

There is, then, an unwritten but generally understood means of valuing the different aspects of the caring exchange, and violations of norms are unacceptable. The further outside one's preferred community, the more caring becomes a commodity to be bartered, rather than a gift to be bestowed.

Interestingly, the interviewees rarely mentioned times when they may have felt unhappy or angry with an imbalance or lack of reciprocity for their caring actions. Sarah was an exception. She wished her younger sisters would reciprocate the caring she showed them, feeling that all of the caring in their relationship was one-way:

I just have these mad moments, thinking 'My sisters could easily get in the car and come up, or they could pick up the phone'. And I get irritated about it and then it goes....I think probably they would be quite horrified if I said it to them, 'I feel that you ought to come and see me'.

Perhaps the majority of these churchgoing women felt a Christian duty to fulfil needs without expecting either acknowledgement or repayment in any form (except perhaps their ultimate reward in heaven). After all, if God's love is unconditional, then should not our love (i.e. caring)



be also? If there is always some form of reciprocity, even if it seemingly comes only from God, then are the love and the caring given still unconditional? Aren't there times when unconditional love or care is appropriate and not oppressive to the carer?

This is where feminists and feminist theologians have tackled the issue of the essentialism of women. Too often, they say, the prevalent view that women are by nature caregivers has led to their oppression via the compulsory caring mentioned earlier (Chapter 5). Women (and men) should have the freedom (i.e. power) to choose when and how to care, as they should have the power to choose their connections. I agree with Koehn when she says, '[t]here is a core independence we each have by virtue of the responsibility to choose our lives (and our relations!). To the extent ethics of care ignore and minimize this responsibility, they destroy female power in the name of saving it' (1998:49). It may be that the interviewees had not fully accepted this concept of "caring with autonomy"—that they could best care for others by caring for themselves first—and were therefore reluctant to appear unchristian and/or unfeminine by complaining. Caring was such a key part of their identities (and one they were justifiably proud of) that they were not able to take the more nuanced view suggested by feminist theologians.

### iii. Costs accepted by the carer

The costs of caring, to the carer, are numerous, as we saw in Chapter 5. Here are a few examples cited by the interviewees:

It would just be a blessing [for my terminally ill friend to die]....It's so wearing. It's taken its toll on me (pauses)...over the last three months. And over the years as I have seen her in all sorts of difficult situations and tried to advise her, tried to help her. (Aleen)

Sometimes [listening is] a bit wearing. You listen to the same thing over and over and over again. But...you listen just the same. (Frederica)

I keep myself awake at night worrying about people. (Dollie)

Muriel cared for 28 people regularly, 'mostly through listening' these days, although she also wrote letters and made visits. This staggering amount of caring work took its toll physically, mentally, and emotionally and in regard to the time invested:

It's very difficult to balance all these people. But, you can't give people up, once you take them on. I wonder sometimes, if I die, who will care for them? These are often people that others don't want.

Although the interviewees recognised the costs of their caring, they did not present themselves either as martyrs or as victims of oppression. Instead, they saw themselves as morally stronger than other people who were selfish. The women's actions resulted from their own free choice.

Sometimes people can be “too caring” in the eyes of the recipient. Fay struggled with herself as she tried to balance her loyalty to her sister with her concern for that sister’s well being. Fay finally contacted her sister’s doctor about a problem, yet ‘I did feel awful’, she said. In this case, being caring cost Fay her sister’s trust. Fay had attempted to share with her sister the power of decision-making over this medical intervention, and she was able to put herself in the recipient’s (i.e. her sister’s) position. When she ultimately decided to act against her sister’s wishes, Fay then experienced her sister’s power to withhold affection. In this very common situation, we see how complex the issue of power is, and how much distress it can cause a carer, and how much more thinking feminists have to do on this issue.

In looking at the topics of benefits, reciprocity, and costs, we have seen how caring can be both rewarding and frustrating for older women carers and recipients. Caring is continually being negotiated among parties to a connection as they strive to achieve a personal ethic of care, one that accounts for a person’s immediate associates as well as the distant stranger. Growing older, as we will see now, forces women to re-address these issues and others, too.

#### **9.4 Changes to caring with age**

As we saw in Chapter 5, social gerontologists have identified three areas of concern that older women have regarding caring: challenges to their identity, lack of recognition of their on-going caring role, and care in the community. In this section, we will examine the data to see what the interviewees had to say about the first two issues. We will review the third in the next major section of this chapter.

##### **9.4.1 Challenges to identity**

There are two possible identities that society gives older women, vis-à-vis caring. One is the image of the woman who keeps on giving until the grave, simply because she is a woman and that is her role. Hoagland argues,

the unidirectional ideal of mothering undermines reciprocal interaction...[and] also encourages incompetency and ageism among us. Recipients of unconditional loving—children and husbands—combine in exploiting mothers, helping to create an ageist response to older women (1991:258).

We saw this in the letter that opened Chapter 5. The other identity is that of the helpless, needy person who needs to be cared for and over whom society holds the power. After all, says this viewpoint, an older woman is not capable of making decisions about what sort of caring she needs. Neither of these identities was wholly satisfactory to the interviewees.

Gloria spoke of how younger people think they are being helpful by making decisions:

People are very bad at sort of thinking, ‘Oh, you wouldn’t like that’ and ‘You wouldn’t like this’. And they’ve no idea. Often they’re saying exactly the opposite to what you would like. (laughs) Oh, yes. One finds that quite a lot



really. Not with people that know you well, of course, but with anyone else that you happen to meet.... You only have to have grey hair and they think you've kind of had it as regards excitement or adventure or (laughs) or anything in your thinking (laughs). You know. They think you've got stuck somewhere.

A bit later, she added,

I'm not terribly set about things. If I say, 'No', to something today, I might not mean I would say 'No' to something similar tomorrow. There might have been other reasons why I said 'No' today. But I might say 'Yes' to a very similar thing tomorrow. Because tomorrow's a different day (laughs).

Gloria's comments remind us that the parties in mutual connections do not make decisions for one another (Fischer, 1998:80). Another way that many younger people condescend to older people is by withholding painful information, under the mistaken assumption that this will protect them (Fischer, 1998:78-79).

Whether other people are well-intentioned or not, becoming a recipient of care may be a change in practice for older women, one with many psychic ramifications in addition to the practical ones. Younger, fitter interviewees did not relish the idea of needing physical "caring for" at some future time and worried about becoming a burden on their families:

Certainly don't want to go into a nursing home....I think I would almost consider committing suicide rather than go into them. To have to be looked after to that extent....I dread the thought of being a nuisance to my family, particularly, and to other people as well. (Barbara)

Barbara was even willing to consider the sacrifice of sudden death in order not to trouble her family:

I wish...I could choose just to be taken in an accident or something like that. A short sharp chop. (pauses) But I suppose you can't choose can you?

Not only did needing extensive physical care mean becoming a burden and seeing the end of a large part of her independence and free choice, but it also meant losing much of her identity as a care-giver. One way out of this dilemma might be for an older woman to view others' caring for her as a gift from God, channelled through her community (Ramsey and Blieszner, 2000:48).

#### **9.4.2 Lack of recognition of ongoing caring role**

Although some people do see older women as (complete and unconditional) carers, many other people fail to recognise, let alone acknowledge, that older women continue in a caring role. Two important areas where this is demonstrated are self-care and "caring for" and "caring about" others.

"Caring for" may be beyond the means and ability of some older women, if the recipients concerned are at a distance or if the demands on the carer cannot be met. In these cases, "caring for" becomes a deeply committed "caring about"—an activity which should not be taken to be

any less (or any more) important simply because it is unseen by others (Noddings, 1984:10). Also, the form of reciprocity may change, but this does not mean that it ceases to exist altogether. What it requires is a restructuring of the balance of exchange and an understanding of receptivity.

Fischer says that receptivity ‘is an intrinsic element in caring. It is a readiness to receive from, as well as give to, others’ (1995:146-147).<sup>3</sup> This goes beyond the idea of reciprocity, where there is an exchange of caring, of giving—even when the goods or services exchanged are of unequal value. Here, Fischer is saying that, in some circumstances (and this is particularly true for some ageing persons), being able to accept others’ caring when we have nothing to offer in return other than that acceptance and gratitude, is a valid part of the caring process. In particular, such receptivity sustains the carer’s commitment to the cared-for person (Noddings, 1984).

#### i. Self-care

The degree of self-care that older women do is often unrecognised. The interviewees named a number of things that would fall under this heading:

[I occupy my time with] looking after meself. Eating and washing and so on and planning it all. (Veeve)

I like to do all me own housework. (Nancy)

[When] you live alone, you’ve got to think as well that you mustn’t overdo things or else you’re going to feel a mess. (Millie)

Barbara had a handyman she could afford to pay to do heavy jobs around her home, and several interviewees had household help they paid for. A number of others kept their minds and their bodies fit by taking sequence-dancing or line-dancing classes. Naturally, the most independent women (Janet, Sarah, and Hope) practised a high degree of self-caring. But, even the more feeble older women (as Eunice described herself) took care of themselves in many ways—albeit slowly.

Sometimes, when a woman thought she needed care and prayed for God’s help (a form of self-care), she discovered that she was fine as she was:

Sometimes, I say to meself, what you worrying [for]? [God’s] not going to answer now. Because you don’t need it now. You’re all right. I tell meself off (laughs). (Millie)

The caring support a number of interviewees received from their churches when they were widowed was frequently commented upon. However, Hope added this thought:

---

<sup>3</sup> The concept of receptivity is borrowed from Nel Noddings (1984).



Oh, they were all very helpful. But you've got to do it yourself, haven't you? You know, you've got to sort of realise life's got to go on.

Dollie said that older women take care of themselves in many ways:

If I'm with an elderly lady, I'll say, 'I'll carry that bag for you. I'll do this'....[or] 'Why don't you do this? Or that'? And it is not what they want to hear. They want to do it when and where their ideas come from, rather than somebody else telling them....So we assume that they're not capable of certain tasks, and maybe take over. And they can show resentment....And [they dislike it when we put] our thoughts and ideas into their heads, which they don't want to hear....They want their own ideas.

As I suggested in Chapter 5, one of the ways in which any community can be truly caring for older women is to allow them to determine their own needs and desires, and to make choices for themselves and not to have them imposed. This was certainly the view expressed by Dollie (here) and Gloria (in the previous section), who indicated that older women have a right to assess the offers of (and the value of) others' caring.

#### ii. "Caring for" and "caring about" others

Throughout this chapter, we have seen examples of the ways in which the interviewees cared for/about other individuals and communities. Here, I wish to illustrate how caring takes on a depth and complexity not often associated with older women.

Sometimes the lack of recognition of an older woman's ongoing caring role occurs because the world and its values have changed. As a consequence, said Aleen, caring needs to be taught:

Basically, there's such a lot of self-centredness [today]....You know, the materialistic society. I feel that people are not given the opportunity...to be taught what caring is and what it involves. And that's not their fault.

When a strong, protective community (be it church, family, or neighbourhood) is lacking, as it is for many young people today, Aleen worried about how and where these young people would receive caring—and how they would learn to give it:

I feel that this whole essence of caring is so important because if you don't teach children that high [measures a small child's height with hand] what it means to consider other people, they're never going to learn....No good waiting till you're my age or in your 50s to learn how to care. If you're not taught it, you won't know it.

She was particularly disturbed that this teaching was not even happening in churches today:

I think, you know, [the churches] have a responsibility in that way. Though...I can't see that they are doing anything with it. I mean, I'm thinking back now, you know, going back to when we had big Sunday schools. And the children there were not just taught parables or scripture or whatever. I mean, they were taught this whole question of relationship with God and what that involves. Your relationship with God meant you related to your fellow people as a whole....There are very few Sunday schools now. There are very few places—

children don't even know about God. I mean, basically it's gone. Isn't it?  
Where are they going to learn?

If there is such a thing as a feminist ethic of caring, then the older women I spoke with would insist that it address this issue of teaching others to care. How to teach caring is, perhaps, one of the key things communities could learn from the older women in their midst. Reciprocity is one way to teach caring, but so is the presence of role models. These can be parents, friends, teachers, peers, church members, and/or Christ. One of the most significant, and most overlooked, ways that older women demonstrate caring is by 'leading a good life' (Barbara), 'setting standards' (Betty), 'living up to principles' (Verity), and 'following Christ's example' (Gloria). The learning that the next generations must do will come (in many cases) from the teaching of this generation of ageing women. For Noddings, 'part of caring... is to encourage the capacity to care in those we encounter' (1990:125). Teaching others to care shows that you care about the future and its people (whom you will never know), about those you teach (whether or not those "students" are your children), and about values and principles.

Another consideration for a feminist ethic of caring, as discussed in Chapter 5, is the issue of caring versus justice—or caring *and* justice. Lillian (and others) struggled with the question of whether and how to be caring when considering evil or troubled people:

It 't isn't always easy to love other people... If you think of somebody who's murdered little children. I couldn't love that person, you know. I think if I felt anything other than anger, it would be pity, you know, that something's wrong... Sometimes, if I'm praying for a particular situation, I would pray for the wrongdoers as well.

Rather than condemning people outright, Frederica attempted to understand what had led them to act in evil ways:

I would never make a judge, because I would always think, 'Now, why is he stealing?' and all this. I can always see a reason. (pauses)... Take those two boys who killed that little James Bulger. Well, one of those boys, his mother wasn't even sitting with him at the trial... Well, poor things! What encouragement to do right or wrong had they? You know, I'm not condoning it. But, if you'd been in the same circumstances, you might have been no different... That's what I say: it's EASY for some people to be good. Isn't it? And in the straight and narrow. They've never been tempted left, right or centre or (pauses). And I think chapel people, myself included, have a lot to learn about such things.

These very thoughtful statements indicate that at least some older women take a view that caring and justice need to be combined when determining how to respond to terrible situations in society.

### **9.5 Care in the community**

"Care in the community" as a social welfare topic was not raised by the interviewees, at least not directly. But, in a broader context, it was discussed by many of the women as they wondered



aloud, ‘Who will take care of me if something happens?’<sup>4</sup> When the loved ones who were their contemporaries died, and with younger loved ones living at a distance, who would be there to take over the immediate tasks of caring that they might need? Fay worried whether care would be there for her if and when she needed it in the future:

You see, in them days you never thought anything about it....[My husband and I] didn’t look at [caring for my mother] as [a] duty, but we just looked at it [as if it] was up to us to look after my mother. Which we did. And we didn’t get any allowance, you know. No attendant’s allowance or anything....We don’t look after mothers and fathers now.

But Dollie described the sort of caring older women need in broader terms:

I think old women need to be loved and [to] know that there’s somebody there for them.

Veeve elaborated on this:

I think what a number of people lack in this age group is a feeling that there’s anybody who cares about them....And I think that is as important as all the other things....They need [God’s caring] demonstrating through human beings who really care, not just because they’re sent [by the churches] to care....When we get older, we get more cantankerous. Shall I say we get more self-centred. And therefore it’s harder for people to contact [us]....And that’s where they need something more than finances, social services, cleaning, and whatever.

These two women did not provide a list of practical help older women might need, but rather said that a sense of attachment and concern and a willingness to be supportive were necessary. Unfortunately, not all older women have these basic human needs met. Future sources of caring were a worry, no matter what the woman’s financial standing or how many family members she had. An unspoken message seemed to be that government welfare agencies could not be depended upon, and that it was up to each individual to make her own care arrangements.

In a different light, care in the community *was* discussed. The two primary communities these women named—family and church—were the arenas for discussing how care works. Perhaps they can serve as examples of how “community” can be redefined as a basis of care provision today. We will examine each in turn now.

### 9.5.1 The family

As we saw in Chapter 7, the family is one of the most important communities in an older woman’s life. Caring within the family is an especially complex and nuanced activity; caring among family members was frequently mentioned. Most of the interviewees named various family members—parents, siblings, children, spouses, aunts, and uncles—that they had devoted years to caring for. Although it was never complained about, some interviewees did say that it had been a physical, emotional, or financial hardship to do so, sacrificing their freedom and

---

<sup>4</sup> This was not an issue for the interviewees who lived in the residential home, as their arrangements had

interests to care for others. Lillian, for example, gave up a relationship with a man when she was in her 20s in order to care for her sister. In Millie's case, a choice was made as to which needy family member—living many miles apart—would be cared for. Other interviewees had given up work to care full-time for loved ones. Where a choice was made to put her own interests ahead of her mother's, Dora continued to feel guilty years later:

I didn't look after her. And what I should have done was to have delayed [taking up a career opportunity], and put her first....I have been selfish. I know.

Not surprisingly, it seemed that a self-sacrificial caring role was expected of the women in this generation, and that quite a few had complied.

Yet the women did not always acquiesce to others' wishes or needs, and occasionally this resulted in family discord. Aleen said that the healing process of re-establishing her family community after a rift had been slow. She now believed that it was better to maintain community than to insist on "being right".<sup>5</sup> Her softer approach resulted, after a recent visit to her family, in this remark:

This visit, [my daughter-in-law] actually said, 'Mum, it's been a pleasure to have you'. And she'd never said that before. And I think (pauses) as I've got older, I've had more understanding. And because they know I care, that I am concerned about them and I do care and I do love them, it's this that comes over.

Ramsey and Blieszner state that it is possible to care 'not always by acting, but sometimes by stepping aside' (2000:48). This happens when older women let another generation care for them:

I keep an ongoing list of things that I could possibly do, but [that my children] would get much more pleasure doing for me. So...I let them do them....I don't mind if they have to struggle, because I've struggled for them. And that gives them more satisfaction anyway. (Barbara)

Another way of practising caring, said Barbara, was to not let the children worry:

The main thing I try to do is not be a trouble to them. And the way I do that is by telling them what a good life I've been having recently. Because I do have a very good life. And I know that every time I communicate with them, and tell them that I've had a particularly good time, that's a tick on my register of, 'Oh, she's all right, we don't need to worry'....Concern is not the same as worry. And [my daughter's] concerned for me, but not worried about me. Which is the ideal situation.

Finally, for Barbara, age and distance meant that there was less direct help she could offer her adult children:

It is very worrying when you get a negative call, and there's very little you can do about it. Of course, you can listen, which is the best part, and the only thing you can do at times. And make suggestions.

---

already been made.

<sup>5</sup> Or, as Veeve's maxim states, 'Never sacrifice fellowship to efficiency'.



For an older woman, family members are important as recipients of caring and as givers of caring. There is a delight in being able to help out a daughter or grandson, and there is also pleasure in helping younger members learn how to care. As recipients, the immediate family 'offers an important protective role to older people: reassuring in times of crisis, playing the role of confidant, and acting as the first port of call if help is needed in the home' (Phillipson, et al., 2001:251).

### 9.5.2 The local church

Experiences within local churches showed instances both of caring and of a lack of caring—sometimes for the same woman in the same church. On the positive side, Barbara said that a church community was different from other communities:

It's people who are more caring than average about everybody. And that appeals to me, the fact that they can care for everybody. Because you don't get that in ordinary everyday life...I feel a buzz [at church] that everybody cares for everybody else. It's the only place I go where I feel vibes.

A number of the widowed interviewees mentioned that one thing they regularly found difficult was coming home to an empty house after a holiday. Fay said that her minister had recognised this:

When I went on holiday the first time [after my husband died], [my minister] left a little note: 'Welcome back'. I mean, you can imagine how I felt coming back....He was really, really supportative [sic] for me.

After her husband's death, Tess's church friends rallied to support her:

I have some wonderful friends. And I do appreciate that. But it is mostly because I belong to a church that I've got these friends...I was never at home Sunday lunch for years, really (laughs).

Unfortunately, other women had experienced (in their view) a distinct lack of caring from their churches. Dollie cited a lack of pastoral visits from members and few clergy visits. Sometimes fellow congregants were not caring in just the way that an older woman wanted. Karen was deeply hurt when her mother died and the funeral was held at another location, with no one from her church there to support her. A number of the interviewees (e.g. Karen, Barbara, and Dollie) were concerned about the presence of cliques or insider groups within their churches. For them, this sort of behaviour went against the definition of a caring community. As Koehn writes, '[i]f the self is reconceived through the other in such a way as to exclude appreciation of those outside the relation, then this form of caring degenerates into a narrow parochialism or cronyism' (1998:176, note 76).

In Chapter 5, we raised two important questions. First, are local churches a valuable resource in helping older women find meaning in being recipients of caring? And second, are local churches encouraging older women to continue to contribute caring, perhaps in new forms? The

church, when it is a successful caring community, provides opportunities for older women to be givers of caring—for example, as pastoral visitors, a role that many of the interviewees had. The church may valorise receiving caring by openly discussing “being” versus “doing”. Yet although there are some instances like this,<sup>6</sup> it is still the case that many older Christian women find that their local churches have not struck the proper balance between seeing them as carers and as recipients. Such women are left in limbo, unsure of what their ongoing role in the church community is to be. This can undermine an older woman’s sense of herself as a giver of caring, as a Christian, and as a valuable member of her church.

Some churches may fear that an ageing newcomer (or long-term member) will bring (or have) increasing needs to be a recipient, rather than a giver, of caring. This is where churches could broaden their perspective. One very important way older women care is by supporting their churches. Many interviewees expressed concern about the future of the Christian church in this country, either because of falling attendance or due to perceived compromises the churches were making:

I think we tend to pander too much to people. Instead of presenting them with a challenge. Because it’s a challenge people need in this day. (Mary)

For Mary, it was not the form of worship that troubled her (a frequent topic in churches when they *do* discuss older people) but the content. She felt that her “truth” was being left behind:

JE: Do you find that because of the way the church has been going, and the way sermons have been going and moral standards have been going, is it more difficult to keep your faith because you have to do all the work? Or is the church still there being helpful in that regard?

Mary: Well, no because you see, you realise that you have a part to play. You don’t just go for what you get, you go for what you can give as well. And therefore you have a value in that respect.

We recall from Chapter 8 that being active was one thing the interviewees pointed to as why they “belonged” to their particular church. “Doing” was highly valued by this group, and there was virtually no discussion of just “being” a Christian. As we discussed above, caring was ranked higher than receiving care; thus, the value of simply “being” in the church was not a concept these women were ready to embrace.<sup>7</sup>

## 9.6 Summary

In this chapter, we have seen that caring was a key feature of the interviewees’ identities and activities. It was something they took great pride in having done throughout their lives and that they were hoping to be able to continue in older age. Although there were almost always costs associated with caring, the women counted the benefits they received to be greater. Receiving

<sup>6</sup> The Methodist and Anglican churches have taken significant strides in the past several years to address these issues. See Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> This may change in future years as today’s younger women age. (See Chapter 11.)



care was also a part of their lives, but one they were less comfortable with. Being able to reciprocate in some way made being a recipient acceptable, and several ways of reciprocating were identified. Being older women meant struggling with conflicting identities as complete carers and complete recipients, neither of which was true. The women's ongoing caring role and activities were often unrecognised by those around them, although this was more frequently the case in the local church than within the family. The interviewees found it challenging to balance the images of carer and recipient at church.

In the course of analysing the interview data, we have refined the original definitions of community, connection, and caring. Now, we are able to say that "community" is a social place where meaningful things happen, that "connection" is coming together in relationship, and that "caring" is the active realisation of connection in community. The three themes are indeed intertwined, each being enhanced and nuanced by the other two. Barbara summed up the links neatly:

I can't get along without people. And I need to have fairly close relationships.  
And I need to care about the people that I'm related with.

In the next chapter, I will analyse the findings in light of feminist theologians' statements about women and community, connection, and caring, and then discuss what contributions older women could make to these ideas. This will lead to suggestions for churches to consider and act upon and to a tentative formulation of a Christian feminist practical theology of older women.

## Chapter 10—Towards a Christian Feminist Practical Theology of Older Women

The old women I know...hold their ground, anchoring every city church I know, like the force of gravity. I suspect that they hold the world together.  
—Kathleen Norris<sup>1</sup>

### 10.1 Introduction

In the previous three chapters, we looked at the interviewees' experiences of and thoughts about community, connection, and caring, and saw how those experiences both illuminated and challenged certain ideas presented by Christian feminist theologians. In particular, we learned that while all three entities and processes were important to older women (thus supporting the theologians' claims for women in general), there were various times and ways in which community, connection, and caring were unsatisfactory—or even painful. Being marginalised, excluded, or denied autonomy, for instance, were not uncommon experiences. Further, older women's successes at initiating and maintaining communities, connections, and caring often went unrecognised. These complexities were evident in one particular community we looked at in detail: the local church. We saw that the local church could be both the source of difficulties and frustrations for older women as well as a rich resource for connection and caring.

In this chapter, I will bring together the three dimensions of community, connection, and caring in older women's lives and show how the interviewees offered new insights beyond what feminist theologians have suggested, including nuances with respect to the more general issue of difference and diversity. I will take a deeper look at how local churches and older women are mutually important and suggest how churches may usefully employ ideas from this research. Finally, I will discuss why I think there should be a separate Christian feminist practical theology of older women, and what the important elements of such a theology might be.

### 10.2 Older women and community, connection, and caring

In this section, I will return to some important findings from this study regarding particular issues related to community, connection, and caring. Each of these issues is central to a discussion of feminist theology; but, as we have seen, feminist theologians have not adequately addressed them with respect to older women. I will also clarify how my project complements and elaborates upon the work of the key forerunners identified in Chapter 2: Patricia Hubbert, Janet Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner, and Joanna Gillespie.

#### 10.2.1 Key findings

A common view of the social consequences of ageing is that '[s]ocial network size [i.e. community], degree of network participation [i.e. connection] and levels of perceived support

---

<sup>1</sup> Norris (1998a:309-310).



[i.e. caring received]...decrease with age' (Cooper, et al., 1999:4; annotations mine). We could add that perceived levels of care giving also decrease with age. As we saw in the last three chapters, this ageist view of older people and community, connection, and caring is disputed by my findings. What are the key things we have discovered about older women and community, connection, and caring? What experiences of these do older women hold in common with all women, and what other experiences are unique to them? What do the answers to these questions add to our understanding of difference and diversity?

### i. Community

We have seen that, for the interviewees, community was a social place where meaningful things happened. They demonstrated their commitment to their communities by continuing to be involved, by being present, and by sacrificing other opportunities and options in order to keep those communities functioning. This is in keeping with feminist theologians' statements about community—it is a social ideal, superior to extreme individualism.

By the parameters of this project, all of my interviewees belonged to at least one community: their local church. Most of them cited a number of other communities that they were a part of, with the family being at least as important as the church or any other. It could be that being a part of a community helps an individual stave off the perceived negative aspects of ageing. This was suggested to me by Winnie when she said that being actively involved 'gives us an incentive. It gives us something to look forward to. So it is helping us, you see...It kept us alive. It kept us living. It kept us feeling that we were wanted, we were needed', and by Aleen when she commented that her involvement in community-based groups was a means of continuing to be 'of some use to [God] here'. This knowledge of the benefits of community participation is part of the "wisdom" of experience we discussed in Chapter 7.

Furthermore, we saw that older women continue to build new communities for themselves as former ones cease to exist. This can be especially challenging if the woman is alone and a newcomer to a town, or if she feels marginalised in some way. Yet, it is vital. Being a member of a community (an "insider") contributes to a sense of belonging, which in turn helps an older woman establish and maintain her identity. Being known as individuals with names and with particular roles and connections is especially important because older women need to counter messages that they have little of value to contribute to society. Being integrated into society is important; older women struggle against society's habit of relegating them to the margins, as was eloquently stated by Phyllis, Mary, and others in Chapter 7. Certain communities and the connections in them give women a supportive base from which they can carry on with activities, such as caring, that confirm their identities. Furthermore, this increases the social capital of the community as a whole.

The sense of belonging and affirmation older women have as a result of membership in certain communities can also, in some cases, lead to a sense of interconnectedness on a larger scale.

## ii. Connection

A key finding in Hubbert's study of older churchgoing women was that their networks of relationships were the most significant motivating forces in their lives (1991:6). Indeed, for those women, maintaining connections was 'a sacred task' (86). We also learned of this "sacred connectedness" from Zappone. While she does not address ageing per se, Zappone makes many of the same points as Hubbert. A sacred connectedness was also overwhelmingly present in the lives of my interviewees. Indeed, being connected to others (often family members) was so important that when connections were lost, some women felt they were in hell:

God *is* love and [being] excluded—that's hell. (pauses) And I mean, I think [when] you've had somebody die who's been very close. I think it was after that that I realised (laughs) that hell was being parted from love. (Gloria)

Connections are complex, however, and certainly not all are either beneficial or enhance self-worth. Sarah recognised this:

Family and...relationships and...the things that happen to them. I think that is hell...I mean, terrible things happen to some people. Dreadful things. Dreadful sufferings and dreadful tragedies happen to some people, and that must be hell. So I think when you're dead, it must be heaven. You don't know anything.

Whether hell is being excluded from loving relationships (Gloria) or embroiled in abusive relationships (Sarah) in this life, being connected to others was a basic fact of the interviewees' lives. This meant that persons (or other parties to the connections) were interdependent. Too often our society sees older women as entirely dependent; however, the women's lives contradict this. At the same time, the women had a strong sense of their own autonomy. As Dollie reminded us, older women were agents with free will who could act (or not) as they chose, and this included accepting or rejecting other people's care. They experienced a *relational* form of autonomy that, for the most part, gave them the benefits of both connection and independence.

The loss of important connections, either through personal physical decline or through the death of loved ones, was a very real part of the interviewees' lives. Because a woman's identity was shaped by her connections with others, she experienced grief both from the lost connection as well as from a loss of part of her identity. Making new connections was always possible (and frequently occurred), but increasing age made this difficult due to such things as decreased mobility, lack of transportation, and, sometimes, a lack of interest from others who might not be seeking new friendships. As a result, asserting one's own identity, as Sarah found, also became



a challenge. These are issues that feminist theologians have not accounted for in their enthusiasm over connection and connectedness.

Hardy says that human relationships are ‘structured by the presence and activity of God’ and patterned on God’s relationships with us (1996:186). In this view, God is the working presence behind human relationships and therefore precedes them. However, as we learned in Chapter 4, in Sölle’s and Heyward’s view, human relationships *precede* God’s existence and call God into being. Either way, God is seen not as separate from us but connected to us.<sup>2</sup> God is therefore dependent upon our very existence. Though the interviewees and I did not discuss images or concepts of God, many of them expressed a feeling that God was present in their connections with others. For instance, they were able to “see” God in the caring actions of others. They also felt a strong sense of being directly connected to God. This seems to indicate that relationships—connections—are somehow tied up in one’s experience of a transcendent life. Grey, too, recognises this when she writes of redemption (1989) and resurrection (1999b). Neither can come about on an individual basis, but can only be achieved ‘through the restoration of broken relationship’ (1989:10) in this life.

For the interviewees, one of the key purposes of connections was to exchange caring and love. These women *transformed* connections into opportunities to care and to receive care. They described this as living God’s plan for their lives and doing God’s work in this world.

### iii. Caring

As we read in Chapter 4, Cady says that ‘[l]ove is a mode of relating that...create[s] a unity out of formerly detached individuals’ and that ‘the wider life created by love constitutes a community of persons’ (1987:141). I suggested that connection is itself an entity, apart from and in addition to the partners that constitute it. For Cady, love is not only the connection but also a *process*, a creative *activity*. It is the caring component of the community-connection-caring dynamic I have identified:

In place of the traditional Christian focus on self-sacrificial love, I have proposed an alternative interpretation of love in which the primary aim is the creation, deepening, and extension of communal life....In place of the autonomous individual, which has been the paradigm for both God and the human person, this interpretation of love suggests that *an expansive relational process* constitutes the core of both the person and the divine (1987:147; emphasis mine).

---

<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Hampson (whom we saw in Chapter 2 is a post-Christian feminist theologian) explores what God might be for feminists. God—whatever God is—is not “an other” to humans but has only been conceived of in this way due to the limits of human imagination (Hampson, 1989:38). She writes, ‘God does not need to be seen as separate from the self or our community. We may see God...as coming into being through us, as we through God. God, though not one member of the web (or God would not be God), can be conceived as upholding the web, as present...through the web [of relationships]’ (37).

Therefore, the community that results from a process of loving connections (that is, we can view “community” as “a collection of loving connections”) has an identity, a meaning, and a “life” of its own. For Welch (1985), when such communities take shape out of political resistance and solidarity, they have a power to act for social justice, a power that comes from working with others rather than through domination over others.<sup>3</sup> What she calls the ‘power of relatedness’ (1985:67) (i.e. connection) is transformed into ‘the redemptive power of community’ (45). For me, caring is that redemptive power.

We saw in the interviewees’ statements that, for many of them, two key Christian principles were (1) helping others and (2) maintaining good relationships with others. For some of the women (e.g. Millie), Christian beliefs and doctrines came first and acted as the impetus for performing caring acts. For other women (e.g. Barbara), the interaction was more complex and worked in a reciprocal and reinforcing fashion. (We will explore this a bit further when we look at Hubbert, below.) Through being connected with other people in communities and by caring for them, these interviewees (and others) experienced a deeper understanding of God and faith—and felt spurred on to build more relationships and to practice more caring acts. For me, such communities of older women have high levels of social capital, and this capital is available not only to the communities’ members but also to outsiders with whom they choose to share it. I would suggest that older women’s communities could be valuable resources of ‘an expansive relational process’ (Cady) that ultimately leads the world to redemption (cf. Welch). For older women, this redemptive power serves a reflexive purpose of keeping them integrated into larger society.

One final point about caring. A persistent concern for feminists has been whether nurturing and caring are harmful to people or whether they lead to the full humanity of persons.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, in many ways the gendering of caring roles in our society has been debilitating for many women, and even destructive if those roles become compulsory rather than freely chosen (see Chapter 5). However, the results of my research and of others’ (e.g. Altschuler, Ramsey and Blieszner) show that, for older women, caring *can* be a means to realising full humanity if pursued with freedom of choice—both for the giver and for the recipient. Problems arise when assumptions are made about what is “best” for an individual (either giver or recipient) without first checking with her. For example, just as older women may be denied the opportunity to care for others, they are frequently denied the opportunity to care for themselves. Not being allowed to care, for herself or for others, is a problem for older women.<sup>5</sup> Older women are happy to receive care,

<sup>3</sup> Compare to Russell (1985b). (See Chapter 5.)

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Al McFadyen and Alister Mason, who raised this question early on in my project.

<sup>5</sup> Would older men, especially churchgoing men, identify caring as a significant activity in their lives? Or, would they differ from older women in this respect? (Thanks to Anne Atkinson (Head of Care, The Sheltered and Residential Court of Lady Katherine Leveson, Temple Balsall) for this observation.) Altschuler asks these and related questions about older men and caring in her conclusion (2001:97).



provided it is their choice and does not detract from their identity as carers. Finding a means of reciprocity is important. “Care in the community” becomes a positive and meaningful social objective if older women’s communities are appropriately (i.e. with their input) identified. Externally imposed definitions of community often create, rather than solve, problems.<sup>6</sup>

#### iv. Difference and diversity

In Chapter 2, we learned that the topics of difference and diversity are very important to feminists and feminist theologians. We recall that “difference” is a rejection of the universalising of white women’s experience in favour of a valuing of the diversity of experiences of *all* women (and all people)—and finding such differences enriching, empowering, and, ultimately, redemptive.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, this encompassing of so many “others” is acknowledged to be a challenge. In this project, we saw how many of the interviewees strove to understand people they did not agree with and to find ways to keep connected to them. They spoke of growing more tolerant, understanding, and accepting with age. Being committed to staying connected and working to keep communication lines open were values and practices that many of the women had developed over the years. For them, forgiveness was important—both to their relationships with other people and to their relationship with God. Although they were not speaking on a grand scale, nevertheless these women were open to—and sometimes even excited by—their encounters with those who were their “others”.

For Nancy, for example, non-Christians were “the other”. They could be right-living, decent people, but they lacked a relationship with Christ. Even so, she was friendly and helpful to them. For Barbara, difference opened a world of opportunities:

I like to mix with people of different outlooks...because it can get a bit monotonous. I think it can get so that you don’t make any progress because you are never seeing anything new. I used to find those pottery classes—where I got all these often quite young people and young mothers and elderly ladies—I found that really invigorating mentally. We had great discussions while we were doing pots....You could sometimes have outrageous conversations, but they were different. And they were thought-provoking.

Gloria also thought difference was a good thing:

I’m just interested in what other people are thinking because it’s going to add some richness. You might not agree with everything, but there’s always something rich to be had out of listening to other people.

This ‘clear-sighted appreciation [of] and commitment to the other’ (Grey, 1999a:15) is an important contribution older women can make to feminist theologians’ arguments of the value

---

<sup>6</sup> I recognise that in some cases older women may have to have decisions made for them, but these are in the minority.

<sup>7</sup> I use this last term in a broad sense here, not necessarily restricted to Christian interpretations.

of difference and diversity and of the feasibility of striving to attain it on a larger scale. This is especially so given that older women are often assumed to share the same experiences (e.g. of dependency) and the same viewpoints (e.g. on moral issues).

### 10.2.2 Relation to previous studies

In Chapter 2, I introduced three studies that were forerunners to my own. Hubbert, Ramsey and Blieszner, and Gillespie all looked at ordinary, churchgoing older women<sup>8</sup> and considered questions of spirituality and/or congregational life. Each researcher discovered that community, connection, and/or caring were important features of older women's experiences of spirituality and of church life, and throughout the course of this thesis we have encountered many of their specific findings and interpretations. Now, I will show how my project carries forward the work of these investigations.

#### i. Hubbert

In Chapter 4, I said that I was interested in whether older women's experiences of Christianity might be the source, or the consequence, of an ethic of connection (and community and caring). Among her respondents, Hubbert found what she termed an "elderly, womanly" approach to life that was relationship-oriented and that reflected the women's spirituality. That word "reflected" is important. Whereas Hubbert began with specific questions of spirituality (and theology and liturgical practice) and arrived at understandings of community and connection (e.g. '[p]atterns of belief and modes of action *were overwhelmingly dependent upon* an ethic of relationships'<sup>9</sup>), my project has moved in the reverse direction, uncovering notions of a spirituality (or theology) *arising from* experiences of community, connection, and caring. This is not to say that older women's beliefs and/or spirituality are *either* the source of *or* the result of experiences and actions only. The two sets of findings raise the possibility that there is a reflexive process at work, and that the questions a researcher starts with merely tend to emphasise one direction of influence over the other. What is important here is the interplay between an older churchgoing woman's beliefs and her experiences of community, connection, and caring.<sup>10</sup>

As noted previously,<sup>11</sup> one of the topics Hubbert investigated was the relationship of older women to the church. Her research focused primarily on "big" issues in "the Church": the subservience and essentialising of women, the ordination of women, the use of inclusive

---

<sup>8</sup> Gillespie considered *all* adult women in the congregations she investigated, not only older women.

<sup>9</sup> Hubbert (1991:6; emphasis mine).

<sup>10</sup> Altschuler asked her older women respondents to name the source of their 'value of doing good deeds or helping others' (2001:85). Of the four explanations given—having a significant relative who set an example of caring, having care-giving responsibilities, having experienced and/or witnessed social injustice, and having perceived gender differences (90-91)—none is explicitly linked to religious beliefs or faith. Yet, for at least some of her respondents, caring was defined as 'mature identity, the ultimate spiritual goal' (88). We could then postulate that spirituality is also, for some women, a motivation to care.



language, and a lack of clergy training regarding older women's needs. In my project, on the other hand, I focused on the relationship of older women to their local churches as specific communities. Both Hubbert and I uncovered instances of older women feeling marginalised and ignored, which resulted in dissatisfaction and frustration. Nevertheless, Hubbert reports a generally positive view of the church, saying that her respondents saw it as 'a living, breathing, nurturing extension of the secular community' (1991:84). My interviewees had a more mixed view. Even so, Hubbert's statement is an ideal the churches could strive for, provided they take older women's needs and contributions into account.<sup>12</sup>

There appears to be a strong correlation between these two research projects, both indicating the synergy of connection, fellowship, and ideas of Christian faith among older churchgoing women. Additionally, the fact that there is this strong correlation between projects that studied older women in two different environments (i.e. a semi-rural village [Hubbert] and a mid-size city [my own]) leads us to speculate that such findings could be true of many, if not most, older churchgoing women in Britain today.

#### ii. Ramsey and Blieszner

Ramsey and Blieszner identified three primary themes as a result of their analysis of interviews with older churchgoing women. These were 'the importance of community in the lives of the elderly women, the significance of affect [i.e. emotions] in their understanding of their faith and their experiences, and the relational aspects of their faith' (2000:47; annotation mine). The first and last of these are directly relevant to my own research and support my findings. (The remaining theme, affect, was not one I studied.)

The importance of community to their respondents was a surprise to Ramsey and Blieszner, as they found that the literature on spirituality usually focuses on the individual. For their older women, community was 'more a world of meaning than a form of social activity' (58). Among other benefits, community life contributed to 'a positive self-image' (48) and offered an arena for the exchange of love (i.e. care). In particular, 'the faith community was integral to their spirituality and a vital component of their general resiliency. They consider[ed] their life together to be an essential aspect of their spiritual lives, not an alternative choice for religious practice' (47). My interviewees also found communities, both church and non-church, to be places of meaning. The local church especially was a place for experiencing the fellowship of other Christians, which many of the women considered to be indispensable to maintaining their faith in older age. We also saw in my findings that community life often presented problems for older women, something Ramsey and Blieszner did not report. The churches should be aware of

---

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup> See 'A different set of practices for local churches', below.

both the importance of a spiritual community for older women (not only desirable but a source of “resiliency”) and that there can be difficulties.

Ramsey and Blieszner also pointed out that, although their respondents spoke of faith mainly in relational terms, they were also comfortable with abstract thought (59). The women were, in effect, “doing theology” (56). The respondents apparently successfully (and without any difficulty) were able to integrate both the emotional and the intellectual aspects of their faith. This was also true of some of my interviewees, such as Veeve and Barbara, who discussed the necessary integration of beliefs and actions, blending the practical with the theoretical. This sits well with Heyward’s definition of Christian theology as ‘the Christian’s attempt to give meaning, by words or other symbols, to the human-divine relation as she experiences it’ (1982:12). Those “other symbols” could include the acts of caring undertaken and received by older women, and the “words” they use to express how caring works in their lives. Care is something that Ramsey and Blieszner say is evident in both the community life and the connections in their respondents’ lives, as it was in the lives of my interviewees.

Finally, the authors brought together the three elements of community, connection, and caring when they suggested that ‘as we age, we may also be resilient because we are *joined in love* and based in *community*’ (2000:60; emphasis mine). This supports a developing theology of older women based on the themes of community, connection, and caring. My research also shows that this is the strength of older age for (at least some) older women. Could it then be the praxis of the churches to foster this for all older women, especially those who do not presently have positive experiences of community, connection, and caring?

Both Hubbert’s and Ramsey and Blieszner’s studies emphasised the spiritual strength and resiliency of older Christian women. Rather than focusing only on those experiences of older women that are problematic—a frequent failing of research among older people—they also show the positive ones. These studies serve as examples of the resources many older women have with which to live satisfying, productive lives. My research, I believe, also does this, while pointing out specific problem areas, too.

### iii. Gillespie

Gillespie studied the congregational life of women of all ages, and, as was noted earlier in this thesis, generational differences were one of her most significant findings. (We will explore this topic in greater depth in the final chapter of the thesis.) Her discovery of how older women defined “belonging” to their local churches as being through ‘activities rather than by internal, private spiritual experience’ (1992:197) bears a strong similarity to my own findings (see Chapter 8). Older women want their work at church to be recognised and valued by others.



When they eventually give up this work, they suffer the double pains of losing a part of their identity at church and of seeing the lack of interest among younger women in taking over (Gillespie, 1992:201). A number of my interviewees, most notably Florence, expressed similar feelings about belonging and church work.

Like Ramsey and Blieszner, Gillespie found women's

expression of "theology"...is indeed a spirituality expressible only in relational terms. These women see themselves as "doing" theology (insofar as they connect their own actions with a type of thought usually associated with clergy) in terms of service or "giving", in terms of spiritual relationships, and in deep bonds of identity with the faith and narrative of their congregation (1992:211-212).

It was the same for my interviewees. Also, I saw them "doing theology" in their experiences of fellowship—not only in their present congregation but also with prior congregations or with Christianity in general. Further, the interviewees and I were all theologians, because 'anyone who in any way tries to understand their [sic] situation in the light of faith in the contemporary world is doing theology' (Pattison, 2000:137). Although they would be unlikely to make such a formulation—and highly unlikely to claim the mantle of theologian for themselves—my interviewees readily spoke of "living" (i.e. "doing") their Christianity in their communities, in their connections, and in their activities of caring, both within and outside of their churches.

We have seen how certain key topics within feminist theologians' discussions of community, connection, and caring are realised in older women's lives, and how older women's lives raise issues not addressed by feminist theologians. Now we will look in detail at one key community in the interviewees' lives: the local church.

### **10.3 The local church as a particular community of connection and caring**

As the findings showed, the family and the local church were the two most important communities in the interviewees' lives. The role of the family in older people's lives has been covered extensively in the social gerontological literature (e.g. Phillipson, et al., 2001), and we saw its importance to the interviewees in Chapters 7, 8, and 9. Because the role of the local church has received less attention<sup>13</sup> and because I wish to focus on it as a key part of a practical theology of older women, I will now discuss it at some length. Here, we will see not only how and why the local church is important to older women, but also how and why older women are (or should and could be) important to local churches, and how local churches can respond to this information with a new set of practices.

---

<sup>13</sup> Jerrome (1989, 1992) is a notable exception.

### 10.3.1 The importance of local churches to older women

The local church is a significant social place for many older women because it is here that they build and maintain community life, create and sustain connections, and care for and care about other people and things. Fellowship and a sense of belonging are important benefits gained from membership in the church community, as is a sense of the woman's ongoing value as a Christian—no matter her ability to actively contribute. In the local church, older women hope to be cared about and cared for on an equal footing with other members.

These findings about the importance of the local church are also supported on a medical level. Churches are places where older people can usually find social support or welfare services (Ellison and Levin, 1998:705), in addition to a sense of community and connections with people who will care about and for them. Although the actual factors that contribute to this result may not be known—and because there are also, for some persons, negative consequences to religious involvement (Ellison and Levin, 1998:710, 714)—the fact that there are benefits for many older people is further support for enhancing the connections older women have with churches.

Chester and Smith (1996) found, as I did, that there are many reasons why older women attend church, including worship (spiritual care), the social interaction of a community (connection), and the welfare services or volunteer activities that are on offer (giving and receiving caring). Being a part of a church community was very important to the interviewees, for several reasons: in particular, friendship, fellowship, worship, and caring were cited. O'Brien also discovered this in the spiritual community she investigated:<sup>14</sup>

The women I interviewed pointed to what will support their spiritual quest in the presence of personal and social change in old age. Emphasis was on the need for the continuation of a caring and celebratory community, a community which nurtured the spiritual search through a respect for solitude and privacy while encouraging meaningful relationships to sustain a sense of connectedness of self to God, to others, to the larger world, and to the earth (1996:13).

As we saw in Chapter 8, fellowship is very important to older women. Meetings and events that might be seen, by outsiders, as primarily or exclusively social (e.g. luncheon clubs) were identified as fellowship gatherings by the participants.<sup>15</sup> Although fellowship was sometimes found outside a Christian context (e.g. Veeve and her lip-reading class), most often it was sought and found among gatherings of Christians—and these gatherings usually occurred either at the local church or under its auspices. This makes the local church vital to older women, as it is often the only place they can experience fellowship, something they value highly.

---

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien interviewed 30 American women, aged 60 to 80, who were members of 'an international lay movement of women known as the Grail, which has its roots in Roman Catholicism but is presently ecumenical and interdenominational' (1996:5).

<sup>15</sup> A finding also discovered by Brierley (2000:40).



This project's empirical findings showed that older women did not encounter ageism to the same extent in their church communities as they did in society at large. In general, they did feel accepted. For instance, the interviewees were less likely to lose their identity as carers, and more likely to have their ongoing role as carers recognised. Even so, a number of the women I spoke with (e.g. Dollie, Karen, and Sarah) had experienced times when they felt marginalised or even excluded from their local church. Having what should be a "safe haven" from the ageism of society at large turn out to be an unwelcoming or unsupportive place was especially painful. Again, churches should be aware of their uniqueness in this regard among society's institutions and be especially sensitive to newcomers and other older women who may, from time to time, feel on the fringes of church communities due to reasons such as inconsistent attendance.

Although we know that older women as a group constitute a large proportion of many church congregations, we know less about their individual patterns of attendance. It would be a mistake to assume that all churchgoing older women attend their own local church exclusively or weekly. Many older women, especially those who are still physically very active, may not attend their local church as regularly as other members of any age. This seemingly contradictory statement is supported by this project's data (e.g. Barbara, Ruth) which showed that older women who are regular churchgoers might attend different churches when out of town or when visitors come. Also, if grand/children do not wish to attend, or if it is logistically complicated to do so, grand/mothers may opt to stay home and miss worship services.

As Barbara noted, she was sometimes made to feel that she was less involved in the life of the church because of such absences. Yet her church community and connections remain very important to her and to the many other older people who are mobile—more mobile than previous generations of older people were.<sup>16</sup> Churches need to be aware of this lifestyle and of members' travel patterns and be prepared to renew connections from the church side as well as from the older person's side (Brierley, 2000:40). Also, two of the women I interviewed (Dollie and Janet) were not formal members of their congregations; nevertheless, they still considered themselves to be good friends (if not "family members") of their churches. Churches need to recognise that older women like this want to feel a sense of belonging, whether or not they are prepared to formalise the connection.

Interestingly, whereas Brierley found that 'for churchgoers the church is where they sense belonging, and virtually nowhere else' (2000:13), in contrast, most of my interviewees also found belonging in family (e.g. Betty, Winnie) and friendship (e.g. Janet, Tess) connections. It could be that Brierley's respondents did not have strong family/friendship ties, or that because

the focus of the research was on church that family and friends did not receive much attention, or that many of the respondents (36 per cent) were men who perhaps gave different answers from the women. Nevertheless, their church connections were very important to them, and perhaps for a few individuals the most important connections they had. I would, however, largely agree with Brierley's conclusion that 'belonging in church only works if a person "does" church regularly' (2000:14). Certainly those women, like Dolores, who have less regular contact with their churches were among those who felt a weakened sense of belonging.

Finally, the local church is important to older women because it is seen as an outpost of certainty in a society that many believe has lost its moral compass. Brierley reports that the vast majority of older people, both churchgoers and non-churchgoers, find the church to be relevant. Reasons given included 'guidance and moral leadership', 'God's forgiveness', and the 'teaching of peace and loving our neighbour' (2000:20)—all of which were believed to be needed by society today. This is a view my interviewees would support wholeheartedly, and partly explains why they were puzzled and concerned that younger generations were not attending. Further, older women 'wish their children and grandchildren to find what they have found in the church' (Ramsey and Blieszner, 2000:54), be this Christian teaching or fellowship through social and devotional activities. Barbara, for instance, had had a very positive experience of youth groups when she was a teenager, and she was disappointed that her children and grandchildren did not share this. The interviewees were worried about the future of the church as an institution (and often for their own declining congregations) because they could point to its importance in their own lives—both past and present.

### **10.3.2 The importance of older women to local churches**

The women I interviewed were—overwhelmingly—very determined to remain part of their local churches. They expected to continue to participate in the church's own work of community, connection, and caring no matter their age or physical or living situation. This may be due to a strong sense of community and connection ('I belong here') or of ownership ('This is my church—no matter what unpleasant things happen, I can outlast them'), or because carving a place in that particular community involved so much effort that the alternative—seeking another church home—would be too much work and of doubtful success. They were not likely to give up lightly, as seen in the number of interviewees who expressed great concern and reluctance over (what they saw as) the inevitability of someday having to change churches. There were, for many of the women, instances when they felt on the fringes or excluded, but this was rarely enough of a problem to cause them to leave a particular congregation.

---

<sup>16</sup> It would be interesting to discover whether younger, unmarried people—who may also travel frequently—have their absences "excused" more readily. Are older people expected to "stay put", and



What older women can offer the churches as a gift or even a blessing goes beyond the practical tasks (e.g. catering, clerical work) that many clergy and male members are willing to delegate. Their loyalty and interest are resources to be tapped, as older women may have ideas on how to maintain and grow their churches.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes these ideas arise from sharing stories of faith journeys, ‘[o]ne of the most important contributions older persons make to a Christian community’ (Fischer, 1998:73). Fischer adds, ‘[t]here are dimensions of the Gospel, aspects of love, courage, faith, and fidelity, which only the old can sacramentalize for the human community’ (1998:19). Veeve, Nancy, Amelia, Millie, and Hazel all spoke of overcoming hardships and disappointments and of being able to trace a pattern of caring (both God’s and other people’s) in their lives. These experiences, as well as lifetimes of Christian practice and membership in fellowship communities, had enriched their reflections on their faith, giving them insights not readily available (at least, in the same way) to younger people.<sup>18</sup>

Older women should be encouraged to share these experiences because theirs are the voices of authority. Because they have lived longer lives and gained more experiences, older women have an important role in their churches as ‘interpreters-in-community of [the] Christian tradition’ (Duck, 1995:9). We may even consider some of them to be prophets, if we use Maitland’s definition that ‘[t]he traditional prophet has always been someone who belongs within a system and pronounces judgment from that position of belonging’ (1983:127-128). As Kolden writes:

[W]ho better to bear witness to the truth of Christ than the older members of the community? Persons who in faith have known joy and sorrow, meaning and meaninglessness, self-sacrifice and undeserved blessing, the deaths of loved ones and the births of new family members—and who have reflected on this as worshipers and learners with divine vocations as stewards of God’s good creation—will transmit the tradition with integrity and effectiveness (1995:493-494).

Nevertheless, this loyalty should not be taken for granted by churches. Continuing to attend services and meetings may not be an indication that all is well but rather a sign of a bond with the past and/or a reluctance to change, and clergy and others charged with pastoral care should assess each woman’s situation individually. Older women’s “devotion to an institution” (Gillespie, 1992:184) may outweigh their frustrations and disappointments, forcing them to cope but not be satisfied.

Another reason older women are important to local churches is that they contribute the work of love. This is regularly done through such basic things as their ‘immediate relationships and household tasks performed in a spirit of love’ (Rudd, 1988:9). Rudd believes that ‘[t]his

---

criticised when they do not?

<sup>17</sup> Churches should beware: younger women in Britain (the future’s older women) are more mobile and take a more consumer-oriented attitude towards religious practice, and therefore may not have such a deep concern for growing their local churches. (See Chapter 11.)

<sup>18</sup> See also Norris (1998a:243).

exercise of love is that means by which we can help to neutralize, to absorb, some of the conflict and hatred in today's world' (10). Many of the interviewees were, already, "pastoral agents" (E Graham, 1993), enacting God's caring as they encountered others in their lives—in some cases, even incarnating God for others in their churches, neighbourhoods, and families. This incarnation was not only in the more obvious role of giving caring, but also in the role of receiving caring. Indeed, God and Christ are incarnated in us when we are the recipients of others' caring activities.<sup>19</sup> Both roles—of carer and cared for—reflect God's nature (E Graham, 1993). More older women could be encouraged to take on this vital role of bringing and enacting God (and Christ) for others, thus creating and maintaining connections. This would be a significant contribution in a theology that sees the entire world as interconnected.

By contributing to the work of love, older women are indicating (overtly or by implication) that our communities today, including the local churches, are or could be resurrection communities. The life of the world to come could be here, today—as much if not more than after death. Grey uses the term resurrection as a metaphor for 'a way of reflective living and action' (1999b:114). For her, '[t]he *praxis* of resurrection...means beginning here and now' (114; author's emphasis). For her and for other feminist theologians, 'the praxis of resurrection is the ethical response to a competitive, individualistic world. It is a local-level, community-oriented, daily-enacted response that judges the world, finds it wanting, and seeks to repair it' (Eldred, 2000:3).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, just as the resurrected community of Christian believers is incomplete unless everyone is included, so it is in this earthly life with the community of all creation: 'the absence of a single individual spoils the whole' (Maitland, 1983:188). Indeed, the resurrected community is impossible unless everyone is redeemed, which is what Grey means when she writes of 'redemptive relatedness' (1989:176). This goes beyond an *awareness* of interconnectedness and interdependence, beyond a *call* for liberation and justice, to *praxis*—a deliberate acting out by individuals, communities, and all humanity of the kinds of relationships that can redeem the world. As Heyward says,

the power in relation is good—redemptive—in and for the present world. Our redemption is our justice, between and among persons whose relation to neighbor as self is our fundamental, constitutive and overwhelming priority in the world. There is no greater a commandment, no more effective an act (1982:132).

Some of the interviewees (e.g. Phyllis, Edith) touched on this idea when they commented that, in the face of large-scale destruction and conflict, they did what they could in their corner of the world and hoped it would contribute to a greater whole. Even more, Barbara was actively

<sup>19</sup> 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me....Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:35-36, 40).

<sup>20</sup> A copy of this paper is bound into the back of this thesis.



working to spread this message among the individuals around her. Could local churches tap into such understandings and praxis and employ them to help deliver the Christian message?

Hubbert concludes that,

by failing to acknowledge the relationship-based vision of ministry and community held by the elderly women who comprise the bulk of their congregations, the churches have become increasingly distanced from those congregations. By listening to older women, by hearing their hopes for, and expectations of, the church, by incorporating these into the traditional male-based visions of church, the churches could inject new life, a new concern, a new vitality into their clerical training, their ministers and their ministry, and become more truly communities of mutual care and concern (1991:89).

By learning from older women, local churches may find ways to ensure their own survival and means of thriving in the future—as communities that recognise their essential connectedness and that enact caring in creative and mutually empowering ways for all of their members. Christianity could even be redeemed for future generations.

### **10.3.3 A different set of practices for local churches**

From everything we have learned up to this point, the connection between older women and local churches is (or is desired to be) strong. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses, and a different set of practices is called for. Here, I will suggest how churches can employ a heightened awareness of older women, tap into their resources, and meet their needs and desires.

#### **i. Employing a heightened awareness of older women**

Churches need to strike a balance between seeing their older constituents as ‘ordinary members [of churches] and in a special category’ (Chester and Smith, 1996:27), as well as a balance between seeing them as individuals and as members of a group with common concerns.<sup>21</sup> The point here is to consider both older persons’ equivalent standing with all other Christians and the particular needs and gifts they bring to their church communities.

When a church (locally or corporately) makes changes—organisational, liturgical, or in policy—is it actively attempting to bring its older members along by first acknowledging and honouring the past and then bringing older members into the new picture? Is it explicitly showing older people how they can engage with “the new”, whatever that is? Of course, not all older persons will want to come along for whatever reason, but churches need to be aware and make every effort to incorporate them. Churches need to send out a clear message that older women are a welcome and valued part of the faith community—even if some of those women disagree with changes. Older women’s loyalty is too often taken for granted and their silence taken for assent.

Take the example of modern versus traditional forms of worship, which was touched on in most of the interviews. Some of the interviewees enthused about their enjoyment of modern songs and styles of worship. Not one said that such worship forms alienated her *as an older woman*.<sup>22</sup> This is interesting, because existing texts (e.g. Webber, 1990; Jewell, 2001) about older people and the churches stress that, in general, older people prefer traditional worship styles, liturgies, and music, either because of familiarity or because ‘older ideas...are still spiritually precious and creative’ for them (House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England, 1986:35). Churches will have to learn the preferences of their particular constituencies of older persons and of their individual members.

The degree of involvement an older woman has with her local church is often related to how comfortable she feels within that community. For instance, Betty was a long-term, happy member of her church and she chose to stay very involved in order ‘to know what’s going on’. Florence, however, several years older than Betty and a member of a different church, had made a conscious choice to step back and to let others take over the work she had done for many years. Less happily, a few of the women had made a conscious choice to be on the periphery of their church community, either because of other commitments (e.g. Janet), because they did not want to be involved in cliques (e.g. Karen), or because they feared repeated insensitivity (e.g. Dollie).

Quite a few of the women talked about problems they had had as newcomers to a church, and being welcomed by both fellow congregants and clergy. Even a woman who felt that she definitely belonged to her church (Dora) commented on a minister who ignored her and her needs. Some hurts went particularly deep and continued to be felt long after certain incidents had happened. From this, churches can be aware of the various and sometimes deeply hidden reasons why some older women are less involved in the life of a congregation than are others. Not only is this important from a pastoral perspective (for the individual woman concerned), but it can also shed light on the dynamics of a particular congregation. Not all older women who complain are merely cranky; some could have useful insights that clergy and church councils could take note of.

It is important to note that not all difficulties older people have with their church communities result from either changes in worship forms or in reduced interaction with fellow members. Just as congregants of any age, older Christian churchgoers may experience crises of faith that they

---

<sup>21</sup> The same, of course, could be said for church members of any age, race, or other sort of category we might want to look at.

<sup>22</sup> The only concern along this line, which we saw raised by Aleen in particular, is that the evangelical interviewees saw the churches as avoiding or abandoning traditional (i.e. conservative) teachings.



are ashamed to mention (Church of England General Synod Board for Social Responsibility, 1990a), personality conflicts with other members (John Williams, 1992) or with the pastor, or a wide variety of other personal problems. In the same way, problems with mobility and health can occur at any age and aren't restricted to the old (Webber, 1990).

What other assumptions do churches and their members make about older women?<sup>23</sup> Ageism not only takes the form of exclusionary or discriminatory behaviours; it can also exist in positive-seeming views, such as the notion that older women have their faith “sorted” and do not have questions or doubts. In fact, older women may not be given the space to share their spiritual doubts (a point raised by Veeve), and some may keep silent if feeling threatened by either confident young persons or by enthusiastic, newly converted Christians. Further, churches need to be aware that people do come to church for the first time in older age, and that these persons will have many questions and be far from having their beliefs sorted out. Older women in this position will need as much attention, if not more, than younger “seekers” who will have potentially more years in front of them.<sup>24</sup>

#### ii. Tapping the resources of older women

One of the simplest ways any church can tap into the resources of older women is to visit, talk to, and especially listen to them. Their experiences are a great gift, one of many potential gifts they have to offer. A few of the interviewees (speaking personally, not universally, of some older women) remarked that a firmness of faith and an assurance of beliefs could come through an older woman's sharing of her faith journey (as noted above). Chester and Smith raise the question, however, “[is] this a defence of firmly held personal values by someone confident of what she [has] and what she [has] to offer or, less positively, [is] it an expression of her inflexibility and her regret at her contribution being undervalued?” (1996:25). This distinction needs to be determined by older people themselves, perhaps in dialogue with their fellow congregants. As with liturgical forms, this dialogue would provide an opportunity for both older women and fellow congregants and clergy to examine the details of the churchgoing experience for older women and perhaps even to hear prophetic voices.

Brierley found that ‘it is only when people get to 85 or over that their contribution [to church] tends to drop significantly’ (2000:30)—well past the age that society in general might assume contributions decline or cease. As we saw in the last three chapters, the interviewees considered themselves to be active members of their congregations, even if their levels of physical activity or frequency of attendance were reduced. For the older woman who is severely restricted due to illness or disability, “[h]er positive acceptance of her situation [can be] the vital gift she gives to

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Rev. Sheila Bishop (Methodist), who suggested the ideas in this paragraph.

<sup>24</sup> Spriggs (1998) discusses the importance and value of evangelical activity among older people.

others” (Chester and Smith, 1996:25)—although it is important not to imply that *any* woman of any age should accept her lot for “our” own comfort. Churches could interview such older women to determine what sorts of contributions they felt capable of making, with both sides of the conversation thinking creatively.

Finally, in the section on the importance of older women to local churches (above), we noted older women’s work of love and their understanding of building the resurrection community here and now.

### iii. Meeting the needs and desires of older women

What can churches do to enhance older women’s experiences of community, connection, and caring and thus meet their most basic needs and desires with respect to the local church? Firstly, they can be aware of newcomers. In our mobile society, many older women are relocating their homes to new towns and cities. Churches can make them welcome not only by greeting them on their first day at worship or another event, but also by asking them to share their church background and to tell of any strong church connections in their past. These may be very significant and might reveal much about a woman’s needs *and* abilities. Then, churches can find out how an older woman newcomer would like to be involved in her new church home—and act on this information.

What will require more effort from churches will be watching for older women who may be feeling excluded or on the margins but not speaking up. Certain long-term members might fall into this category. It isn’t only housebound members who may feel isolated, although special concern should be taken to continue to involve housebound older women in the life of the church community. Older women having a transportation problem or feeling left out of changes at the church may also feel excluded. Sensitive church members and clergy will ask these women what would help them to feel more strongly connected to their churches—and again, take action.

Older women who have lost a partner or special friend are vulnerable, particularly as the majority of older women live alone (often a consequence of this loss). We saw in Chapter 8 that the loss of such significant persons in a woman’s life can damage or sever her sense of belonging and connection. Churches should be prepared to be sensitive and helpful in such circumstances—especially many months after the loss, when the older woman may still be feeling its effects. Help and support could come not only from clergy but also from other older women who have experienced similar losses.



The theologies of ageing of Fischer, Knutsen, Larsen, and King (which we looked at in Chapter 2) all discuss the importance of ritual and the use of appropriate and meaningful scriptural resources.<sup>25</sup> Rituals, they claim, are important to mark the significant events of growing older, such as retirement (from paid employment or from church volunteering), moving home, and passing on a legacy to younger persons:

A great deal of the isolation, loneliness, poverty, and sense of shame in the human experience of aging...has to do with the fact that there are virtually no rituals through which people corporately enact and celebrate the major transitions in life, nor celebrate the reality and presence of the aging and elderly among us. Rather, the process of aging is privatized, hidden away, and even rendered shameful, depriving all persons of any sense that their own futures might have a richly human face (Knutsen, 1995:477).

Ritual, Knutsen says (citing Myerhoff<sup>26</sup>), may 'even bring people unexpectedly into the presence of the living God...And that is something no theology can ever do' (1995:478). This is significant, because it takes these theologies out of the realm of the theoretical and into the world of practice and 'draw[s] people together in order to create fresh perspectives on the transitions of aging. Through such rituals, women and men, old and young, can nurture one another's growth toward a transformed vision of human life and community' (Kimble, et al., 1995:387). In this sense, these theologies of ageing (women) are in keeping with feminist religious praxis in general, from which we have seen the development of numerous liturgies and prayers. Here is an opportunity for churches to work with older women, tapping into their experiences and insights in order to meet their needs and desires. I join in advocating the development of rituals for and with older women in the churches and the involvement of persons of all generations in the churches. As more of these rituals are developed and take place, this could be a rich field for future research, studying how they work for different older women.

Hubbert gives us a final suggestion of what the churches can do to meet the needs of older women:

The expressed desire for more personal contact with their pastors reflected the need of the elderly women to belong to the church community, and to be valued by that community, despite the age-imposed low level of participation or contribution (1991:63).

There was also a strong desire for these pastoral visits from ministers to include 'a formal spiritual dimension' in addition to the purely social (63). Pastoral visits from fellow members or lay leaders, while important, do not entirely fulfil the need to be recognised and valued by the clergy.

---

<sup>25</sup> For example, '[t]he biblical account of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi and their loyalty and love is an empowering example for women facing widowhood or who have chosen to remain unmarried' (Larsen, 1995:250).

Although I did not set out to examine the spirituality or faith lives of older women *per se*, this is an area that was hinted at by a number of the interviewees. These women mentioned either a continuing need for religious teaching in older age (e.g. Rebecca, Aleen) or a sense that they themselves continue to gain new insights about their faith (e.g. Millie, Veeve). It has been suggested that ‘many churches pay attention only to maintaining people’s current levels of religious experience and faith rather than encouraging spiritual growth. In other words, churches do little to prepare people spiritually for the rigors of old age’ (McFadden, 1999:145). I would challenge the idea that churches are even doing the basics of maintaining older people’s current levels of religious experience and faith. Churches need to address the spiritual growth of *all* people and to teach *all* people about the spiritual implications of ageing. While I strongly agree with this, I also want to emphasise that older people in particular need to be targeted with and involved in developing such teaching, so that it does not end up being directed only at younger and middle-aged persons. There is a growing awareness of this need, and a number of organisations, resource centres, dioceses, researchers, and authors are working diligently to meet it. Nevertheless, there is much work still to be done, and training of clergy is a key element of this.

If churches are honest with themselves, then they should ask (as I did in Chapter 1) why older women continue to attend services and meetings and to support the church structure in so many ways when the churches themselves do not explicitly validate their experience or affirm them as persons and as Christians. If the answer is that older women find community, connection, and caring despite the church’s ageism and neglect (and, in some cases, veiled hostility), then the next question is, how long can such a situation continue? Wise church leaders and members will act now, if only for their own sake. As we will see in the next chapter, tomorrow’s older women (the younger and mid-life women of today) are not likely to be so forgiving of or loyal to systems that do not affirm them. While issues such as women’s ordination and inclusive language—areas where the critical edge of feminist theology has been addressing in/exclusion of women—may not have been important to my interviewees, they are likely to be significant for future generations of older women.

Throughout this project, I have been concerned with how the information and conclusions might be made available to a wider, non-academic audience. To this end, I have made presentations of my research to the Christian Council on Ageing (Eldred, 2001), the York chapter of the Association of Retired and Persons Over 50, and the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women’s 10<sup>th</sup> World Assembly. I am a member of the Women’s Network of

---

<sup>26</sup> Myerhoff, B, 1992, *Remembered Lives: The Work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Older*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Mich.



the Methodist Church's Task Group on Older Women,<sup>27</sup> and I participated in a symposium convened by The Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy.

I have networked with interested individuals who are now or have previously worked in the fields of older persons and/or the churches, or are themselves older and seeking to increase their understanding. I have established contacts with church-based constituencies, such as Methodist Homes for the Aged, in order to promulgate my findings to the people who will be able to put them to good use: the churches themselves.<sup>28</sup> While seeking to contribute to an academic discussion, I have also striven to contribute to a growing discussion among church practitioners and older persons.<sup>29</sup> Largely, the response to my findings has been a strong sense of recognition, a 'Yes—that's exactly what I've seen in my church/experienced in my life' reaction. I have had correspondence from various non-academics, working with either older people or churches or both,<sup>30</sup> who have said they want and need the sort of information this project is bringing forth. It has been challenging to attempt to bring these two audiences—academic and public—into contact in this thesis in a coherent way (Davies, 1999:228).<sup>31</sup> And, that way is directed towards a practical theology of older women.

#### **10.4 A Christian feminist practical theology of older women**

In Chapter 2, I raised the following questions: Should there be a unique Christian feminist theology of older women, or should the experiences, praxis, and insights of older women contribute to a wider (and growing) "cumulative understanding" of feminist theologies? Is it possible to construct a single theology (or spirituality) of older women, when their selves and their experiences are so diverse? Do we risk universalising older women in the process and thus silencing them in new ways? Put another way, is it better to have a separate feminist theology of older women (emphasising difference) or to incorporate it into the more general feminist theologies (emphasising diversity)? In short, are older women sufficiently, accurately, and explicitly accounted for already, and if not, how can we ensure that they are?

---

<sup>27</sup> The aims of the Task Group are '[t]o acknowledge the needs of older women at different stages in their lives and in different circumstances; to celebrate the contribution of older women in the life of today's Church; [and] to provide resources for older women to enable their personal development and spiritual growth' (*Women's Network News*, Autumn 2001, page 1).

<sup>28</sup> Methodist Homes for the Aged are planning to publish a condensed, "popular" version of this thesis in the near future (with myself as the named author).

<sup>29</sup> For instance, by attending the conference, "Valuing Ageing: meeting the spiritual needs of older people" (November 2001) and by presenting a workshop at the forthcoming "International Conference on Ageing, Spirituality, and Well-being" (July 2002).

<sup>30</sup> For example, Rev. Jean Mayland of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Ms. Pauline Main of Churches Together in England, and Martin Green of Counsel and Care.

<sup>31</sup> Davies emphasises the importance of bearing in mind audiences of so-called user groups when writing up ethnographic research, because '[m]ost of them...look to such research to enlarge their own understanding and provide them with another perspective on issues that are of interest and concern' (1999:228). By interacting with them during the research process, they serve as a check on the validity of the researcher's findings. Having dissemination in mind is also one of the key objectives of feminist

We have seen that there are a small number of theologians (not all of them feminist) who are constructing theologies of older people and of older women, theologies that propose that the experiences of older age are not fully accounted for by existing theologies. In some cases, these theologians have called for new practices by the churches, for instance, the creation of new rituals. But, do any of these theologies contain a call for committed praxis by the Christian churches?

In this section, I will explain why I believe a Christian feminist practical theology of older women usefully resolves these questions, and then proceed to name the elements that would constitute such a theology.

#### **10.4.1 Why have such a theology?**

Knutsen reminds us that no single theology is likely to encompass all of the experiences and truths of women within different Christian traditions, let alone all religious (i.e. non-Christian) communities:

Rather, it is precisely in and through their enactment of a mutually critical, mutually illuminating, and mutually enlivening dialogue between the particularities of their situation and the particularities of their religious traditions that [new and diverse] theologies open persons to the possibility of an enriched awareness of the ultimate context of all life: the encompassing reality of God (1995:462).

Different theologies bring different nuances of understanding and recognition of different experiences, but they do not, she says, mean that there are different Gods. We needed to determine if existing Christian feminist theologies specifically address and are relevant to older churchgoing women in Britain today. We have answered this query by examining the positive and negative experiences older women have of community, connection, and caring, and seeing where the theologies do and do not account for those experiences.

Should there be a unique feminist theology of older women? I believe so, for the following reasons. First, feminist theology has tended to focus upon issues that are not pertinent to the ordinary, older woman in the pew. When discussing church life, my interviewees did not mention leadership, inclusive language, hermeneutics, or “lost and recovered” women from Christianity’s past. They did not speak of institutional sexism at any level of the church, nor did it seem to have been something they encountered in their own experience. Older women’s issues with Christianity and the churches may be more grassroots and personal: how to negotiate being a newcomer, how to find meaning in church life after retirement from voluntary activities,

---

research, as such research aims to raise consciousness and to change systems of oppression. An excellent guide to research dissemination is Osborn and Willcocks (1990).



how to stay connected if transportation and mobility become issues. Feminist theologians are not, currently, speaking to older women's concerns.

Second, and arising from this, is the fact that feminist theology has succeeded in marginalising older women. Speaking for marginalised and excluded persons is a key issue in both Christianity and feminism; yet, Christian feminist theology is guilty of excluding older women. of being as ageist as the institutional churches as a whole. Older women very often feel marginalised, both inside and outside the church. Yet Christian feminist theologians have not recognised this and addressed it, despite it being obvious territory for them. Here is ageism at work. In the best light, older women have simply been ignored. In a more sinister light, the dissenting voices of older women may have been deliberately silenced by feminist theologians who have preferred to be overwhelmingly enthusiastic about community, connection, and caring. I believe that it is more the former than the latter, a case of oversight rather than cover-up.

Third, older women are not only different in certain ways from younger and midlife women; they are also different from each other. As Fischer writes,

Though our stereotyping of the elderly had led us to view them as basically similar, there is probably no other point in life when personal diversity is so apparent. A lifetime of accumulated differences in experience, education, and social opportunities has sharpened individuality. As we grow older we become more ourselves, more unique (1998:14).

I, too, discovered this during the course of my research.

Older women have not concerned themselves with feminist theology because it has not explicitly addressed them as either audience or co-creator of theory. Older women have not received any message that what the theologians are doing has any relevance to them, either as ordinary women or as older women. The issues older women do hear raised do not concern them or reflect their thinking. When feminist theology's issues *have* intersected with those of older women (e.g. connection), it has gone unremarked by both sides. It seems that neither older women nor feminist theologians have taken any notice of one another and do not see themselves as having anything in common—when, as this study shows, they have much in common. Feminist theologies of community, connection, and caring speak very clearly to older women's experiences and ideas, yet this is by default rather than by design. How much stronger both sides would be if older women and feminist theologians worked together, supporting each other's goals! How much better for the future of the church!

In addition to the main research questions proposed at the outset of this thesis, I asked two other questions that would serve to bring the theoretical query into an empirical context. I will answer these now.

Does the Christian faith in theory (e.g. beliefs) and in practice (e.g. churchgoing) support older women's continued role in their communities, both church and non-church? I believe it does. The Christian faith requires that all persons, older women not excepted, participate in community, connection, and caring. In practice, local churches (many, even if not all) strive to make opportunities for older women to practice these three dimensions of faith. However, sometimes the churches fail or fall short of what older women need and want—we saw this in Dollie's and Karen's reports. We heard that some older women consciously strive to take their Christian-based ideas into their non-church communities, such as family and neighbourhood and volunteer/charitable groups, and that those ideas often are warmly received and accepted. Despite the problems and occasional failings—even the large ones—for most of the women I spoke with there was a sense of support from Christianity for their continued presence in communities. Even so, I think the churches, especially corporately, could be more vocal about supporting older people, especially women, in their various non-church communities where they are more likely to encounter ageism.

Secondly, I wanted to know if being a part of communities (especially local churches) supported and confirmed the Christian beliefs held by many older women. This is less easy to discern. Positive experiences of community, connection, and caring do seem to exemplify and reinforce the truth of Christian faith for many older women. We saw this in the accounts of Barbara, Tess, Fran, Edith, and Gloria. However, there are times when older women confront a society that devalues them and they experience disillusionment and doubt. (This happened to Aleen when she was accosted by teenagers when out walking after dark.) But the women did not give up their faith as a consequence; rather, they find it becomes a support to help them cope with these failings.

In Chapter 2, I queried whether anything could be gained by distinguishing a *Christian feminist* practical theology. I gave a provisional “yes”, saying such a specific sort of practical theology would foreground concerns that are particularly feminist in nature. It would consciously account for women's experiences and issues within the Christian life and tradition (and, as we learned in Chapter 2, women's experiences are a valid foundation for theology); it would raise awareness of past and present wrongs and work to correct them; and it would seek to liberate women and, by so doing, all people and the church itself. In the case of this thesis, a Christian feminist practical theology would say something unique about the experiences, views, and praxis of older churchgoing women, and use these to call the church to a new standard of working with



and showing concern for older women and all members of the Christian community. Finally, it would recognise that change and development will be ongoing, and that the theology itself is always provisional.

Now, after reviewing the literature and analysing new data, we can say that there is much to be gained by distinguishing a Christian feminist practical theology of older women. The reasons are that such a theology: (1) corrects the lack of attention to older women within feminist theology; (2) offers a synthesis of feminist theological thought about community, connection, and caring with theological thought about older age; (3) builds upon the work of those theologians (such as Knutsen, Larsen, Leder, Fischer, and King) who are addressing older people and their concerns; (4) places older women in the role of subjects, rather than objects, and recognises that they have unique concerns and practices; (5) addresses large numbers of people in the churches, i.e. ordinary older women; and (6) focuses on praxis. Also, by taking older women's experiences as valid and important, the field of practical theology would continue to make up for its historical lack of engagement with feminism and with women (E Graham, 1993; Walton, 2001).

#### **10.4.2 Important elements of the theology**

As I noted in Chapter 2, some of the theologians developing theologies of ageing take certain intellectual constructs as their starting point and then seek to apply these to the situation(s) of older women. For example, Knutsen works with the Christian idea of the trinity and eschatology, and Larsen starts with sexual dualism and bodiliness, two primary issues for feminists. Fischer, however, begins with experience to develop theology. I have attempted to employ both approaches in this project. First, I have taken the intellectual constructs of community, connection, and caring as outlined by feminist theologians and attempted to see what relevance they have for older women. Then, I have taken the ideas and experiences of older women and attempted to use these to move us towards a Christian feminist practical theology of ageing, one that incorporates these three dimensions.

With a Christian feminist practical theology of older women, there would be a rich, deep level of discussion about community, connection, and caring, one that reflected on and incorporated older women's praxis. As I see it, such a theology would explicitly account for issues of relevance and importance to older women. Some of the issues revealed within this project are: time (e.g. living a longer life, and end-of-life issues); inactivity versus activity (i.e. being versus doing); belonging versus marginalisation; fellowship; giving and receiving caring (e.g. care in the community); reflecting on one's life (including integration and forgiveness); the family and the local church as key communities; autonomy and identity; the body; loss and gain; timeless values versus a changing society; and exploring and/or confirming faith through the above

issues. Not all of these were investigated in detail in this thesis, but each was either discussed by the interviewees or suggested by other researchers.

A practical theology would go a step further than merely accounting for these issues, however. After examining them, a practical theology would emphasise praxis, both as input and as outcomes.

We reviewed a great deal of the input older women have to offer when we examined their statements in Chapters 7, 8, and 9. For example, we learned about older women's use of and contribution to social capital; their historical and social knowledge as a result of years of living and experience; their commitment, both to various communities and to people who challenged them or were unlike them; their struggles and successes at maintaining identity and autonomy; how they cope with loss in all of its forms; how they work out reciprocity in caring relationships; and how they work to overcome their marginalisation in society and in the local church. As for outcomes, a practical theology would call churches, especially local churches, to act. Many suggestions were made in the section, "A different set of practices" (above). One of the main tasks the churches can set for themselves is to lead the way in countering ageism:

The element in the social situation which calls for a response from the churches is not the inadequacy of the welfare state to meet the needs of the older population; it is rather the inadequacy of the ideas of human ageing that shape both individual attitudes and institutional policy, within the churches and outside them (Howse, 1999:56).

People do still occasionally look to the churches for moral leadership and this is an area where they could be outspoken advocates.

The theology would call for the involvement of all ages within church communities, because integration of older people is something they desire and because sharing between generations is helpful for all. Concerted efforts would be made to have older people "doing" their own theology, and not just younger researchers and theologians. As we have seen, there is a national-level awareness of the importance of keeping older people involved in the church and of addressing their needs and desires. However, this has yet to move down to the local level to any noticeable degree. Therefore, churches need to make changes corporately through clergy training and through more meaningful encouragement to congregations. And, more work needs to be done by organisations such as the Christian Council on Ageing to help local churches reach more people, as only a small number of older people are able to attend national events.

A Christian feminist practical theology of older women would recognise the importance of rituals related to the ageing process (socially, physically, and spiritually), although it would not dictate any set forms but rather encourage communities to create or discover what is appropriate



for them. As we have seen, there are a number of rituals already in existence. Workshops on how to create rituals could be run by experienced leaders of events or by liturgists, each working in different ways to help congregations create their own customs and rites.

Finally, the theology would necessarily be provisional, always seeking and adapting to new data. Not only do we have much to learn from today's older women, but, as I will discuss in the next chapter, there are upcoming generations of older women whose experiences and insights are likely to dictate a rethinking of whatever theology is "done" today.

A few theologians are proactive in including older women in research and theorising, and we can expect to see more in the future for two reasons: feminist theologians themselves are ageing, and the profile of older women in general is being raised. When feminist theologians work in partnership with older women—when feminist theologians *are* older women and older women *are* regarded as theologians—then older women will surely experience the feelings Ursula King describes:

[T]he word empowerment in feminist writing has come to mean the recognition of one's own inner capacities, one's strength and ability in going out and changing situations and social relations, in influencing and shaping not only one's own life, but also the world around us. It is also linked to a deeper spiritual experience in feeling more hopeful and strong, in being affirmed and encouraged by a greater spiritual power that enables us to grow, be healed and transformed' (1999b:112).

Once older women begin to experience this spiritual empowerment, then our society will be moving towards reducing and eliminating ageism and celebrating ageful lives. This would add yet another element to a Christian feminist practical theology.

### 10.5 Summary

In this chapter, we have reviewed and amplified some of the key findings of this project. In the course of this, we have once again seen that although many of older women's experiences of community, connection, and caring *are* reflected in Christian feminist theologies, this appears to be more by default than by design. There are other research projects that have begun to open up the area of older women's spirituality and church experiences, yet we have only begun to scratch the surface of what could be learned. I have singled out the local churches as communities of importance to many older women, and suggested some practical ways that churches can engage with this constituency that is also important to them. I believe that there are mutual benefits to be gained by closer and more attentive work between churches and older women.

Finally, I have stated why I believe that there can and should be a Christian feminist practical theology of older women, and outlined the key elements that such a theology would contain.

This theology is necessarily a beginning and provisional; yet, it provides a foundation on which to build.

But what does the future hold, both for this embryonic Christian feminist practical theology of older women and for the churches? This will be part of what we consider in the final chapter of this thesis.



## Chapter 11—Conclusion and looking to the future

It is amazing how things we think are conclusions get downgraded to hints with the passage of time!  
—John Shelby Spong<sup>1</sup>

### 11.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will review the research project as presented in this thesis, beginning with the questions investigated and moving on to the key findings, contributions to the fields of study, and limitations. I will then discuss what avenues of research might be pursued in the future. With respect to the latter, we will examine in some detail the characteristics of future generations of older Christian churchgoing women—women who may turn out to be very different from the older women interviewed here. Any of the proposed avenues for future research is likely to require changes to our Christian feminist practical theology of older women, a result that should be welcomed.

### 11.2 Review of the project

In this section, I will remind us of the research questions the project set out to investigate, and then review how this thesis followed the project as it unfolded. During the course of this review, we will once more encounter the key findings of community, connection, and caring in older churchgoing women's lives and see how these led to a proposal for a Christian feminist practical theology of older women. I will then state what other contributions the project has made, as well as discuss its limitations.

#### 11.2.1 The research questions and key findings

The research questions I investigated were:

- What do Anglo-American Christian feminist theologians have to say about older women?
- Are the theologians' ideas of community, connection, and caring relevant to older churchgoing women in Britain today?
- What is distinctive about older women's experiences and insights of these processes?
- Do older women see continuity or discontinuity between their experiences of community, connection, and caring and their Christian faith?
- Finally, should there be a unique Christian feminist theology of older women, based on these three dimensions, and if so, what shape would it take?

To provide the context needed to answer these questions, in the first two chapters I presented the current situation of older women in British society as a whole and within the institutional church in particular. Ageism, how it functions, and its particular severity for women were part

of this discussion, all of which pointed to the reasonableness of undertaking a study of older churchgoing women in Britain today. I also gave the background, key arguments, and important issues of Christian feminist theology. We learned that feminist theologians, as a group, have not, to date, given much consideration to older women, providing further support for undertaking this study. I stated my belief that there should be useful outcomes from research such as this, and suggested that practical theology could offer the necessary structure for bringing together the three key feminist theological themes of community, connection, and caring with the praxis of older churchgoing women.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I explored community, connection, and caring in general and with respect to older women, using information from social gerontology, feminist research, and feminist theology. We saw how closely the three concepts are related, and the importance of each to the lives of women in general and of older women in particular. And, we learned that there are both positive and negative outcomes of each dimension within an older woman's life. Particular questions we hoped the empirical data would address were identified. Finally, I presented my provisional definitions of community as "a social place", of connection as "a relationship that occurs in community", and of caring as "the active realisation of connection".

Chapter 6 reconstructed my journey through this project, and discussed my involvement with the methodological disciplines and concerns of feminist scholarship, theology and religious studies, and sociology. Here, I also reviewed the methods I employed, and in the related appendices presented my interview schedule and a combined profile of the interviewee group.

In Chapters 7, 8, and 9, we heard the interviewees' voices as they discussed their experiences of community, connection, and caring. We saw the deep significance and complexity of these dimensions in their lives, with most of their examples coming from two dominant communities: the family and the local church. Much of what the women had to say supported the ideas of the feminist theologians presented earlier. As a result of this information, I refined my original definitions of community, connection, and caring, saying that community is "a social place where meaningful things happen", that connection is "coming together in relationship", and that caring is "the active realisation of connection in community".

For the interviewees, being established as members of communities ("insiders") allowed them to make contributions and to extract benefits. Among the benefits of being part of a connection within a community were a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. In the case of the local church, a unique benefit to be gained was fellowship with other Christians. However, a number of the women had had unsatisfactory experiences with communities and connections, especially

---

<sup>1</sup> Spong (2001:xix).



if they had seen themselves as newcomers or as marginalised. This could be particularly painful if the problems occurred within the local church because of the emotional aspect that a woman's connections within a community had. Further, the ability to sustain connections or to make new ones was often affected by the ageing process: broken or lost connections were a common consequence of growing older. Although new connections could be made, being identified by others solely as an "older woman", or having mobility or health problems, could make this a challenge.

Both giving and receiving caring were important to the interviewees, and a balance was often achieved through reciprocity. Caring was something they took great pride in having done throughout their lives and that they were hoping to be able to continue in older age. However, being older women meant struggling with the fact that their ongoing caring roles and activities often went unrecognised by those around them. Even at the local church, the interviewees sometimes found it challenging to balance the images of carer and recipient.

In Chapter 10, we discussed that, although older women's experiences of community, connection, and caring *are* reflected in Christian feminist theologies, this appears to be more by default than by design. In addition, older women's experiences challenge the generally enthusiastic assertions of feminist theologians due to their mixture of positive and negative circumstances. I focused again on the particular community of the local church, where too often older women's contributions go unrecognised and where the very old or frail may be sidelined—with the best of intentions but to everyone's loss (Chester and Smith, 1996:49). To correct this, I suggested some practical ways that churches can engage with this constituency to their mutual benefit. Finally, I stated why I believe that there can and should be a separate Christian feminist practical theology of older women, and outlined the key elements that such a theology would contain. Most important to this theology is a call for a commitment to praxis as both input and outcomes.

### **11.2.2 Contributions to the fields of study**

In this thesis, I have brought together the three dimensions of community, connection, and caring—all central to the thinking of Christian feminist theologians—in a new way, by examining the meaning they have in older churchgoing women's lives. We have seen nuances and distinctions that were previously not considered, at least with respect to this constituency of women. If, as Gross says, '[m]ost feminist religious thinkers...seek ways to enhance the quality of relational, communal existence' (1996:240-241), they would do well to examine older churchgoing women's experiences for ideas—and to remember these women when making calls to new and renewed life. In addition, by illuminating instances of the churches' ageism and offering suggestions for local congregations that could lead to better practices with older

women, I have brought this constituency within the realm of practical theology. This theology is necessarily a beginning and provisional; yet, it provides a foundation on which to build.

In the course of this project, I have produced original empirical data through conducting interviews with older women. Although there has been a groundswell of interest in older people, and older women in particular, in the last few years, there is still much work to be done, and these data help us along the way. Taken as a whole, this project has confirmed the value of research among older women, a result that is pertinent to feminist scholarship and feminist theology, as well as to social gerontology.

As noted in Chapter 10, I have presented various findings from my research to several interested groups. In all instances, the findings were enthusiastically received, as well as being a starting point for much discussion about audience members' own experiences as and with older women in churches—as newcomers, as repositories of local church and social history, and as dedicated workers on all manner of church projects. In turn, audience feedback has helped me consider new possibilities for research (discussed below) and provided new understandings of my own data. For instance, it was suggested to me that one reason why being carers was so significant for the interviewees was because this generation(s) of women had fewer other non-traditional roles available to them.

As noted at the outset of this thesis, this project was multidisciplinary in nature. Feminist scholarship, feminist theology, sociology, and social gerontology all influenced the resources drawn on, methodologies and methods employed, and interpretations of the empirical data gathered. In addition, practical theology was drafted in as a means of bringing together both the various issues involved and the concern I had that there be some practical, usable suggestions for churches and other parties interested in these same issues. The fact that a range of disciplines was successfully brought together to study some broad research questions demonstrates the usefulness of employing (or at least considering) a multidisciplinary approach for particular projects.

### **11.2.3 Evaluation of the project's limitations**

As Ramsey and Blieszner point out, 'denominational identity is...an important component [in how one expresses one's spirituality]' (2000:44). I would add that it is also an important component of one's local church experience, as each denomination's "style" shapes how, when, and where its adherents will interact to establish community and connections.

In this project, I interviewed women who were churchgoing Protestants—primarily Methodists, along with a few Anglicans. We do not know about other Protestant groups, Roman Catholics,



Orthodox Christians, or non-churchgoing believers, let alone non-Christians. Additional data about women from these other groups might alter the findings, and thus the interpretations and conclusions I made. Furthermore, mine was not a comparative study; however, as more research is completed, then comparative analysis could and should be done between the different denominations and, ultimately, between older women and older men. The challenge of making choices such as denominational focus signals the fact that there is a vast amount of work still to be done in researching older churchgoing women, their experiences of community, connection, and caring, and feminist theologies.

Another limitation of this project is that my sample of interviewees was entirely white and more or less of the same social class and background.<sup>2</sup> Thane suggests that older age is experienced differently by women who are in different economic or social classes (2000:246), so this important variable remains unexplored here. Likewise, there are other demographic factors that could be separated out and taken into account. These include (but are not limited to) the specific ages of the interviewees (e.g. “young-old” versus “old-old”), the physical location of their churches (e.g. city centre versus suburban), the size and demographics of their congregations, and the age and interests of the clergy of these churches (Huber, 1987:69). For example, with respect to the age of the interviewees, it might have been useful to select only one subset of all women aged 65 and over, such as women 65-84 or 85 and over. This could then have shown more similarities of generation. However, as there was so little research available about older women of any age, this was not a poor choice on my part.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it is an area for further study.

Taken as a whole, the results of such investigations named could lead to different agendas for the different denominations, types of churches, and socio-cultural groups (Huber, 1987:70). For example, Reddie (2001a, 2001b) has taken steps to appreciate the distinctiveness of African and African-Caribbean congregations within Protestant denominations, the experience of racial prejudice among Black elders, and the contributions of Black elders to the nurture of Black Christian youth.

As for the data gathered here, as is always the case with interviewing as a method, we only learned what certain willing participants were able and inclined to disclose (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998:136).<sup>4</sup> Some of the women knew me fairly well and probably felt comfortable revealing certain things about their lives; but others did not know me at all, and it would be only natural for them to be less open. This does not discount the value of the data collected; it merely

---

<sup>2</sup> I did not ask the interviewees about their social class, so this is an unsubstantiated observation.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Small-scale research has its limitations, therefore, but is also able to make a significant contribution in under-studied areas’ (Blaxter, et al., 1996:200).

<sup>4</sup> Were I to repeat the study, I might choose to interview fewer women and to seek some interpretive feedback on the interview transcripts from them. This method has been employed by some feminist researchers (e.g. Franks, 1998), but is not without its problems (see Chapter 6).

reminds us that, as always, our knowledge is incomplete. Unfortunately, I had no access to the ideas and experiences of women who were more reticent and therefore declined to be interviewed. They might have had equally valuable (and possibly different) information to share. For those audiences of this thesis who wish to use the findings in practical ways (e.g. churches, clergy, and pastoral carers), this is a red flag to remind them to use this information as a starting point only, and then to query specific older women about their individual experiences, needs, and desires.

I did not discuss in any depth with more than one or two of the interviewees that I was interested in feminist theology, or that I might be attempting to develop a feminist theology of older women. Had I done so, I suspect that fewer women would have wished to speak with me, either put off by the idea of theology or by feminism or both. I did not ask the interviewees direct questions about sexism in the churches, which as we saw earlier in the thesis is a key concern of feminist theology. While this could be construed as a flaw, I deliberately did not bring up this subject because I did not wish to prejudice the women's responses. Most of the interviewees did not seem to take a political view of their churches, with respect to either ageism or sexism. And, as I stated in the last chapter, the fact that the interviewees did not bring up these subjects on their own indicates, to me, that these were not burning issues for them. Certainly, these questions could be asked—and indeed have been, by others (e.g. Hubbert, 1991; Brierley, 2000).

As Davies remarks, 'interviewing...is better understood as a process in which interviewer and interviewee are both involved in developing understanding [and] in constructing their knowledge of the social world' (1999:97-98). In light of this fact, I do not wish to claim too much for the findings I have discovered and for how I have interpreted them. It is possible that the interviewees and I were not moving towards a single, undeniable truth (Davies, 1999:104); rather, we were considering what was true at the time for these particular women.

Finally, there is the ultimately unanswerable question raised by Ribbens:

Can the research process foster empowerment, via the articulation and wider communication of people's own understandings of their lives[?]....Or will our presence as researchers in relationships with interviewees, acting as the personalized interface between the expression of private meanings and their ultimate reception by the powerful audience of public knowledge production, mean that we can only offer a semblance of hearing, contributing in the end to an even more subtle subversion of private understandings? (1998:37).

As one of the aims of feminist research is to empower women—and in this case, to empower older women—has this purpose been achieved? Or, has it been hindered in some way? I can only hope that, through diligence on my part, it has been more the former than the latter.



### 11.3 Areas for future research and thought

There are a number of areas for future research that were either unexplored or only briefly touched upon by this project. As suggested in the last section, it would be well worth investigating older women's experiences of community, connection, and caring within denominations other than Methodist and Anglican. For example, it was suggested to me that because of the structure of the Roman Catholic Church and its parishes, older Catholic women might be more inclined to find community in church-affiliated service organisations than in the local congregation itself.<sup>5</sup> And, it may be that community, connection, and caring are experienced differently by older women of non-Christian faith traditions. As our body of knowledge about older women of faith increases, we will need to expand our horizons to encompass non-white, non-Anglo-American, non-Northern, non-Western, and non-Christian women. Also, non-churchgoing women (whether nominal or lapsed Christians or with no religious affiliation whatsoever) should be heard from. These investigations, and the resultant comparisons, are worthy projects for future research.

Some of the churches that my interviewees were connected with were neighbourhood-based ("parish type"), while others were destination churches ("gathered type"). This was not necessarily a factor of whether they were Methodist or Anglican, as both denominations were represented in both types of church. It might be worthwhile to delve into this variable more deeply, especially considering older people's concerns with mobility and transportation, and their dread of being newcomers. For example, how does each type of church operate with respect to older women newcomers? Does a parish church have special gifts or concerns that a gathered church does not, and vice versa?

All of the interviewees for this project had regular contact with their fellow congregants. It would be beneficial to study older women who are housebound as a particular group, as their experiences of community, connection, and caring may well involve different sorts of people and frequency of contact. How do they "do church" under these circumstances? Are they able to find fellowship? Likewise, a comparative study of older churchgoing women from a range of socio-economic backgrounds might bring up differences among them as to how important their different communities are for offering connection and caring.

I did not interview any clergy for this project, although I did speak informally with a number of clergywomen and men about it. They were excited to know that research among older women was being done, and hoped that the results would be made available to them. It would be worthwhile to conduct a survey of clergy within the next few years to see whether the burgeoning amount of material being produced is actually reaching their hands, and whether or

---

<sup>5</sup> Pauline Main, *Churches Together in England*, private correspondence.

not they are acting on it. If so, which elements are helpful or not helpful? If not, what are the constraints that prevent them from accessing and using this information?

We have seen how useful the work of social gerontologists is towards gaining understandings of older people's lives, which in turn could (and should) influence theological thought. I would suggest that feminist theologians who are interested in older women establish links with social gerontologists to keep abreast of developments in the field. New knowledge and new key issues that arise there could stimulate new directions in feminist theology. In turn, the theologians' research could point social gerontologists towards new interpretations of their own findings. Likewise, Christian feminist theologians and those who explore feminist spirituality should be in closer dialogue. There is much common ground, such as the important topic of interconnectedness, where the two groups could work productively together. By exploring older women's values, for example, there could be new material for considering what "faith", "beliefs", and "spirituality" mean to us all.

### **11.3.1 Future generations of older women**

A number of authors (e.g. Gillespie, 1992, 1995; Howse, 1999) have commented that tomorrow's older people are likely to be different from today's.<sup>6</sup> As a result, 'our present planning for old age had better take into account the probability that we will be dealing with different kinds of people and conditions' (Troll, 1984:33). From a socio-cultural perspective, 'evidence points to a considerable increase in the future population of divorced elderly women who are better educated, have had higher incomes and professional careers, and whose status has been relatively independent of men' (Maxwell, 1988:83). These older women, Maxwell says, will be 'more likely to be self-reliant' (90). However, divorce—either for an older woman herself or for her children—may mean greater loneliness, as important loved ones are no longer part of the family "community" (Brierley, 2000:41). Broken and blended families, as well as untraditional families (e.g. lesbian couples) may bring special challenges to the pastoral care of tomorrow's older woman—and, equally, opportunities for older women to share their experience with younger women facing the same challenges.

The women I interviewed were, for the most part, part of the generation Walrath refers to as "Strivers". For them, 'the stable world is normal. Their approach to living depends on the world continuing as it has been in the past. Whatever change they may experience, they feel that someday, somehow things will quiet down and "get back to normal"' (1987:80). We can expect tomorrow's older women, however, to be used to living with a rapid rate of change throughout and in all aspects of their lives. For instance, there is likely to be a wider range of 'employment

---

<sup>6</sup> Generational and cohort differences are discussed extensively by Gillespie (1992, 1995) and featured by Jerrome (1992).



patterns and family/household duties of younger women today' (Maynard, 1999: 72-73), compared to their mothers and grandmothers.<sup>7</sup>

A question raised in Chapter 1 was why older women continue to be loyal to traditional modes of religious observance, such as regular attendance at worship services, when the churches do so little, corporately or locally, to validate their experience and to affirm them as persons and as Christians. A strong possibility that emerged from this research is that today's older woman is not concerned about ageism or sexism at institutional levels. As long as her local church experience is satisfactory (something she judges on the basis of her connections with the individuals there), then she is content to stay. Or, she may stay with her church despite unsatisfactory experiences because her generation extolled such loyalty. But, will tomorrow's older woman be as likely to "make the best of it" if she is not affirmed, or as likely to turn a blind eye if her contributions are not accepted and valued?

Among the things that will distinguish the upcoming generations of churchgoing (or church-affiliated) older women, women who are now middle-aged or young, is how they will be involved in their local churches.<sup>8</sup> For the older women I spoke with, there was a tendency to slot themselves into whatever tasks were required of them or wherever the need lay. Younger women, however, are already making their own deliberate choices about their contributions,<sup>9</sup> and may be likely to continue to do so as they age (Gillespie, 1992)—and these choices may conflict with what individual congregations need to survive.

For instance, Gillespie says that women aged between 40 and 59 at the time of her study (who would have been between 45 and 64 at the time I conducted my research—in other words, just below my interviewees' ages) 'are sharply aware of the contrast between the ideal of selfless volunteering they were brought up to expect of themselves, and the self-fulfillment they now feel free to pursue in church as in other areas of life' (1995:39). In other words, tomorrow's older woman will expect to be involved in shaping her church community to help foster her own spiritual needs and desires, rather than merely accepting it as handed down to her (Gillespie, 1995:119). Further, rather than aligning themselves with a particular denomination or doctrine as today's older women do, tomorrow's older women may adapt different elements of various denominations, spiritualities, and philosophies to their own 'unique self-centred spiritual perspectives and requirements' (Exon, 1999:198), or they may be more prepared to switch

---

<sup>7</sup> While Maynard raises the importance of studying these so that younger women do not suffer financially in the future, she does not say whether the patterns and duties are likely to be the same as or different from those of today's older women.

<sup>8</sup> Again, Richter and Francis (1998) discuss the *present* needs of the middle-aged (i.e. Baby Boomers) and the young (i.e. Baby Busters) vis-à-vis the churches.

denominations—or even religions. They may, for example, be drawn together by a ‘common issue, interest, preference, or group identity...[such as a] shared ethnicity or sexual orientation [or] shared political agenda or activist project’ (Serene Jones, 2000:133). Another distinction is that, having grown up in more mixed-sex social groups, the older women of tomorrow may be less inclined to attend sex-segregated or gender-identified activities at church, preferring joint activities—including opportunities for fellowship—with men (Chester and Smith, 1996:33).

The social presence and the theology of the Christian church during the formative years of upcoming generations of older women will have an influence on not only what they know about the faith but also how they perceive the role of the church in their lives. Both will be more varied than they were for the generations of older women I interviewed.<sup>10</sup> For example, Sunday churchgoing and church fellowship groups will be less a part of both childhood and adulthood;<sup>11</sup> the church will have had a diminished presence in the mass media (Bruce, 2001:202); religious education may have taken place only in school (if the woman did not attend Sunday school) and will have been more multi-faith than exclusively Christian-based; the women will have grown up in an increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-faith (or no faith) society; and they will have been influenced by the greater tendency towards a “pick-and-mix” consumer approach to religion and spirituality, rather than a wholesale acceptance of one faith.

Overall, this will mean less individual knowledge of the Christian faith and its traditions and doctrines, and less uniform understanding between individuals—in other words, a lack of a common language about church experience and faith (McFadden and Gerl, 1990:38), a language still shared by today’s older women. In this respect, future generations of older women will be more different than they are alike, having more diverse and, perhaps, interrupted church careers—or none at all. What will they have in common to shape their faith communities?<sup>12</sup> Both they and their churches will need to address this creatively. One place to begin is with today’s older women, whose knowledge of Christian beliefs and traditions makes them a valuable resource—one the churches will rapidly lose if they do not employ them now to help teach newcomers and younger members the faith.

---

<sup>9</sup> Younger women’s view of what constitutes worthy church work can have a negative effect on present cohorts of older women, who may feel that younger women do not view their contributions of “institutional maintenance” with proper regard (Gillespie, 1992:201, 215).

<sup>10</sup> Howse notes that present research findings are unclear as to whether religious commitment among older people is a generational effect or a life-cycle effect (1999:29). This uncertainty gives yet more reason for continued research as the generations age.

<sup>11</sup> ‘[T]he pattern for England overall is of a decline in church attendance from 12 to 7.5 percent of the adult population [over the past twenty years]’ (Bruce, 2001:195).

<sup>12</sup> This question was raised by Rev. Sheila Bishop in private conversation.



Will there even be many older women in the churches in the decades ahead?<sup>13</sup> Many will either not believe or not align themselves with a church. It will be important for society as a whole to consider ‘the aspirations to spiritual fulfilment of many [persons] who are outside the structure of any formal religion’ (Chester and Smith, 1996:46). The language of “spirituality”, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, may well become prevalent, versus the language of “Christianity” or indeed of any other single religion.

If only a minority of the middle-aged British population currently affiliates with a church, will these people look elsewhere for spiritual support in their older years? If they do turn to churches, how will the churches respond to the needs of non-members, occasional churchgoers, and religious-supermarket shoppers? As Wraight so prophetically states,

Younger women are likely to only be part of the church, let alone involved in it more deeply, as the result of conscious choice. They are more likely to want to give the limited time they have available to activities which “make a difference”, and when the need is met or their interests change, they will move on to something or somewhere else. Churches need to be flexible enough to use the gifts of these younger women—if we don’t keep them in the church now, we won’t have any older women left to lead in a few years’ time! (2001b:194).<sup>14</sup>

These questions are not particularly new in the life of the Christian churches, but research will need to be done regularly—perhaps more than ever before—to adjust to societal changes such as those already mentioned. This will necessitate ongoing studies of older women and their interaction with traditional—and new forms of—church community.

With respect to new forms of church community, none of the interviewees mentioned virtual communities or cyberchurches; but in a decade’s time, or less, we may find older women are making electronic “church” connections that augment or even substitute for more traditional kinds of church communities. These women will be more technologically literate than any generation before, and traditional churches will certainly feel the impact. Regarding future generations of older women, Ruth Clarke said, ‘they will be expecting to use all of their [professional] skills, certainly in the first ten years or so of retirement. They expect to be active’. For herself, she added, ‘I expect that the Internet’s going to be able to help me to communicate with the world at large when I am housebound. Just as television has done for older women today, though that’s a passive thing. The Internet will be more active’.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Bruce points to current trends in church membership and attendance to support his thesis that ‘unless [these] trends are reversed, major British denominations will cease to exist by 2030’ (2001:191).

<sup>14</sup> Citing the Church of Scotland Woman’s Guild Research and Development Project, n.d., *20/20 Vision*, St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Private conversation.

Nevertheless, future generations of older women might return to church: today's younger spiritual seeker could be tomorrow's older reverter to traditional Christianity.<sup>16</sup> If churches change their practices and emphases, then they could become important places for people to gather and to seek that special connection known as fellowship. As Wraight observes, 'when many other community-based structures and institutions are falling apart, it is more important than ever that the church should demonstrate the reality of a loving and caring community. In the years ahead, the communal aspect of the life of a local church is likely to be one of its key functions' (2001b:198). We saw in this project that caring was a key component of communal life, especially at the local church. When Altschuler says that '[c]aring has the potential for helping older and younger women transcend chronological age as a social barrier to identify common needs across the life course' (2001:98), it follows that the churches could be places for this to happen.<sup>17</sup>

What must churches do to prepare for these future older women? Says Walrath, '[e]ach of us approaches living and believing and...the church through our socially defined framework. The church that appeals to us and nurtures us will probably approach us through that framework as well' (1987:87). The churches will have to find a path between rigid adherence to their own heritage and the relativism of the moment in order to reach out to and nurture tomorrow's older women. This will not be an easy task, but one which, if embarked on now, they will be ready to meet. And, the same will be true of each generation of women that ages and is one day considered "old"; therefore, new research and new understandings will always be necessary.

Writing from an American perspective, Payne-Stancil announces that 'a new older woman is coming....There is a definite generational break between the baby-boomer woman and the older woman [of today]' (1997:234-235). And, what does she say is different about baby-boomer women?

It is primarily the movement from religiosity to spirituality....They are more likely to drop out [of church] altogether or attend services irregularly, pray less, or report fewer memorable religious experiences....They separate the spiritual from the religious. They define religious as the traditional congregational organization, worship, and ritual. The spiritual is the direct experience with God. *They are looking for relationships and experiences of sharing, caring, accepting, and belonging.* The baby-boomer woman's spiritual journey is to find a connection between life and meaning and about finding a way to express it. She finds her religious quests supported in small, intentional groups formed

---

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Kim Knott for this suggestion. Bruce appears to contest this, however: 'If a large proportion of the population was church-going or had been socialized in the Christian churches in childhood, we might suppose that as those young people presently avoiding church aged, they might attend church more frequently. But as the vast majority of young Britons have no church connection or religious socialization...this seems very unlikely' (2001:196).

<sup>17</sup> Altschuler also speculates that today's younger women do not attach the same meaning and significance to care (i.e. that it is 'inextricable' to life) that older women do. This is another potential avenue of research with implications for feminist theology.



within a congregation or in the community, and they may be found in new forms of community (1997:235; emphasis mine).<sup>18</sup>

If this is what tomorrow's older women will be seeking, then they would do well to be in dialogue with today's older women: women who are seeking—and finding—just these aspects to their communities. By learning from older women, the churches may find ways to ensure their own survival and means of thriving in the future—as communities that recognise their essential connectedness and that enact caring in creative and mutually empowering ways for all of their members. Christianity will be redeemed for the future.

### 11.3.2 Next steps for this practical theology

Of the older women I interviewed, those at the younger end of the range, in their late-60s, will continue to be with us for as much as another 30 years. How will we as a society continue to engage with them in our communities, make connections with them, care for them and be cared for by them in return? How will local churches meet their needs and expectations and tap into their gifts, even as their numbers dwindle and as new generations of older women come along? As a beginning, I hope that churches will cease to despair that their congregations are comprised largely of older people, and instead realise that there is a considerable amount of life left—both in older people and in their churches (Brierley, 2000). Then, I hope they will work with the suggestions I gave in the last chapter, and, importantly, share their successes and failures with others, so that we can all learn and then adapt our praxis.

How else can this Christian feminist practical theology of older women be used? It can be utilised as a further critique of Christian feminist theologians' thinking about community, connection, and caring; as a critique of practical theology from a feminist perspective; and as the basis of exploration among older women in different segments of the population (e.g. non-Christian, non-white, urban, rural, immigrant, non-churchgoers, etc.). Another point was made by Raymond Clarke, who indicated that, in the decade ahead, churches will want to focus their efforts with older people within their communities as a whole, not only within the churches themselves, and from a firm, ecumenical stance.<sup>19</sup> This means that we will have to expand the present boundaries of the theology to encompass non-church experiences, something that is both challenging and exciting.

As researchers, we should welcome any changes called for to this practical theology, as they mean that people are seriously interested in the issues involved and actively engaging with older people themselves. Our objective is not to produce ultimate answers or static positions; rather, we want to keep developing, just as people do. As society becomes more enlightened about

---

<sup>18</sup> For more about what this generation of women is thinking and doing about faith and worship, see Winter, Lummis, and Stokes (1994).

older age and does its best to eliminate ageism, the specific concerns older people have may change. Today's pressing issues may move to the background or even disappear; unanticipated problems will arise. But the fundamental issue of people seeking community, connection, and caring is likely to remain constant, and therefore I believe the basis of the theology will have meaning for some time to come.

---

<sup>19</sup> Private conversation.



## Appendix I—Interview Schedule

Many of the research questions being investigated in this project (see Chapter 1) are answered either by the literature review or by my analysis and interpretation of the findings. The second research question, however, asks about the relevance of feminist theologians' ideas of community, connection, and caring to the lives of older churchgoing women, and this question shaped the interview schedule.

Q1 and Q2 focused the interviewee on the subject of being older. Questions directly related to community are Q3, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q11, Q15, Q16, Q19, Q22, and Q23. Questions that ask about connections to people and communities are Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q12, Q13, Q17, Q18, Q19, Q20, Q21, and Q23. Connections to the Christian faith were explored in Q14, Q15, and Q20. Caring as a specific topic appears in Q5, Q10, and Q23, but also emerged in discussions of the connection questions and in Q15. The final questions—Q24, Q25, and Q26—are administrative.

### Interview schedule

- 1) Are you old? (Or, Do you consider yourself to be old?)
  - Why or why not?
  - What makes a person “old”?
  
- 2) People make lots of assumptions about old women. As I read each one of these 10 assumptions aloud, please tell me if it's a fair assumption, and why or why not.
  - Old women have settled all of their religious or spiritual questions
  - Old women need to be cared for
  - Old women go to church or church groups for the company/social life
  - Old women don't like changes to the church service, they don't like modern hymns and songs, and they don't like inclusive language, such as substituting “all people” for “mankind”
  - Old women are good at prayer
  - Old women are past it in terms of doing anything for the church
  - Old women only want to talk to other old women
  - Old women are the founts of all wisdom
  - Old women only think and talk about the past—they have no knowledge of or interest in the world today
  - Old women are waiting to die
  
  - Are there any other assumptions I left out?
  
- 3) What communities (or groups of people) do you belong to?  
 [Show card X, listing family, neighbourhood, church, luncheon club, book groups, former work associates, adult-education classes, keep-fit, charity work]
  - What have I missed off here?
  
- 4) For each one of these you named, do you feel more or feel less a part of the group?
  - Why?

- 5) Let's talk a bit about your family.
- How often do you see, talk to, or hear from various family members?
  - Is this about the same frequency as recent years, or has it changed?
    - If it's changed, how has it changed?
  - What sorts of things do you do together when you see your family?
  - What do you like to do for them?
  - What do they do for you?
- 6) Is York your home, or is "home" somewhere else?
- If "yes", please explain.
  - If somewhere else, where?
    - How do you maintain ties to that home?
    - Do you feel at home in York now?
    - Why or why not?
  - (FOR WOMEN WHO LIVE IN RESIDENTIAL OR NURSING HOMES) Tell me about [name of home]. How did you come to live here? Do you feel a part of the community here?
- 7) Tell me about your relationship with your church/chapel.
- Which church/chapel is it?
  - What sorts of things make you feel you belong?
    - [Show card Y, listing singing, sharing food, attending services, reading the church magazine, attending meetings, having visits from minister/vicar/pastoral visitor, praying]
  - What have I missed out here?
  - What sorts of things make you feel you don't belong?
  - Do you feel connected to/represented by the national church organisation?
    - Why or why not?
- 8) Is church where your most important friends are? Or are they somewhere else?
- If "church", why?
  - If somewhere else, where and why?
- 9) How do your church groups (or other groups) deal with "difficult" members, the ones who disagree a lot, or who ask tough or annoying questions?
- 10) Who have you cared for in your life?
- Do you care for anyone now?
    - Who?
    - How do you care for them?
  - Who cares for you now?
    - How do they care for you?
- 11) Do old women have a special role to play in their communities?
- If so, what is it?
  - Is there anything special about your role in your communities?
- 12) What difficulties, if any, do you face in maintaining ties to your communities?
- Is isolation a problem? Explain.
  - Is dependence a problem? Explain.
  - How do you try to deal with these difficulties?
- 13) Have you formed any new friendships in recent years, or joined any new groups?
- If so, how easy or hard was it to do?
  - If not, why do you think this is?



- 14) Are there any Bible verses or hymns that mean a lot to you these days?
- If so, which ones and why?
  - (IF BIBLE VERSES) Here are some Bible verses that talk about being old. [Show cards BV2, BV3, BV4, BV5, BV6, and BV7]
  - What do you make of each one of these?
  - (IF HYMNS) Do you watch “Songs of Praise”?
    - If so, when you sing along do you feel you belong to something?
      - If so, what is that “something”?
- 15) What principles do you try to live by?
- Would you describe these principles as Christian?
    - Explain.
  - Have these principles changed since you were younger?
    - If so, how?
  - Do you put these principles into practice when you go to [name one or two of her communities identified earlier]?
  - Is there anything Christian or Christian-like about each of these groups?
- 16) Over the years...
- Have you lost any communities?
  - Have you gained any communities?
  - Are there any you no longer have that you miss?
  - Why do you think these changes came about?
  - What do you think about this?
- 17) Does “belonging” have the same meaning for you now that it did in years past?
- 18) Do you feel you have any particular relationship with or connection to things other than people? (Examples might be plants, animals, pets, music, art, nature in general, etc.)
- Do you ever think about these things?
  - Do they matter to you?
- 19) What do you see happening with your relationships, your communities, in the remaining years of your life?
- How important will those relationships or communities be at the time of your death?
    - Why?
- 20) Do you have a picture of the afterlife?
- How would you describe it?
  - Will you reconnect with loved ones who’ve gone before?
  - Will you be with God?
  - Will you be with Jesus?
- 21) Do you feel you’re connected now with anyone who’s died?
- Tell me about it.
- 22) What are your hopes and fears for “your” communities here on Earth after your death?
- Will the Christian church be any help with those communities?
    - Why or why not?
- 23) Do you have any advice or message to give to younger women, the churches, or anyone at all regarding communities and relationships and caring?

24) Is there anything else you'd like to say about anything we've discussed?

25) Please help me make sure that I have your details correct.

May I confirm your:

- religious/denominational affiliation:
- marital status:
- number of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren (or other close family):
- age:
- number of years lived in York:

26) I would like to re-confirm that I may use excerpts of your words in my thesis and other related work. Is this still all right, or do you wish to withdraw your consent, all or in part?



## Appendix II—Interviewee Profile

I have chosen to present the interviewees' details as a summary, rather than individually, in order to maintain their anonymity. The total number of women interviewed, including the pilot phase, was 40.<sup>1</sup>

### Age group

65-74	15
75-84	18
85 and over	6
Unknown	1
TOTAL	40

The interviewees in each age group are:

65-74: Barbara, Betty, Dollie, Edith, Elsie, Eunice, Fran, Janet, June, Karen, Kate, Lillian, Muriel, Rebecca, Ruth

75-84: Ada, Aleen, Alfreda, Amelia, Dora, Doris, Ella, Fay, Gloria, Hope, Mary, Millie, Nancy, Phyllis, Sarah, Tess, Veeve, Winnie

85 and over: Dolores, Florence, Frederica, Hazel, Mavis, Verity

Unknown: Hilda

### Marital status

Ever-single	6
Married	6
Separated	1
Divorced	2
Widowed	25
TOTAL	40

(continued)

<sup>1</sup> One woman participated in both the pilot and the regular interview series. I have counted her only once to make up the total number of interviewees.

**Interviewees with living...**

Children (incl. step-children)	29
Grandchildren	27
Great-grandchildren	4
Siblings	16
Other close family members	17
No close family members	1

NB: Some interviewees fall into more than one category. Two interviewees had children who had died in adulthood.

**Living arrangement**

	Alone	With other(s)	TOTAL
House	17	8	25
Flat	8	Nil	8
Room or flat in residential or nursing home	6	1	7
TOTAL	31	9	40

**Access to personal or family car?**

Yes	13
No	27
TOTAL	40

**Years resident in York**

0-5 years	4
6-10 years	1
11-15 years	2
More than 15 years	20
Entire life (or virtually so)	12
Unknown	1
TOTAL	40

NB: Two of the interviewees had lived overseas for a number of years. The average number of years resident in York is approximately 43.

(continued)



**Former employment outside home**

Teacher	8
Nurse	7
Clerical or office work	11
Administrative or professional white collar	6
Church-related work	3
Child-minder/nanny/domestic help	4
Tailor or factory work	4
Warden for sheltered housing or church	4
Own/family business	4
Unknown	4

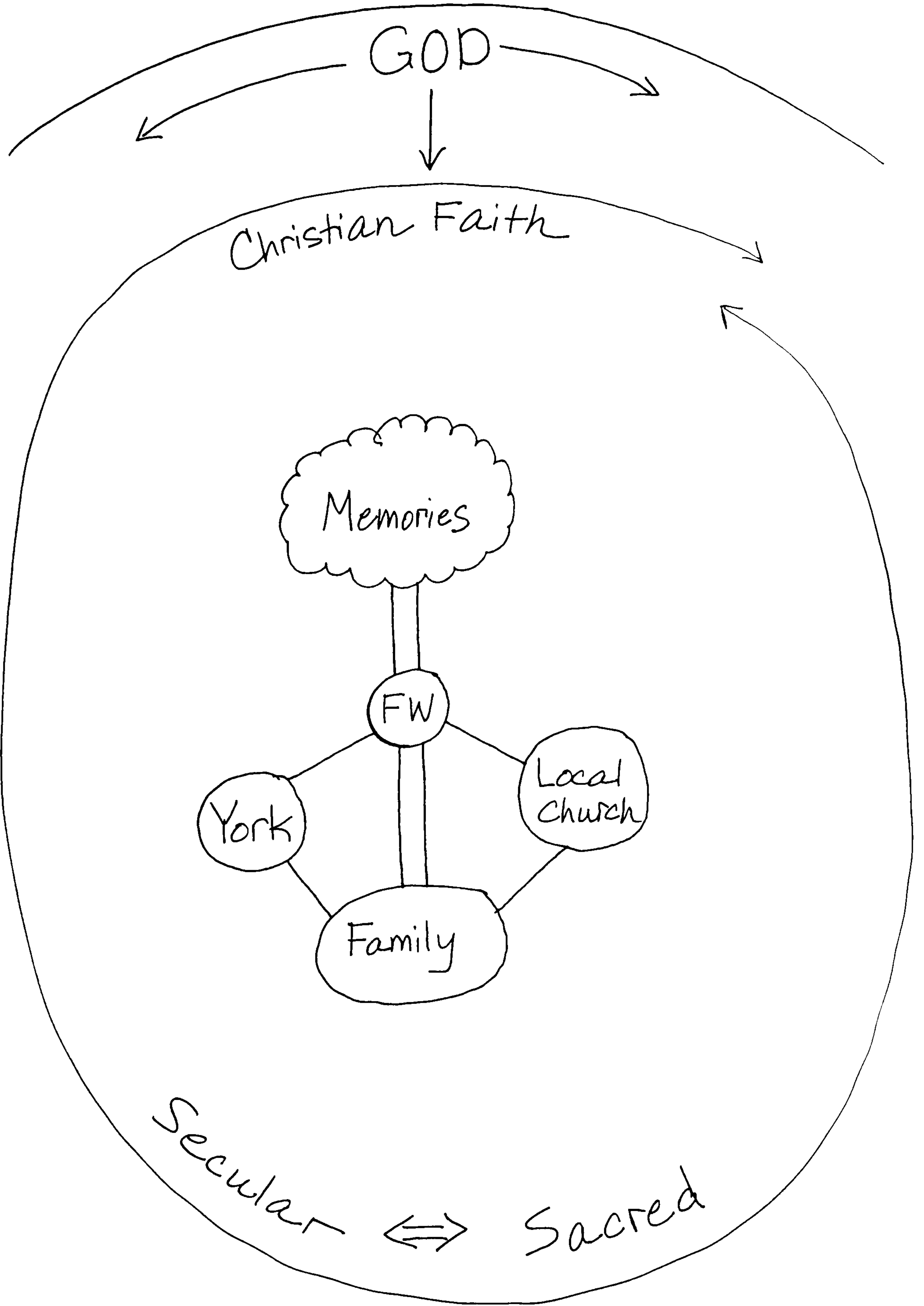
NB: Some interviewees fall into more than one category

**Denomination**

Methodist	30
Anglican	9
Baptist	1
TOTAL	40

NB: "Anglican" covers the range from Anglo-Catholic high church to evangelical low church

Appendix III—Diagram of Florence's connections



FW = Florence



## **Appendix IV—Aims of two Christian organisations working with older persons**

### **CHRISTIAN COUNCIL ON AGEING**

The Christian Council on Ageing (CCOA) was formed in 1982 with the following expressed aims:

- To explore the Christian potential and vocation in later years, and to nurture the continuing development of personal faith and growth.
- To affirm the contribution of older people to their local church and community and to encourage wider understanding across the generations.
- To improve the pastoral care of, and opportunities for worship and fellowship for frail and elderly people.
- To improve pastoral support and fellowship for those who care for elderly people.
- To co-operate with other agencies concerned with ageing, including those of other faiths.
- To encourage an educated response to ageism in the churches.

(Christian Council on Ageing, 1999).

### **THE LEVESON CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF AGEING, SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL POLICY**

The aims of the Leveson Centre are to:

- become an interdisciplinary centre for the study of ageing, spirituality and social policy and a bridge between theory and practice in this area.
- identify and disseminate the distinctive contribution that Christian Churches can make to the development of social policy.
- develop an understanding of spirituality, to help older people to express their spiritual awareness and to learn from them.
- be a focus for a network of relevant projects, agencies and individuals.
- establish and promote accessible information about ageing, spirituality and social policy.
- promote and disseminate best practice through a series of publications, conferences and seminars.
- co-ordinate and sponsor appropriate research.
- explore the multi-cultural aspects of ageing.
- enable older people to influence professionals, carers and the Church.

(Santer, 2001:back cover)

## Bibliography

- AGE AWARENESS PROJECT, 1998, *Spiritual Perspectives on Ageing: A Module for Ministerial Training*, Methodist Homes for the Aged, Derby.
- AGE CONCERN ENGLAND, 2000a, *Quick Facts*. Date site consulted: 6 February 2001. URL: <http://www.ace.org.uk/SiteArchitek/news.nsf/html/4J2J5K?OpenDocument&style=News>.
- , 2000b, *Older People in the United Kingdom: Some Basic Facts, November 2000*. Date site consulted: 6 February 2001. URL: [http://www.ace.org.uk/SiteArchitek/facts.nsf/html/4HDMNR?OpenDocument&style=Facts for you](http://www.ace.org.uk/SiteArchitek/facts.nsf/html/4HDMNR?OpenDocument&style=Facts%20for%20you).
- , n.d., *Debate of the Age in Yorkshire: Final Report*. Date site consulted: 12 April 2000. URL: <http://www.age2000.org.uk/Live>.
- AINLAY, S C, SINGLETON, R, JR, and SWIGERT, V L, 1992, 'Aging and religious participation: Reconsidering the effects of health', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 31(2), 175-188.
- ALBROW, M, 1997, 'Travelling beyond local cultures: socioscapas in a global city' in EADE, J, ed, *Living the Global City: Globalization as Local Process*, Routledge, London, 37-55.
- ALEXANDER, J, BERROW, D, DOMITROVICH, L, DONNELLY, M, and MCLEAN, C, 1986, *Women and Aging: An Anthology by Women*, Calyx Books, Corvallis, Ore.
- ALLEN, I, 1988, 'Ageing as a Feminist Issue', *Policy Studies*, 9(2), 35-50.
- ALSFORD, S, 1999, 'Women's nature and the feminization of theology' in SAWYER, D F, and COLLIER, D M, eds, *Is There A Future for Feminist Theology?*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 126-138.
- ALTSCHULER, J, 2001, 'Meaning and centrality of caring activities among older women', *Journal of Women & Aging*, 13(3), 79-100.
- ANDERSON, B, 1983, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London.
- ANDERSON, K, and JACK, D C, 1991, 'Learning to listen: interview techniques and analyses' in GLUCK, S B, and PATAI, D, eds, *Womens Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Routledge, New York and London, 11-26.
- ANDERSON, S R, and HOPKINS, P, 1991, *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women*, Bantam Books, New York.
- ANDREWS, G R, 1999, 'The positive impact of the United Nations declared international year of older persons on perceptions of ageing', *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 18(3), supplement, 3-7.
- ANDREWS, M, 1999, 'The seductiveness of agelessness', *Ageing and Society*, 19(3), 301-318.
- , 2000, 'Ageful and proud', *Ageing and Society*, 20, 791-795.



- APPLETON, N J W, 1998, *Respecting the Gift of Years: A Report to the Church and Society Committee and the Discipleship and Witness Committee of the United Reformed Church*, Contact Consulting, Witney, Oxon.
- ARBER, S, 2000, Book Review of 'Women, Feminism and Aging', *Ageing and Society*, 20(1), 123-124.
- and GINN, J, 1991, *Gender and Later Life: A Sociological Analysis of Resources and Constraints*, SAGE, London.
- and GINN, J, eds, 1995, *Connecting Gender and Ageing: A Sociological Approach*, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia.
- ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY'S COMMISSION ON URBAN PRIORITY AREAS, 1985, *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation*, Church House Publishing, London.
- BAUMAN, Z, 1992, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Routledge, London and New York.
- BEAN, P, FERRIS, J, and WHYNES, D, eds, 1985, *In Defence of Welfare*, Tavistock Publications, London and New York.
- BEASLEY, C, 1999, *What is Feminism? An Introduction to Feminist Theory*, SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi.
- BELL, C, and NEWBY, H, 1971, *Community Studies: An Introduction to the Sociology of the Local Community*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London.
- and ROBERTS, H, eds, 1984, *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley.
- BENNETT, G, 1987, *Traditions of Belief: Women, Folklore and the Supernatural Today*, Penguin, London.
- BERNARD, M, and MEADE, K, eds, 1993, *Women Come of Age: Perspectives on the Lives of Older Women*, Edward Arnold, London, Melbourne, and Auckland.
- BERNARD, M, MEADE, K, and TINKER, A, 1993, 'Women come of age' in BERNARD, M, and MEADE, K, eds, *Women Come of Age: Perspectives on the Lives of Older Women*, Edward Arnold, London, Melbourne, and Auckland, 167-190.
- BERNARD, M, and PHILLIPS, J, 1998, *The Social Policy of Old Age: Moving into the 21st Century*, Centre for Policy on Ageing, London.
- BIGGAR, N, 1997, *Good Life: Reflections on What We Value Today*, SPCK, London.
- , 1998, 'Should pastoral theology become postmodernist?', *Contact* 126, 22-27.
- BIRKE, L, 1986, *Women, Feminism and Biology: The Feminist Challenge*, Wheatsheaf Books, Brighton.
- BLAIKIE, A, 1999, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- BLAXTER, L, HUGHES, C, and TIGHT, M, 1996, *How to Research*, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia.

- BLUE, E, 2001, 'When feminist theology becomes practical theology: Some reflections on its use in the pastorate', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 17(2), 131-141.
- BORLAND, K, 1991, "'That's not what I said": interpretive conflict in oral narrative research' in GLUCK, S B, and PATAI, D, eds, *Womens Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Routledge, New York and London, 63-75.
- BORNAT, J, PEREIRA, C, PILGRIM, D, and WILLIAMS, F, eds, 1993, *Community Care: A Reader*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- BOWDEN, P, 1997, *Caring: Gender-Sensitive Ethics*, Routledge, London and New York.
- BRAY, G, 1991, *Ageing—A Sort of Ghetto-Land*, Grove Books Limited, Bramcote, Nottingham.
- BRIERLEY, P, 2000, *Sir Halley Stewart Project: Older People and the Church—Quantitative Report*, Christian Research, London.
- BRIGHT, R, 1997, *Wholeness in Later Life*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Bristol, Penn.
- BROWN, I Q, 1992, 'Women's works of devotion: feasts, fairs, and festivities' in PRELINGER, C M, ed, *Episcopal Women: Gender, Spirituality, and Commitment in an American Mainline Denomination*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 239-262.
- BROWN, P, 1982, *The Other Side of Growing Older*, Macmillan, London and Basingstoke.
- BROWNE, C V, 1998, *Women, Feminism, and Aging*, Springer Publishing Co, New York.
- BRUCE, S, 2001, 'Christianity in Britain, R.I.P.', *Sociology of Religion*, 62(2), 191-203.
- BRYMAN, A, and BURGESS, R, eds, 1999, *Qualitative Research*, 4 volumes, SAGE, London.
- BURCH, J C, 1994, *Contemporary Christian Spirituality in a Modern Urban Culture*, unpublished MPhil thesis, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds.
- BURKHARDT, M A, 1989, 'Spirituality: an analysis of the concept', *Holistic Nursing Practice*, 3(3), 69-77.
- BURTON-JONES, J, 1990, *From Generation to Generation: Towards a Christian Understanding of the Role and Care of Older People*, Jubilee Centre Publications Ltd, Cambridge.
- BUTLER, A, ed, 1985, *Ageing: Recent Advances and Creative Responses*, Croom Helm, London, Sydney, and Dover, N.H.
- BUTLER, M, 1998, 'Spirituality and Growing Older' in AGE AWARENESS PROJECT, *Spiritual Perspectives on Ageing: A Module for Ministerial Training*, Methodist Homes for the Aged, Derby, E1-E9.
- and ORBACH, A, 1993, *Being Your Age: Pastoral Care for Older People*, SPCK, London.



- BYRNE, P, 1999, 'The Study of Religion: Neutral, Scientific, or Neither?' in MCCUTCHEON, R T, ed, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, Cassell, London and New York, 248-259.
- BYTHEWAY, B, 1995, *Ageism*, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia.
- , 2000, 'Youthfulness and agelessness: a comment', *Ageing and Society*, 20, 781-789.
- , KEIL, T, ALLATT, P, and BRYMAN, A, eds, 1989, *Becoming and Being Old: Sociological Approaches to Later Life*, SAGE, London, Newbury Park, and New Delhi.
- CADY, L E, 1987, 'Relational love: A feminist Christian vision' in COOEY, P M, FARMER, S A, and ROSS, M E, eds, *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 135-149.
- CAMPBELL, R, and WASCO, S M, 2000, 'Feminist approaches to social science: epistemological and methodological tenets', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(6), 773-791.
- CARD, C, 1990, 'Caring and Evil', *Hypatia*, 5(1), 101-108.
- , ed, 1991, *Feminist Ethics*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kan.
- CARR, A, 1988, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*, Harper & Row, San Francisco.
- CARVER, V, and LIDDIARD, P, eds, 1978, *An Ageing Population: A Reader and Sourcebook*, Hodder and Stoughton, Sevenoaks, Kent.
- CASEY, E S, 1996, 'How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time: phenomenological prolegomena' in FELD, S, and BASSO, K H, eds, *Senses of Place*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, 13-52.
- CATALFO, P, 1993, 'America, Online' in WALKER, S, ed, *Changing Community*, Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, Minn., 163-175.
- CHESTER, R, and SMITH, J, 1996, *Acts of Faith: A Study of Older People and Their Places of Worship*, Counsel and Care, London.
- CHODOROW, N, 1999, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, with a new preface, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London.
- CHRIST, C P, 1992, 'Why women need the Goddess: Phenomenological, psychological, and political reflections' in CHRIST, C P, and PLASKOW, J, eds, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, Harper, San Francisco, 273-287.
- and PLASKOW, J, eds, 1992, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, Harper, San Francisco.
- CHRISTIAN COUNCIL ON AGEING, 1999, *Plus: A Quarterly Journal*, 15(1), back cover.
- CHURCH OF ENGLAND, 2000, *The Church of England's View on...AGEING*. Date site consulted: 9 April 2001. URL: <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/view/index.html>. Section: Social Policy.

- CHURCH OF ENGLAND GENERAL SYNOD BOARD FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, 1990a, *Ageing*, Church House Publishing, London.
- , 1990b, *Happy Birthday Anyway!*, Church House Publishing, London.
- Church On-Line*, n.d. Date site consulted: 11 June 2001. URL: <http://www.angelfire.com/me/curchonline/index.html>. [sic "curch"]
- CLAGUE, J, 1996, 'Autonomy' in ISHERWOOD, L, and MCEWAN, D, eds, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 14-15.
- COFFEY, A, and ATKINSON, P, 1996, *Making Sense of Qualitative Data: Complementary Research Strategies*, SAGE, London.
- CONN, J W, ed, 1996, *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, second edition, Paulist Press, New York and Mahwah, N. J.
- CONRADI, E, 2000, 'A critique of reciprocity in the light of an ethics of care', University of Goettingen, Germany. (Unpublished paper presented at the 2000 Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Conference, University of Leeds.)
- COOEY, P M, FARMER, S A, and ROSS, M E, eds, 1987, *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, Harper and Row, San Francisco.
- COOPER, H, ARBER, S, FEE, L, and GINN, J, 1999, *The Influence of Social Support and Social Capital on Health: A review and analysis of British data*, Health Education Authority, London.
- COOPER, J C, ed, 1996, *Dictionary of Christianity*, Cassell, London and Washington.
- COYLE, J M, ed, 1997, *Handbook on Women and Aging*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn. and London.
- CRAMPSEY, J A, 1999, 'The Lord's Prayer: A Prayer of the Ageing' in JEWELL, A, ed, *Spirituality and Ageing*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 53-64.
- CrossSearch Online Christian Resource Directory*, n.d., Gospel Communications Network. Date site consulted: 11 June 2001. URL: [http://www.crosssearch.com/Churches\\_and\\_Denominations/Online\\_Fellowships/](http://www.crosssearch.com/Churches_and_Denominations/Online_Fellowships/). Section: Online Fellowships.
- DALLEY, G, 1993, 'Caring: a legitimate interest of older women' in BERNARD, M, and MEADE, K, eds, *Women Come of Age: Perspectives on the Lives of Older Women*, Edward Arnold, London, Melbourne, and Auckland, 106-125.
- , 2001, Book Review of 'Caring for Older People: An Assessment of Community Care in the 1990s', *Generations Review*, 11(2), 22.
- DALY, L, ed, 1994, *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.
- DAVIE, G, 1994, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- and VINCENT, J, 1998, 'Progress Report: Religion and old age', *Ageing and Society*, 18, 101-110.



- DAVIES, C A, 1999, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, Routledge, London and New York.
- DE GROOT, J, and MAYNARD, M, eds, 1993a, *Women's Studies in the 1990s: Doing Things Differently?*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- , 1993b, 'Facing the 1990s: Problems and Possibilities for Women's Studies' in DE GROOT, J, and MAYNARD, M, eds, *Women's Studies in the 1990s: Doing Things Differently?*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 149-178.
- DELMAR, R, 2001, 'What is Feminism?' in HERRMANN, A C, and STEWART, A J, *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, second edition, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo. and Oxford, 5-28.
- DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, 2001, *National Service Frameworks for Older People Short Summary*. Date site consulted: 7 July 2001. URL: [http://www.fyldepcg.fsnet.co.uk/older\\_peoples\\_nsf\\_short%20summ.htm](http://www.fyldepcg.fsnet.co.uk/older_peoples_nsf_short%20summ.htm).
- DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECURITY, 1989, *Caring for People: Community Care in the Next Decade and Beyond*, HMSO, London.
- DEVAULT, M L, 1990, 'Talking and listening from women's standpoint: feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis', *Social Problems*, 37(1), 96-116.
- , 1997, 'Personal writing in social research: Issues of production and interpretation' in HERTZ, R, ed, *Reflexivity and Voice*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi, 216-228.
- DILLON, J T, 1990, *The Practice of Questioning*, Routledge, London and New York.
- DOLAN-HENDERSON, S, 1996, 'Care' in RUSSELL, L M, and CLARKSON, J S, eds, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, Mowbray, London, 36-37.
- DONNER, W, 1997, 'Self and community in environmental ethics' in WARREN, K J, ed, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 375-389.
- DOWELL, S, and HURCOMBE, L, 1987, *Dispossessed Daughters of Eve: Faith and Feminism*, new edition, SPCK, London.
- DUCK, R C, 1995, *Finding Words for Worship: A Guide for Leaders*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville.
- EADE, J, ed, 1997, *Living the Global City: Globalization as Local Process*, Routledge, London.
- EAGLETON, M, ed, 1996, *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, second edition, Blackwell, Oxford.
- ECK, D L, and JAIN, D, eds, 1986, *Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*, The Women's Press, London.
- EDWARDS, R, and RIBBENS, J, 1998, 'Living on the Edges: Public Knowledge, Private Lives, Personal Experience' in RIBBENS, J, and EDWARDS, R, eds, *Feminist*

*Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, SAGE, London, 1-23.

ELDRED, J B, 2000, *Judgement Day or Daily Judgement: Are Older Christian Women Awaiting God's Kingdom or Living God's Community?*, University of Leeds, Leeds. (Unpublished paper presented at the 2000 Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Conference, University of Leeds.)

———, 2001, 'Older Christian Churchgoing Women's Experiences of Community, Connection, and Caring: An Appraisal of Feminist Theologies', *Plus*, 17(3), 19-21.

ELLISON, C G, and LEVIN, J S, 1998, 'The religion-health connection: evidence, theory, and future directions', *Health Education & Behavior*, 25(6), 700-720.

ELWES, T, ed, 1992, *Women's Voices: Essays in Contemporary Feminist Theology*, Marshall Pickering, London.

ETZIONI, A, 1995, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda*, Fontana Press, London.

EVANDROU, M, 1990, *Challenging the Invisibility of Carers: Mapping Informal Care Nationally*, London School of Economics, London.

EXON, R S, 1999, *Biographical continuity, identity and agency in the self-accounts of western devotees of two modern Hindu movements in Britain*, unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds.

FEATHERSTONE, M, and WERNICK, A, eds, 1995a, *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, Routledge, London and New York.

———, 1995b, 'Introduction' in FEATHERSTONE, M, and WERNICK, A, eds, *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, Routledge, London and New York, 1-15.

FELD, S, and BASSO, K H, eds, 1996, *Senses of Place*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe.

FENNELL, G, PHILLIPSON, C, and EVERS, H, 1988, *The Sociology of Old Age*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes and Philadelphia.

FINCH, J, 1984, "'It's great to have someone to talk to": The ethics and politics of interviewing women' in BELL, C, and ROBERTS, H, eds, *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley, 70-87.

FIORENZA, E S, 1995, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, tenth anniversary edition, Beacon Press, Boston.

FISCHER, K, 1995, *Autumn Gospel: Women in the Second Half of Life*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J.

———, 1996, 'Winter of the Heart: The spiritual journey through loss and grief', *The Way*, 36(2), 123-132.

———, 1998, *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging*, Upper Room Books, Nashville.



- FOLTZ, T G, 2000, 'Women's spirituality research: doing feminism', *Sociology of Religion*, 61(4), 409-418.
- FORD, J, and SINCLAIR, R, 1987, *Sixty Years On: Women Talk About Old Age*. Women's Press, London.
- FOSTER, E, 1992, 'Women and the inverted pyramid of the Black churches in Britain' in SAHGAL, G, and YUVAL-DAVIS, N, eds, *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, Virago, London, 45-68.
- FOWLER, J W, 1996, 'Stages of faith' in CONN, J W, ed, *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, second edition, Paulist Press, New York and Mahwah, N. J., 342-348.
- FRANKS, M C, 1998, *Choosing a Gendered Solution: Why Do Some Women Embrace Islamic and Protestant Revivalisms in Britain Today?*, unpublished DPhil thesis, Centre for Women's Studies, University of York.
- FRIEDAN, B, 1993, *The Fountain of Age*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- FRIEDMAN, M, 1989, 'Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community', *Ethics*, 99(2), 275-290.
- , 1997, 'Autonomy and social relationships: Rethinking the feminist critique' in MEYERS, D T, ed, *Feminists Rethink the Self*, WestviewPress, Boulder, Colo., and Oxford, 40-61.
- FRY, C L, ed, 1980, *Aging in Culture and Society: Comparative Viewpoints and Strategies*, Praeger, New York.
- FURLONG, M, ed, 1995, *Our Childhood's Pattern: Memories of Growing Up Christian*, Mowbray, London.
- GARNER, J D, 1999, 'Feminism and feminist gerontology', *Journal of Women and Aging*, 11(2/3), 3-12.
- GEE, E M, and KIMBALL, M M, 1987, *Women and Aging*, Butterworths, Toronto and Vancouver.
- GELDER, A, 1996, 'Community' in ISHERWOOD, L, and MCEWAN, D, eds, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 31-33.
- GIBSON, D, 2000, Book Review of 'A Certain Age: Women Growing Older', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 15(32), 291-292.
- GIBSON, H B, 2000, 'It keeps us young', *Ageing and Society*, 20, 773-779.
- GILLESPIE, J B, 1992, 'Gender and generations in congregations' in PRELINGER, C M, ed, *Episcopal Women: Gender, Spirituality, and Commitment in an American Mainline Denomination*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 167-221.
- , 1995, *Women Speak: Of God, Congregations, and Change*, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, Penn.
- GILLIGAN, C, 1979, 'Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle', *Harvard Educational Review*, 49(4), 431-446.

- , 1982, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London.
- , 1986, 'A different voice in moral decisions' in ECK, D L, and JAIN, D, eds, *Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*, The Women's Press, London, 221-229.
- GINN, J, and ARBER, S, 1998, 'Gender and older age' in BERNARD, M, and PHILLIPS, J, eds, *The Social Policy of Old Age: Moving into the 21st Century*, Centre for Policy on Ageing, London, 142-162.
- , 1999, 'Women's pension poverty: prospects and options for change' in WALBY, S, ed, *New Agendas for Women*, Macmillan, Houndmills and London, 75-97.
- GLENDINNING, C, and MILLAR, J, 1987, *Women and Poverty in Britain*, Wheatsheaf, Brighton.
- GLUCK, S B, and PATAI, D, eds, 1991, *Womens Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Routledge, New York and London.
- GOLLINS, T, 2001, *Male carers: a study of the inter-relations between caring, male identity and age*. Sheffield Papers Online, issue 3, Sheffield University. Date site consulted: 16 May 2001. URL: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/R-Z/socst/Shop/>.
- GRAHAM, E, 1993, 'The sexual politics of pastoral care' in GRAHAM, E, and HALSEY, M, eds, *Life Cycles: Women and Pastoral Care*, SPCK, London, 210-224.
- and HALSEY, M, eds, 1993, *Life Cycles: Women and Pastoral Care*, SPCK, London.
- GRAHAM, H, 1993, 'Feminist perspectives on caring' in BORNAT, J, PEREIRA, C, PILGRIM, D, and WILLIAMS, F, eds, *Community Care: A Reader*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 124-133.
- GreenSpirit*, n.d. Date site consulted: 1 August 2001. URL: <http://www.greenspirit.org.uk>.
- GREER, G, 1992, *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause*, Penguin, London.
- GREY, M, 1989, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition*, SPCK, London.
- , 1990, 'The Core of Our Desire: Re-imagining the Trinity', *Theology*, XCIII (755), 363-372.
- , 1991, 'Claiming Power-in-Relation: Exploring the Ethics of Connection', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 7(1), 7-18.
- , 1993, *The Wisdom of Fools? Seeking Revelation for Today*, SPCK, London.
- , 1999a, "'Expelled again from Eden": facing difference through connection', *Feminist Theology*, 21, 8-20.
- , 1999b, 'The Praxis of Resurrection: Literature and Feminist Quest', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 21(2), 112-120.
- GRIFFITHS, M, 1995, *Feminisms and the Self: The Web of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York.



- GRIMSHAW, J, 1986, *Feminist Philosophers: Women's Perspectives on Philosophical Traditions*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London.
- GROSS, R M, 1996, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*, Beacon Press, Boston.
- , 2000, 'The place of the personal and the subjective in religious studies' in MOCH, S D, and GATES, M F, eds, *The Researcher Experience in Qualitative Research*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi, 163 -177.
- GRUEN, L, 1994, 'Toward an ecofeminist moral epistemology' in WARREN, K J, ed, *Ecological Feminism*, Routledge, London and New York, 120-138.
- GUBRIUM, J F, 1993, *Speaking of Life: Horizons of Meaning for Nursing Home Residents*, Aldine De Gruyter, New York.
- GUENTHER, M, 1995, *Toward Holy Ground: Spiritual Directions for the Second Half of Life*, Cowley Publications, Boston.
- HAIGHT, R, 1999, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York.
- HAMER, M, 1999, 'Listen to the Voice: An Interview with Carol Gilligan', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 10(2), 173-184.
- HAMMOND, G, and TREETOPS, J, 2001, 'Belonging' in JEWELL, A, ed, *Older People and the Church*, Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough, 38-61.
- HAMPSON, D, 1989, 'The theological implications of a feminist ethic', *MC: The Modern Churchman*, new series, 31(1), 36-39.
- , 1996a, 'On Autonomy and Heteronomy' in HAMPSON, D, ed, *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, SPCK, London, 1-16.
- , ed, 1996b, *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, SPCK, London.
- HANEY, E H, 1994, 'What is Feminist Ethics? A Proposal for Continuing Discussion' in DALY, L, ed, *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky., 3-12.
- HARALAMBOS, M, and HOLBORN, M, 1995, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, fourth edition, Collins Educational, London.
- HARDY, D W, 1996, *God's Ways with the World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh.
- HARRISON, J, 1983, 'Women and Ageing: Experience and Implications', *Ageing and Society*, 3(2), 209-235.
- HAUERWAS, S, 1993, 'Discipleship as a Craft, Church as a Disciplined Community' in WALKER, S, ed, *Changing Community*, Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, Minn., 151-162.
- HEMMINGS, S, ed, 1985, *A Wealth of Experience: The Lives of Older Women*, Pandora Press, London.

- HENDRICKS, J, and HENDRICKS, C D, 1978, 'Ageism and common stereotypes' in CARVER, V, and LIDDIARD, P, eds, *An Ageing Population: A Reader and Sourcebook*, Hodder and Stoughton, Sevenoaks, Kent, 60-63.
- HEPWORTH, M, 2000, *Stories of Ageing*, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia.
- HERRMANN, A C, and STEWART, A J, 2001, *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, second edition, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo. and Oxford.
- HERTZ, R, ed, 1997, *Reflexivity and Voice*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi.
- HEYWARD, I C, 1982, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*, University Press of America, Washington, D.C.
- , 1996, 'Mutuality' in ISHERWOOD, L, and MCEWAN, D, eds, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 155-156.
- , 1999, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right: Rethinking what it means to be Christian*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.
- HILL, J, BOND, M A, MULVEY, A, and TERENCE, M, 2000, 'Methodological issues and challenges for a feminist community psychology: an introduction to a special issue' *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(6), 759-772.
- HOAGLAND, S L, 1991, 'Some thoughts about "caring"' in CARD, C, ed, *Feminist Ethics*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kan., 246-263.
- HOGAN, L, 1997, *From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield.
- , n.d, *Feminist Research in Theology*. University of Leeds Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies. Date site consulted: 19 February 2001. URL: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/gender-studies>. Section: e-paper 4.
- HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY, 2000, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition*. 2000. Date site consulted: 11 June 2001. URL: <http://www.bartleby.com/61/67/V0116700.html>. Section: "virtual".
- HOUSE OF BISHOPS OF THE GENERAL SYNOD OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, 1986, *The Nature of Christian Belief*, Church House Publishing, London.
- HOWSE, K, 1999, *Religion, Spirituality and Older People*, Centre for Policy on Ageing, London.
- HUBBERT, P E, 1991, *The Spirituality of Elderly Women, Landbeach 1990*, unpublished MA thesis, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds.
- HUBER, L W, 1987, 'Connections: congregational differences in the place of the church in the personal networks of elderly members', *Journal of Religion and Aging*, 4(2), 59-73.
- HUFFORD, D J, 1999, 'The scholarly voice and the personal voice: Reflexivity in belief studies' in MCCUTCHEON, R T, ed, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, Cassell, London and New York, 294-310.



- HUMM, M, 1989, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York and London.
- HUNT, F C, 1999, "Older people speaking to be heard": *Synopsis of the Ageing Well/Debate of the Age—Voice of Experience seminars, June-July 1999*. Age Concern England. Date site consulted: 12 April 2000. URL: <http://www.age2000.org.uk/Live>.
- HURD, L C, 1999, "'We're not old!': older women's negotiation of aging and oldness", *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13(4), 419-439.
- HYCNER, R H, 1999, 'Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data' in BRYMAN, A, and BURGESS, R, eds, *Qualitative Research*, volume 3, SAGE, London, 143-164.
- ISHERWOOD, L, 1996, 'Post-Christian feminism' in ISHERWOOD, L, and MCEWAN, D, eds, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 180-182.
- and MCEWAN, D, eds, 1996, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield.
- JAFFEE, M S, 1999, 'Fessing up in theory: on *professing* and *confessing* in the religious studies classroom' in MCCUTCHEON, R T, ed, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, Cassell, London and New York, 274-285.
- JAGGAR, A M, and BORDO, S R, eds, 1989, *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N.J.
- JANTZEN, G, 1992, 'Connection or Competition: Identity and Personhood in Feminist Ethics', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 5(1), 1-20.
- JEANROND, W G, 1992, 'Theological method' in MUSSER, D W, and PRICE, J L, eds, *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 480-486.
- JEFFERYS, M, ed, 1989, *Growing Old in the Twentieth Century*, Routledge, London and New York.
- JERROME, D, 1981, 'The significance of friendship for women in later life', *Ageing and Society*, 1(2), 175-197.
- , 1985, 'Voluntary association and the social construction of old age' in BUTLER, A, ed, *Ageing: Recent Advances and Creative Responses*, Croom Helm, London, Sydney, and Dover, N.H., 51-66.
- , 1989, 'Virtue and Vicissitude: The Role of Old People's Clubs' in JEFFERYS, M, ed, *Growing Old in the Twentieth Century*, Routledge, London and New York, 151-165.
- , 1992, *Good Company: An Anthropological Study of Old People in Groups*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- , 1993, 'Intimacy and sexuality amongst older women' in BERNARD, M, and MEADE, K, eds, *Women Come of Age: Perspectives on the Lives of Older Women*, Edward Arnold, London, Melbourne, and Auckland, 85-105.
- JEWELL, A, ed, 1998, *Age Awareness: Understanding the Spiritual Needs of Older People*, Methodist Homes for the Aged, Derby.

- , 1999a, 'Introduction' in JEWELL, A, ed, *Spirituality and Ageing*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 9-13.
- , ed, 1999b, *Spirituality and Ageing*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia.
- , 2000, *Grow Old Along With Me*, National Christian Education Council, Birmingham.
- , ed, 2001, *Older People and the Church*, Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough.
- JOHNSON, A M, 2001, 'The background' in JOHNSON, A M, and MORRIS, H H. *Understanding the Needs of Older People*, The Leveson Centre, Solihull, 3-14.
- and MORRIS, H H, 2001, *Understanding the Needs of Older People*, The Leveson Centre, Solihull.
- JOHNSON, D P, and MULLINS, L C, 1989, 'Religiosity and loneliness among the elderly', *The Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 8(1), 110-131.
- JONAS, K, and WELLIN, E, 1980, 'Dependency and Reciprocity: Home Health Aid in an Elderly Population' in FRY, C L, ed, *Aging in Culture and Society: Comparative Viewpoints and Strategies*, Praeger, New York, 217-238.
- JONES, SERENE, 2000, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.
- JONES, STEVEN G, ed, 1995, *CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi.
- , 1998a, 'Information, internet, and community: notes toward an understanding of community in the information age' in JONES, STEVEN G, ed, *CyberSociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi, 1-34.
- , ed, 1998b, *CyberSociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi.
- KEATS, D M, 2000, *Interviewing: A Practical Guide for Students and Professionals*, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia.
- KEITH, J, 1980, 'Old Age and Community Creation' in FRY, C L, ed, *Aging in Culture and Society: Comparative Viewpoints and Strategies*, Praeger, New York, 170-197.
- KELLER, C, 1989, 'Feminism and the ethic of inseparability' in PLASKOW, J, and CHRIST, C P, eds, *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 256-265.
- KERNS, V, 1980, 'Aging and Mutual Support Relations Among the Black Carib' in FRY, C L, ed, *Aging in Culture and Society: Comparative Viewpoints and Strategies*, Praeger, New York, 112-125.
- KIMBLE, M A, MCFADDEN, S H, ELLOR, J W, and SEEBER, J J, eds, 1995, *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.
- KING, A S, 1996, 'Spirituality: transformation and metamorphosis', *Religion*, 26(4), 343-351.



- KING, U, 1993, *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise*, second edition, Macmillan, Houndmills.
- , 1994, 'Voices of protest and promise: women's studies in religion, the impact of the feminist critique on the study of religion', *Studies of Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 23(3), 315-329.
- , 1996, 'Spirituality' in ISHERWOOD, L, and MCEWAN, D, eds, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 218-220.
- , 1998a, 'Spirituality in a postmodern age: faith and praxis in new contexts' in KING, U, ed, *Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age*, Cassell, London and New York, 94-112.
- , ed, 1998b, *Faith and Praxis in a Postmodern Age*, Cassell, London and New York.
- , 1999a, 'Spirituality, Ageing and Gender' in JEWELL, A, ed, *Spirituality and Ageing*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 146-157.
- , 1999b, 'Feminist theologies in contemporary contexts: a provisional assessment' in SAWYER, D F, and COLLIER, D M, eds, *Is There A Future for Feminist Theology?*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 100-114.
- KITTAY, E F, 1997, 'Human dependency and Rawlsian equality' in MEYERS, D T, ed, *Feminists Rethink the Self*, WestviewPress, Boulder, Colo., and Oxford, 219-266.
- KLAUS, V, 2000, 'Communitarianism: A medicine worse than the disease?', *The Responsive Community*, 10(2), 66-70.
- KNOTT, K, 1994, 'Women and religion in post-war Britain' in PARSONS, G, ed, *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945, vol ii, Issues*, Routledge, London, 199-230.
- , 2000, 'Religion and locality: issues and methods', University of Leeds. (Unpublished paper presented at the XVIII Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Durban.)
- , 2001, 'The sense and nonsense of "community": a consideration of contemporary debates about community and culture by a scholar of religions', University of Leeds. (Unpublished paper presented at the British Association for the Study of Religions annual conference, Cambridge.)
- , n.d., *Religious Studies, Feminist Research and Gender Studies*. University of Leeds Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies. Date site consulted: 19 February 2001. URL: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/gender-studies>. Section: e-paper 6.
- KNUTSEN, M M, 1995, 'A feminist theology of aging' in KIMBLE, M A, MCFADDEN, S H, ELLOR, J W, and SEEBER, J J, eds, *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 460-482.
- KOEHN, D, 1998, *Rethinking Feminist Ethics: Care, Trust and Empathy*, Routledge, London and New York.
- KOLDEN, M, 1995, 'Constructive theology' in KIMBLE, M A, MCFADDEN, S H, ELLOR, J W, and SEEBER, J J, eds, *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 483-496.

- KRAUSE, N, CHATTERS, L M, MELTZER, T, and MORGAN, D L, 2000, 'Negative interaction in the church: insights from focus groups with older adults', *Review of Religious Research*, 41(4), 510-533.
- LAND, H, and ROSE, H, 1985, 'Compulsory altruism for some or an altruistic society for all?' in BEAN, P, FERRIS, J, and WHYNES, D, eds, *In Defence of Welfare*, Tavistock Publications, London and New York, 74-96.
- LARSEN, M K, 1995, 'A feminist perspective on aging' in KIMBLE, M A, MCFADDEN, S H, ELLOR, J W, and SEEBER, J J, eds, *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 242-252.
- LARTEY, E, 2000, 'Practical Theology as a Theological Form' in WILLOWS, D, and SWINTON, J, eds, *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 72-77.
- LATHER, P, 1988, 'Feminist perspectives on empowering research methodologies', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 11(6), 569-581.
- LEDER, D, 2000, 'Aging into the spirit: from traditional wisdom to innovative programs and communities', *Generations*, 23(4), 36-41.
- LESNOFF-CARAVAGLIA, G, ed, 1984, *The World of the Older Woman: Conflicts and Resolutions*, Human Sciences Press, New York.
- LUFF, D, 1999, 'Dialogue across the divides: "Moments of rapport" and power in feminist research with anti-feminist women', *Sociology*, 33(4), 687-703.
- MACDONALD, B, 1986, 'Outside the Sisterhood: Ageism in Women's Studies' in ALEXANDER, J, BERROW, D, DOMITROVICH, L, DONNELLY, M, and MCLEAN, C, *Women and Aging: An Anthology by Women*, Calyx Books, Corvallis, Ore., 20-25.
- and RICH, C, 1984, *Look Me In The Eye: Old Women, Aging and Ageism*, Spinsters, Ink, San Francisco.
- MACRAE, H M, 1995, 'Women and caring: constructing self through others', *Journal of Women & Aging*, 7(1/2), 145-167.
- MAITLAND, S, 1983, *A Map of the New Country: Women and Christianity*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne, and Henley.
- , 1992, 'Biblicism: a radical rhetoric?' in SAHGAL, G, and YUVAL-DAVIS, N, eds, *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, Virago, London, 26-44.
- MATHESON, J, and EDWARDS, G, eds, 2000, *Regional Trends 35, 2000 edition*, The Stationery Office, London.
- MATTHEWS, A M, and CAMPBELL, L D, 1995, 'Gender roles, employment and informal care' in ARBER, S, and GINN, J, eds, *Connecting Gender and Ageing: A Sociological Approach*, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia, 129-143.
- MAUTHNER, M, 1998, 'Bringing Silent Voices into a Public Discourse: Researching Accounts of Sister Relationships' in RIBBENS, J, and EDWARDS, R, eds, *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, SAGE, London, 39-57.



- MAUTHNER, N, and DOUCET, A, 1998, 'Reflections on a Voice-centred Relational Method: Analysing Maternal and Domestic Voices' in RIBBENS, J, and EDWARDS, R, eds, *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, SAGE, London, 119-146.
- MAXWELL, E K, 1988, 'Status differences in cohorts of aging women', *Health Care for Women International*, 9(2), 83-91.
- MAYNARD, M, 1999, 'What do older women want?' in WALBY, S, ed, *New Agendas for Women*, Macmillan, Houndmills and London, 62-74.
- MCCUTCHEON, R T, ed, 1999, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, Cassell, London and New York.
- MCEWAN, D, and POOLE, M, 1990, 'Making the connections: The global agenda of feminist theology', *New Blackfriars*, 71(838), 229-236.
- MCFADDEN, S H, 1999, 'Surprised by joy and burdened by age: the journal and letters of John Casteel' in THOMAS, L E, and EISENHANDLER, S A, eds, *Religion, Belief, and Spirituality in Late Life*, Springer Publishing Company, New York, 137-149.
- and GERL, R R, 1990, 'Approaches to understanding spirituality in the second half of life', *Generations: Aging and the Human Spirit*, 14(4), 35-38.
- MCFADYEN, A I, 1990, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- MCGRATH, A E, 1997, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, second edition, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
- MERRICK, E, 1999, "'Like chewing gravel": on the experience of analyzing qualitative research findings using a feminist epistemology', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 23, 47-57.
- MEYERS, D T, ed, 1997, *Feminists Rethink the Self*, WestviewPress, Boulder, Colo., and Oxford.
- MILES, M R, 1989, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, Beacon, New York.
- MILLER, J B, and STIVER, I P, 1993, 'A relational approach to understanding women's lives and problems', *Psychiatric Annals*, 23(8), 424-431.
- MILLER, T, 1998, 'Shifting Layers of Professional, Lay and Personal Narratives: Longitudinal Childbirth Research' in RIBBENS, J, and EDWARDS, R, eds, *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, SAGE, London, 58-71.
- MINICHELLO, V, BROWNE, J, and KENDIG, H, 2000, 'Perceptions and consequences of ageism: views of older people', *Ageing and Society*, 20(3), 253-278.
- MOBERG, D O, 1968, 'Religiosity in old age' in NEUGARTEN, B L, ed, *Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 497-508.

- MOCH, S D, and GATES, M F, eds, 2000, *The Researcher Experience in Qualitative Research*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi.
- MORRIS, J, 1993, "'Us' and 'Them'?" Feminist research and community care' in BORNAT, J, PEREIRA, C, PILGRIM, D, and WILLIAMS, F, eds, *Community Care: A Reader*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 156-163.
- MUSSER, D W, and PRICE, J L, eds, 1992, *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge.
- NAPLES, N A, 1997, 'A feminist revisiting of the insider/outsider debate: the "outsider phenomenon" in rural Iowa' in HERTZ, R, ed, *Reflexivity and Voice*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi, 70-94.
- NEILL, C M, and KAHN, A S, 1999, 'The role of personal spirituality and religious social activity on the life satisfaction of older widowed women', *Sex Roles*, 40(3-4), 319-329.
- NEUGARTEN, B L, ed, 1968, *Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
- NODDINGS, N, 1984, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- , 1990, 'A Response', *Hypatia*, 5(1), 120-126.
- NORRIS, G, ed, 1996, *The Seasons of Women: An Anthology*, Viking, London.
- NORRIS, K, 1998a, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Riverhead Books, New York.
- , 1998b, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and "Women's Work"*, Paulist Press, New York and Mahwah, N.J.
- NYE, M, 2000, *Multiculturalism and Minority Religions in Britain*, Curzon, Richmond.
- O'BRIEN, M, 1996, 'Spirituality and Older Women: Exploring meaning through story telling', *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 10(1), 3-16.
- O'NEILL, M A, 1995, 'The nature of women and the method of theology', *Theological Studies*, 56(4), 730-742.
- OAKLEY, A, 1981, 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms' in ROBERTS, H, ed, *Doing Feminist Research*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Henley, 30-61.
- OCHS, C, 1997, *Women and Spirituality*, second edition, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, Lanham, Md., Boulder, New York, and London.
- OPPENHEIMER, H, 1999, 'Inner Resources for Growing Older' in JEWELL, A, ed, *Spirituality and Ageing*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 39-47.
- OSBORN, A, and WILLCOCKS, D, 1990, 'Making research useful and usable' in PEACE, S, ed, *Researching Social Gerontology: Concepts, Methods and Issues*, SAGE, London, Newbury Park, and New Delhi, 188-202.
- OZORAK, E W, 1996, 'The Power but not the Glory: how women empower themselves through religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35(1), 17-29.



- PARSONS, G, ed, 1994, *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945, vol ii, Issues*, Routledge, London.
- PATTISON, S, 2000, 'Some straw for the bricks: A basic introduction to theological reflection' in WOODWARD, J, and PATTISON, S, eds, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 135-145.
- and WOODWARD, J, 2000, 'An introduction to pastoral and practical theology' in WOODWARD, J, and PATTISON, S, eds, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1-19.
- PAWSON, R, 1996, 'Theorizing the interview', *British Journal of Sociology*, 47(2), 295-314.
- PAYNE-STANCIL, B, 1997, 'Religion and faith development of older women' in COYLE, J M, ed, *Handbook on Women and Aging*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn. and London, 223-241.
- PEACE, S, 1986, 'The forgotten female: social policy and older women' in PHILLIPSON, C, and WALKER, A, eds, *Ageing and Social Policy: A Critical Assessment*, Gower Publishing Co Ltd, Aldershot, 61-86.
- , ed, 1990a, *Researching Social Gerontology: Concepts, Methods and Issues*, SAGE, London, Newbury Park, and New Delhi.
- , 1990b, 'Introduction: researching social gerontology: concepts, methods and issues' in PEACE, S, ed, *Researching Social Gerontology: Concepts, Methods and Issues*, SAGE, London, Newbury Park, and New Delhi, 1-5.
- , 1993, 'The living environments of older women' in BERNARD, M, and MEADE, K, eds, *Women Come of Age: Perspectives on the Lives of Older Women*, Edward Arnold, London, Melbourne, and Auckland, 126-145.
- PHILLIPSON, C, and WALKER, A, eds, 1986, *Ageing and Social Policy: A Critical Assessment*, Gower Publishing Co Ltd, Aldershot.
- , BERNARD, M, PHILLIPS, J, and OGG, J, 2001, *The Family and Community Life of Older People: Social Networks and Social Support in Three Urban Areas*, Routledge, London and New York.
- PLASKOW, J, and CHRIST, C P, eds, 1989, *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, Harper and Row, San Francisco.
- POLK, D, 1992, 'Practical theology' in MUSSER, D W, and PRICE, J L, eds, *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 375-377.
- PRELINGER, C M, ed, 1992, *Episcopal Women: Gender, Spirituality, and Commitment in an American Mainline Denomination*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford.
- PRIMAVESI, A, 1996, 'Ecofeminism' in ISHERWOOD, L, and MCEWAN, D, eds, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 45-48.
- PULLING, J, 1987, *The Caring Trap*, Fontana Paperbacks, Glasgow.

- QURESHI, H, and WALKER, A, 1986, 'Caring for elderly people: the family and the state' in PHILLIPSON, C, and WALKER, A, eds, *Ageing and Social Policy: A Critical Assessment*, Gower Publishing Co Ltd, Aldershot, 109-127.
- RAMSEY, J L, and BLIESZNER, R, 2000, 'Community, affect, and family relations: a cross-cultural study of spiritual resiliency in eight old women', *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 11(1), 39-64.
- RAY, R E, 1999, 'Researching to transgress: the need for critical feminism in gerontology', *Journal of Women and Aging*, 11(2/3), 171-184.
- REDDIE, A G, 2001a, *Faith, Stories, and the Experience of Black Elders: Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
- , 2001b, 'Singing the Lord's song in a strange land: faith, stories and the experience of Black elders', The Queen's College, Birmingham. (Unpublished paper presented at a research symposium, The Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy, Temple Balsall.)
- REID, E, 1995, 'Virtual worlds: culture and imagination' in JONES, S G, ed, *CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi, 164-183.
- REINHARZ, S, 1997, 'Who am I? The need for a variety of selves in the field' in HERTZ, R, ed, *Reflexivity and Voice*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi, 3-20.
- RIBBENS, J, 1998, 'Hearing my Feeling Voice? An Autobiographical Discussion of Motherhood' in RIBBENS, J, and EDWARDS, R, eds, *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, SAGE, London, 24-38.
- and EDWARDS, R, eds, 1998, *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives*, SAGE, London.
- RICE, S, 1989, 'Sexuality and intimacy for aging women: a changing perspective', *Journal of Women & Aging*, 1(3), 245-264.
- RICHTER, P, and FRANCIS, L J, 1998, *Gone But Not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning*, Darton, Longman, and Todd, London.
- ROBERTS, H, ed, 1981, *Doing Feminist Research*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston, and Henley.
- ROSE, H, and BRUCE, E, 1995, 'Mutual care but differential esteem: caring between older couples' in ARBER, S, and GINN, J, eds, *Connecting Gender and Ageing: A Sociological Approach*, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia, 114-128.
- RUDD, T N, 1988, *Growing Old With God*, SLG Press, Fairacres, Oxford.
- RUDDICK, S, 1989, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, Women's Press, London.
- RUETHER, R R, 1986, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities*, Harper & Row, San Francisco.



- , 1995, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, Beacon Press, Boston.
- RUSSELL, C, 1999, 'Interviewing vulnerable old people: ethical and methodological implications of imagining our subjects', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13(4), 403-417.
- RUSSELL, L M, ed, 1985a, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- , 1985b, 'Authority and the challenge of feminist interpretation' in RUSSELL, L M, ed, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 137-146.
- and CLARKSON, J S, eds, 1996, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, Mowbray, London.
- SAHGAL, G, and YUVAL-DAVIS, N, 1992a, 'Introduction: fundamentalism, multiculturalism and women in Britain' in SAHGAL, G, and YUVAL-DAVIS, N, eds, *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, Virago, London, 1-25.
- , eds, 1992b, *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, Virago, London.
- SANGER, G, 1999, *Sir Halley Stewart Project: Older People and the Church—Results of 6 Focus Groups Held in England*, Christian Research, London.
- SANTER, M, 2001, *Valuing Age? An Agenda for Society and Church*, The Leveson Centre, Solihull.
- SAWYER, D F, and COLLIER, D M, eds, 1999, *Is There A Future for Feminist Theology?*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield.
- SCANLON, J, 1993, 'Challenging the imbalances of power in feminist oral history: developing a take-and-give methodology', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16(6), 639-645.
- SHAW, R, 1999, 'Feminist Anthropology and the Gendering of Religious Studies' in MCCUTCHEON, R T, ed, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, Cassell, London and New York, 104-113.
- SHREEVE, M, 2001, 'Better Government for Older People: All Our Futures or another interesting pilot project?', *Generations Review*, 11(1), 7-8.
- SILVERMAN, P R, and COOPERBAND, A, 1984, 'Widow-to-widow: the elderly widow and mutual help' in LESNOFF-CARAVAGLIA, G, ed, *The World of the Older Woman: Conflicts and Resolutions*, Human Sciences Press, New York, 144-161.
- SLEE, N, 2000, 'Some patterns and processes of women's faith development', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 21(1), 5-16.
- SMITH, C, 1991, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
- SÖLLE, D, 1990, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology*, SCM Press, London.
- SONTAG, S, 1978, 'The double standard of ageing' in CARVER, V, and LIDDIARD, P, eds, *An Ageing Population: A Reader and Sourcebook*, Hodder and Stoughton, Sevenoaks, Kent, 72-80.

- SOSKICE, J M, 1996, 'Essentialism' in ISHERWOOD, L, and MCEWAN, D, eds, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 55-56.
- SPONG, J S, 2001, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born*, HarperSanFrancisco, New York.
- SPRETNAK, C, ed, 1994a, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays by Founding Mothers of the Movement*, Anchor Books, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, and Auckland.
- , 1994b, 'Introduction' in SPRETNAK, C, ed, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays by Founding Mothers of the Movement*, Anchor Books, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, and Auckland, xxiii-xlii.
- SPRIGGS, D, 1998, 'Reaching Older People with God's Love' in AGE AWARENESS PROJECT, *Spiritual Perspectives on Ageing: A Module for Ministerial Training*, Methodist Homes for the Aged, Derby, H1-H11.
- ST HILDA COMMUNITY, THE, 1996, *The New Women Included: A Book of Services and Prayers*, SPCK, London.
- STARHAWK, 1989, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, tenth anniversary edition, HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco.
- STARK, R, and GLOCK, C Y, 1968, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- STEINEM, G, 1996, 'Fifty is what forty used to be' in NORRIS, G, ed, *The Seasons of Women: An Anthology*, Viking, London, 409-412.
- STRANGLEMAN, T, 2000, 'Interview: Richard Sennett', *Network: Newsletter of the British Sociological Association*, number 76, 1-4.
- STRAUSS, A, and CORBIN, J, 1999, 'Grounded theory methodology: an overview' in BRYMAN, A, and BURGESS, R, eds, *Qualitative Research*, volume 3, SAGE, London, 72-93.
- THANE, P, 2000, "'An untiring zest for life": Images and self-images of old women in England', *Journal of Family History*, 25(2), 235-247.
- THIRD AGE TRUST, 2001, (no title). Date site consulted: 30 August 2001. URL: [http://www.u3a.org.uk/Describes\\_U3A.html](http://www.u3a.org.uk/Describes_U3A.html). Sections: 'Origins' and 'U3A Basics'.
- THOMAS, L E, and EISENHANDLER, S A, eds, 1999, *Religion, Belief, and Spirituality in Late Life*, Springer Publishing Company, New York.
- THOMAS, T, ed, 1988, *The British: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, 1800-1986*, Routledge, London and New York.
- THOMPSON, J L, and PRIESTLEY, J, 1996, *Sociology*, second edition, Made Simple Books, Oxford.
- THOMPSON, K, 1988, 'How religious are the British?' in THOMAS, T, ed, *The British: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, 1800-1986*, Routledge, London and New York, 211-239.



- TIDMARSH, M, 1998, 'The Ageing Process' in AGE AWARENESS PROJECT, *Spiritual Perspectives on Ageing: A Module for Ministerial Training*, Methodist Homes for the Aged, Derby, A1-A14.
- TILBY, A, 1992, *Science and the Soul: New Cosmology, the Self and God*, SPCK, London.
- TILLEY, C, 1994, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, Berg, London.
- TROLL, L E, 1984, 'The psycho-social problems of older women' in LESNOFF-CARAVAGLIA, G, ed, *The World of the Older Woman: Conflicts and Resolutions*, Human Sciences Press, New York, 21-35.
- TRONTO, J C, 1989, 'Women and Caring: What can feminists learn about morality from caring?' in JAGGAR, A M, and BORDO, S R, eds, *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N.J., 172-187.
- TULLE-WINTON, E, 2000, Book Review of 'The Mature Imagination: Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond', *Ageing and Society*, 20(5), 642-645.
- TULLOCH, S, ed, 1993, *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* (reissued with corrections, 1995), Oxford University Press, Oxford and Melbourne.
- UNESCO, 1999, *Gearing up for the granny boom*. Date site consulted: 10 July 2001. URL: [http://www.unesco.org/courier/1999\\_01/uk/dossier/txt0.htm](http://www.unesco.org/courier/1999_01/uk/dossier/txt0.htm). Section: The Courier, archives, January 1999.
- VANDENBERG, D, 1996, 'Caring: feminine ethics or maternalistic misandry? A hermeneutical critique of Nel Noddings' phenomenology of the moral subject and education', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 30(2), 253-269.
- VIDICH, A J, BENSMAN, J, and STEIN, M R, eds, 1964, *Reflections on Community Studies*, John Wiley and Sons, Inc, New York, London, and Sydney.
- VINCENT, J A, 2000, Book Review of 'The Imaginary Time Bomb: Why an Ageing Population is Not a Social Problem', *Ageing and Society*, 20(6), 797-798.
- WALBY, S, ed, 1999, *New Agendas for Women*, Macmillan, Houndmills and London.
- WALDRON, J W, 1996, 'Feminist spirituality' in ISHERWOOD, L, and MCEWAN, D, eds, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 64-68.
- WALKER, S, ed, 1993, *Changing Community*, Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, Minn.
- WALRATH, D A, 1987, *Frameworks: Patterns of Living and Believing Today*, Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia.
- WALTER, T, and DAVIE, G, 1998, 'The religiosity of women in the modern West', *British Journal of Sociology*, 49(4), 640-660.
- WALTON, H, 2001, 'The wisdom of Sheba: constructing feminist practical theology', *Contact* 135, 3-12.
- WARD, H and WILD, J, 1995a, *Guard the Chaos: Finding Meaning in Change*, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, London.

- , eds, 1995b, *Human Rites: Worship Resources for an Age of Change*, Mowbray, London.
- WARREN, K J, ed, 1994, *Ecological Feminism*, Routledge, London and New York.
- , ed, 1997, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis.
- WEBBER, A, 1990, *Life Later On: Older People and the Church*, Triangle, London.
- WELCH, S D, 1985, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.
- WELLMAN, B, and BERKOWITZ, S D, eds, 1988, *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- WELLMAN, B, CARRINGTON, P J, and HALL, A, 1988, 'Networks as personal communities' in WELLMAN, B, and BERKOWITZ, S D, eds, *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 130-184.
- WILLCOCKS, D, 1986, 'Residential care' in PHILLIPSON, C, and WALKER, A, eds, *Ageing and Social Policy: A Critical Assessment*, Gower Publishing Co Ltd, Aldershot, 146-162.
- WILLIAMS, F, 1993, 'Women and community' in BORNAT, J, PEREIRA, C, PILGRIM, D, and WILLIAMS, F, eds, *Community Care: A Reader*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 33-42.
- WILLIAMS, JANE, 1992, 'The doctrine of the trinity: a way forward for feminists?' in ELWES, T, ed, *Women's Voices: Essays in Contemporary Feminist Theology*, Marshall Pickering, London, 31-43.
- WILLIAMS, JOHN LLOYD, 1992, *A Study in the Christian Understanding of Ageing and Old Age*, unpublished MSc dissertation, King's College London, University of London.
- WILLIAMS, R, 1983, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, Flamingo, London.
- WILLOWS, D, and SWINTON, J, 2000a, 'Introduction' in WILLOWS, D, and SWINTON, J, eds, *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 11-16.
- WILLOWS, D, and SWINTON, J, eds, 2000b, *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia.
- WILSON, E, 1996, 'Mirror writing: an autobiography' in EAGLETON, M, ed, *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, second edition, Blackwell, Oxford, 247-249.
- WINTER, M T, LUMMIS, A, and STOKES, A, 1994, *Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives*, Crossroad, New York.
- WOLCOTT, H F, 1990, *Writing Up Qualitative Research*, SAGE, Newbury Park and London.
- WOODWARD, J, and PATTISON, S, eds, 2000, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.



- WOODWARD, K, 1995, 'Tribute to the older woman: psychoanalysis, feminism, and ageism' in FEATHERSTONE, M, and WERNICK, A, eds, *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, Routledge, London and New York, 79-96.
- WOOLF, V, 1993, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, Penguin Books, London.
- WRAIGHT, H, 2001a, 'Evangelising' in JEWELL, A, ed, *Older People and the Church*, Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough, 103-121.
- , 2001b, *Eve's Glue: The Role Women Play in Holding the Church Together*, Paternoster Lifestyle and Christian Research, Carlisle, Waynesboro, Ga., and London.
- ZAPPONE, K, 1991, *The Hope for Wholeness: A Spirituality for Feminists*, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, Conn.
- ZECH, C E, 2000, 'Generational differences in the determinants of religious giving', *Review of Religious Research*, 41(4), 545-559.
- ZINNBAUER, B J, PARGAMENT, K I, COLE, B, RYE, M S, BUTTER, E M, BELAVICH, T G, HIPPEL, K M, SCOTT, A B, and KADAR, J L, 1997, 'Religion and spirituality: unfuzzifying the fuzzy', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36(4), 549-564.
- ZORN, C R, and JOHNSON, M T, 1997, 'Religious well-being in noninstitutionalized elderly women', *Health Care for Women International*, 18(3), 209-219.

[This paper is listed in the bibliography as Eldred (2000). It is referred to in Chapters 8 and 10 of the thesis.]

## **Judgement Day or Daily Judgement: Are Older Christian Women Awaiting God's Kingdom or Living God's Community? [1]**

Janet Eldred

### **ABSTRACT**

*Are older Christian women awaiting resurrection at Judgement Day or realising it now? Drawing on interviews, this paper proposes that the primacy of communities, relationships, and caring in older women's lives, combined with uncertainty about an afterlife, challenges the concept of Judgement Day. Instead, well-being is worked out in this life.*

### **Background and context**

The research project from which this study is taken examined experiences of community, connection, and caring in the lives of older Christian churchgoing women in Britain today. The aim was to demonstrate whether concepts of community, connection, and caring current within Christian feminist theologies had any resonance with women aged 65 and over. Many of these theologies hold that relationships (i.e. connections) and caring within communities are keys to women's understanding and interpretation of faith. Does this hold true for older women? What distinctive contributions might older women be making to these theologies?

The research was essentially qualitative. Forty women were interviewed on a range of topics. These topics included the various communities (such as family, neighbourhood, and church) to which the women were connected; their feelings of inclusion, exclusion, and belonging; what it was like to be an older woman; and the role of faith in each of these experiences. From my fieldwork, as well as from what textual evidence exists, I can state the following with some certainty: that, for many older Christian women, their relationships with family, with neighbours, with fellow congregants at church, and with fellow members of clubs and social groups are a key focus of their lives and thoughts, in many cases expressing their relationships with God.

Several questions in the interview schedule inquired into the women's understandings about an afterlife: whether they believed in one, what picture(s) they had of it, and how it would "work" in terms of judgement and reunion with deceased loved ones. We often assume that Christians have a unified view of the afterlife, or we at least assume that most Christian women over a certain age are likely to cleave to a similar view of the afterlife—that which is taught by the Christian churches. However, the interviewees expressed a variety of ideas. In fact, the most common response was, 'I don't know what it will be like'. Nevertheless, most of the older women I talked with have speculated, and it is how these speculations affect their actions in *this* life, as well as how they compare to Christian teachings, that I am interested in here.

At this point, let us hear from four of the women interviewed:

*Barbara:* 'I don't believe in [God as a] judge as such because [a] judge could sentence people to hell, couldn't they, and I don't believe that God would do that....Because I believe God is a God of love and...forgiveness, and a judge doesn't forgive, does he? A judge punishes'.

*Millie:* 'But we must all go to heaven, because it says we're all going to be judged. So, how can you be judged if you don't go to heaven? Whether you'll stay there is another matter'.



*Veeve*: 'I think heaven or hell can actually exist on this Earth. To me, it's a case of fellowship with God or separation from God, and that can happen here just as much as in the afterlife....I mean, I do think of the existence of heaven or hell, but not as places; [rather,] as states of being'.

*Nancy*: 'Now, if we're all looking forward to this, going to the kingdom of heaven—well, it depends how you live on this Earth, doesn't it?...[We're all going to face judgement, and because of that some people are going to be allowed into] this wonderful afterlife and some people are not....[M]y husband...I just don't know where he ended up'.

### **The afterlife and Judgement Day in Christian teaching and doctrine**

What does the Christian faith teach about resurrection and judgement? [2] In the first instance, it is important to know that the different Christian denominations place significantly different emphases on questions of judgement, punishment, predestination, and other matters regarding death and final destiny. Therefore, what follows is a general statement of the common ground, and does not constitute any particular denomination's doctrine. [3]

A foundational Christian belief is that the possibility of partaking of eternal life is bound up with our earthly lives, and that an accounting of those earthly lives will occur on Judgement Day. Resurrection is, first, the belief that Christ rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion, and, second, that the faithful will rise from the dead at the Last Judgement. The Last Judgement is God's final sentence on humanity on the Last Day, which is the day of Christ's Second Coming and the inauguration of God's kingdom on Earth. Believers will be received into eternal life with God and the angels in paradise. Others, the unrepentant sinners and those who have rejected God in this life, will be sent to hell, the place of everlasting torment and punishment. All of this is resurrection as "not yet".

At the same time as holding this belief in a fate to be finally decided in the future, the Christian church and the New Testament scriptures teach that all Christians, through faith, *already* participate in Christ's resurrection. Believers have *already* been spiritually raised with Christ; but they will experience their full (that is, bodily) resurrection only at the Last Day. Also, Christians believe that Christ's resurrection has inaugurated the "age to come" *and* that he will "come again" to complete the New Jerusalem. Thus, the Last Days are already present as well as being expected in the future. Along with this goes another Christian idea, that of the "communion of saints". A belief stated in the Apostles' Creed, the communion of saints is traditionally understood to be the spiritual union that exists between each Christian and Christ and also between each and every Christian, whether in heaven or on Earth. This communion, or relationship, is believed to exist "already". In sum, one of the most important features of Christianity—and also one of the most challenging to grasp—is that this religion holds these two ideas of resurrection as "already" and "not yet" in tension.

To digress briefly: For the sake of simplicity, I have deliberately omitted a discussion of the resurrection of the believer's body, and of what form that body might have. I realise that issues surrounding the body are of particular interest to feminists. Feminist critiques of Christianity have long criticised the church's traditional preferencing of the spiritual life over the bodily life, and the deferment of well-being to the next life. Feminists have put forward many arguments in support of honouring the body, and feminist Christians have written many prayers and liturgies that celebrate the body. At the end of this article, we may wish to propose that "living God's community" *is* a form of bodily resurrection—but let us hold that to one side for now.

### **Community, connection, and caring in feminist theology**

Christian feminist theologians are very concerned with life in the here and now. This is not to discount any interest in or beliefs about an afterlife that they may hold; rather, they place

a particular emphasis on women's experience and praxis, and on the quality of life in this existence. And it is the ideas of these feminist theologians that will help to place the interviewees' comments in context.

A key idea emerging is that of living resurrection life in the here and now, what I call "living God's community". Rosemary Radford Ruether has written of 'incarnat[ing] the redemptive community...[and allowing God to break] in from the future' (Hampson and Ruether, 1987:17) to correct and refresh the past for the lived now. Diana Eck writes that 'the resurrection of Christ...has more to do with whether there is real life before death than with whether there is life after death' (1993:115). Mary Grey uses the term resurrection as a metaphor for 'a way of reflective living and action' (1999:114). For her, '[t]he *praxis* of resurrection...means beginning here and now' (1999:114; author's emphasis). For these and other feminist theologians, the praxis of resurrection is the ethical response to a competitive, individualistic world. It is a local-level, community-oriented, daily-enacted response that judges the world, finds it wanting, and seeks to repair it.

Take the concept of moral judgement. Carol Gilligan (1979) has proposed that women's reluctance to judge others may be part and parcel of women's care and concern for others. I will extrapolate this to state that therefore some women, like interviewee Barbara (above), are reluctant to accept the finality of a Judgement Day that will, by definition, doom some others to eternal punishment. Gilligan has observed that women's moral understanding and judgements are different from men's, making it clear 'why a morality of rights and noninterference may appear to women as frightening in its potential justification of indifference and unconcern' (1979:444). Perhaps women reject a 'formal and abstract' God in favour of a 'contextual and inductive' God (Gilligan, 1979:442), and thus see God-the-Judge as letting more people be included in the blessings and rewards of eternal life. This would be in keeping with feminization thesis, '[a] view...that religion in the West...has been undergoing a process of fundamental orientational change in which feminine (rather than masculine) images of the nature of deity...[have] come to predominate. God [has come to be] seen as loving and consoling, rather than as authoritarian and judgmental' (Swatos, 1998:187). [4]

Picking up on this theme, Grace Jantzen writes, '[t]he isolated, autonomous individual clinging to his or her rights and impartially performing his or her duties is, from the connectedness perspective, a good picture of hell' (1992:11). In contrast, 'the connectedness model seeks by positive building of relationships and community to prevent or scale down crises before they happen' (1992:10). Would not the greatest crisis, then, be a Judgement Day where many souls were condemned to eternal punishment? Therefore, a way to lessen this would be to build relationships and community—to help others—in the here and now, and thus to realise resurrection in the present for as many people as possible. This brings us to an ancient teaching of the Christian church, that 'heaven cannot be fully perfect until every member of every generation of the human race is within it...[and that] what really matters is the resurrection of the whole Body of Christ' (Perry, 1975:124). Therefore, one's own resurrection is caught up in the web of humanity's resurrection and cannot be affected apart from it.

### **Empirical findings**

But what view of resurrection and judgement has the greater claim on the lives, minds, and hearts of older women in today's England, women who grew up with the authority of the pre-war Christian establishment and its teachings on sin and salvation? Are these women awaiting resurrection in a hoped-for future, as traditional Christian teaching instructs, or are they realising resurrection now through their caring relationships in communities, both religious and secular, as feminist theologians have posited? I am proposing preliminary answers to these questions by drawing on my interviews with Methodist and Anglican churchgoing women in York aged 65 and up. And, I will be drawing on comments from the same four women we heard from earlier.

Barbara was in her early 70s. As we heard previously, her God was a loving, forgiving God, one who would not be so hard-hearted as to send even the worst sinners to eternal punishment—'except if they weren't repentant'. Speaking of herself and her own time of judgement, Barbara said,



Usually, if I've done something that I'm not very pleased about, I'm fairly repentant straight away. And I hope that would be enough when the time came for me to go to heaven. But it might not....And I wouldn't like to think I'd gone to hell because I do think I've tried pretty hard. And I feel that all the plus marks should have got me well on the way.

Millie was in her early 80s. She based her understandings of the workings of heaven, hell, and God's judgement on the authority of scripture and her own efforts at interpreting it. She said, 'I think God will judge because he says he will. So I believe that'. In response to questions about whether she believes in heaven and hell, Millie said, 'Yes, of course I do. 'Cause God says so. That's why I believe in it. Because he said so'. Her remark, recounted earlier, that we will all go to heaven but we will not all necessarily stay there, was an interpretation that came to her one day as she was thinking about what she had read in the bible. Still, in doing all of this puzzling out of the meanings of the scriptures, Millie commented, 'If you dwell on [the certainty of God's judgement] too much, [you] could be a little bit afraid, couldn't you really? 'Cause you're always afraid of the unknown, aren't you'?

Veeve, also in her 80s, was, like Barbara, unsure of an afterlife, calling herself 'an agnostic [who doesn't] even try to speculate'. As we saw at the beginning, her experience of heaven and hell was "already", possible here on Earth in this life. Nevertheless, she continued, 'I don't know, and yet I have a good feeling that there's an afterlife...and I don't know why I think that. I don't remember anybody teaching me, but maybe it's what I've gleaned from the bible, you know, putting it all together as it were'. Veeve was not overly concerned, saying 'I don't worry too much about it, to tell you the truth. 'Cause I mean I shall find out when I get there, won't I'? She was more concerned about being separated—or feeling separated—from God in the here and now, as we live our lives with other people:

If you feel separated from your fellow human beings, you can't help but be separated from God. And...if you feel separated from God, I think that as a Christian...I would automatically feel separated from human beings because the two go together.

Finally, Nancy, in her 80s, was a 'definite' believer in heaven, hell, and God's judgement. She saw God as more loving and forgiving than Millie did, but not quite as loving and forgiving as Barbara did. Said Nancy, '[God] loves us no matter what we're like, doesn't he?...I think the Lord realises that you have your moments of weakness and this is all part of human life, isn't it? I'm sure he understands. Yeah, I'm sure he does'.

### **Analysis and conclusion**

What do these women's words tell us? A long life might mean more time to work towards eternal life, to repent for sins and to act to repair damage done. This seems to be the case for Barbara. In her later life, Barbara found that she had more time to concentrate on helping others, time she did not have as a young wife and mother. She was working out her own salvation here on Earth, and consciously trying to make a better life for others on a daily basis.

But for Veeve, we cannot know anything at all about the afterlife, so working to maintain connections to our fellow human beings now, in this life, was key to maintaining a relationship with God. There was hope for an afterlife, an expectation of judgement, but no worries about what cannot be known or controlled. And for Millie and Nancy, there was a certainty of heaven, hell, and a final judgement that will send each woman to one or the other destiny. They devoted themselves to bible study, prayer, and—after a lifetime of caring for others—whatever good works they could still perform, coupled with an unshakeable faith in God's promises. These four women spaced themselves along a continuum that spans from an awaiting of God's kingdom at one end to a living of God's community at the other, based on their own individual mix of certainty and uncertainty, hope and concern about an afterlife.

Based on this research, I propose that, rather than sitting—or kneeling—meekly by, many older women are “out there” taking resurrection into their own hands and their own communities. They are not only awaiting God’s kingdom but living God’s community. They are not only working *for* resurrection but *in* resurrection. Whether or not an older Christian woman believes in a final resurrection, in an ultimate redemption of (at least a part of) the world, she is willing, even eager, to make a better life for more people on Earth, created through the exercise of her own style of moral judgement—a morality of connectedness. If a woman has a traditional belief in heaven, hell, Judgement Day, and an afterlife, then she is likely to incarnate the communion of saints in the here and now as a sacred duty, one that will help her own soul in the future as well as have a positive effect on the souls of others, both living and dead. For the woman who is unsure of the existence or nature of an afterlife, but feels that heaven and hell are states of being that can equally exist in the here and now as in some future time, then incarnating the resurrection community is an activity that *must* take place now, on Earth. For both types of women, the morality of connectedness, a life that will provide the most good for the most people—and perhaps even the best chance of future resurrection for the most people—is at play.

This is a fulfilment of what Mary Daly calls for in her watershed text, *Beyond God the Father*. Daly proposes that by rejecting their past praxis of focusing on the next life and on the God who rewards and punishes after death, women should ‘liv[e] full lives here and now’, and create ‘a counterworld to the counterfeit “this world” presented to consciousness by...societal structures that oppress’ (1973:30-31). She says that this will then be ‘participation in eternal life’ (1973:31). For older Christian women, God may or may not judge individuals and all of humanity at some future Last Day; but in the meantime, they can incarnate the resurrection community today.

## NOTES

[1] This article was presented as a paper at ‘Making Time/Marking Time’, the British Sociological Association 2000 Annual Conference (University of York) and at ‘Gendering Ethics/The Ethics of Gender’, the Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies 2000 International Conference (University of Leeds). The paper developed from research conducted for a PhD. Grant support for the PhD was gratefully received from Methodist Homes for the Aged and from the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Leeds.

[2] Definitions in this section of the article are based on those given in Cassell’s *Dictionary of Christianity* (Cooper, 1996), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Cross and Livingstone, 1997), and *The Macmillan Dictionary of the Bible* (Selman and Manser, 1998).

[3] All of the women interviewed were Protestant, and, with one exception, either Methodist or Anglican. I wish to draw the reader’s attention to this fact, as no Roman Catholic women were interviewed and thus the concept (and doctrine) of purgatory never presented itself as an option either to the interviewer or to the interviewees. (Thanks to Lena Gemzoe [Dept. of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University] for pointing this out.)

[4] I refer the interested reader to Schoenfeld and Mestrovic (1991) for an interesting discussion of masculine and feminine traits of God in Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. The authors attempt to draw a connection between a masculine, Protestant God and the ‘economic development of Western capitalism’ (1991:368), and speculate that the “feminization” of God (although they do not use this term) is a reaction against capitalistic structures and values.



## REFERENCES

- Cooper, J. C., ed. (1996) *Dictionary of Christianity*. London and Washington: Cassell.
- Cross, F. L. and Livingstone, E. A., eds. (1997) *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daly, M. (1973) *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Eck, D. L. (1993) *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1979) 'Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle'. *Harvard Educational Review* 49, 431-446.
- Grey, M. (1999) 'The Praxis of Resurrection: Literature and Feminist Quest'. *British Journal of Religious Education* 21, 112-120.
- Hampson, D. and Ruether, R. R. (1987) 'Is there a place for Feminists in a Christian Church?'. *New Blackfriars* 68, 7-24.
- Jantzen, G. (1992) 'Connection or Competition: Identity and Personhood in Feminist Ethics'. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 5, 1-20.
- Perry, M. (1975) *The Resurrection of Man: Christian Teaching on Life After Death*. London and Oxford: Mowbrays.
- Schoenfeld, E. and Mestrovic, S. G. (1991) 'With justice and mercy: instrumental-masculine and expressive-feminine elements in religion'. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, 363-380.
- Selman, M. J. and Manser, M. H. (1998) *The Macmillan Dictionary of the Bible*. London: Macmillan.
- Swatos, W. H., Jr., ed. (1998) *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*. Walnut Creek, London, and New Delhi: AltaMira Press.