



*Making and Sharing  
the space among  
Women and Men*

Maria Ericson



MAKING AND SHARING THE SPACE  
AMONG WOMEN AND MEN

*Some challenges for the  
South African church environment*

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*In memory of my father:*

*Erik Gösta Ericson*

*\* 4 April 1923*

*† 18 March 2003*

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## SUMMARY

This book takes its starting point in contemporary notions of reconciliation as a process of building, rebuilding and transforming relationships in the pursuit of a “just peace”, or God’s *shalom*, and how these notions might be applied in post-TRC South Africa. While being aware of the diversity of experiences (and actual or potential conflicts) *between* women from various social locations, gender sensitive researchers around the globe have *also* pointed out that women tend to have less power, influence and material resources than men *within* the same social or cultural group. In the light of these general observations, specific observations are made regarding gender relations in contemporary South African society, highlighting links between the past, the present and the future.

In the light of these observations, the second part of this book explores how South African churches might be(come) spaces and agents of *shalom* in post-TRC South Africa. Here critical questions are asked about the spaces provided by a number of them in terms of safety, power dynamics and norms for interaction. The focus will be on two crucial issues: the potential of South African churches to be “safe spaces” for abused women and children, and their potential to be spaces for women and men to encounter each other in non-stereotypical roles. This critical examination will be inspired by some interviews with, and writings by, South African women active in their church environments and/or in the field of theology and religious studies. What visions do they have for their (institutional) churches, and how do these visions correspond to the way they have experienced their own reality and space within these institutions? What lessons and challenges do they present with regard to “being church in South Africa today”?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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While the Crafoord Foundation in Sweden provided me with the travel grant necessary to attend the TSSA-conference in 2006, the Swedish Research Council made the whole research project possible by providing me with a salary as well as with funds for my travel expenses to South Africa (in the years 2003-2005), for literature and for other research related costs.

During my research stays in South Africa I had the privilege of being based, successively, at all of the three universities in the Western Cape region, namely the University of the Western Cape (UWC), the University of Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town (UCT), each one of them with its own distinctive character and historical heritage. I wish to express my appreciation, and thanks, to the great number of people (too numerous to mention by name) at these institutions, as well as in other places in the Western Cape or other parts of South Africa, who assisted me in various ways in the course of this project: in finding information, in agreeing to be interviewed, in translating documents from Afrikaans into English, and in other practical matters. I am also truly grateful to those who, through their friendship and encouragement, have sustained me throughout these years, and who thereby made me want to return to South Africa again and again to complete this project.

Here in Sweden, I wish to express my appreciation to my colleagues in the research seminar in Ethics at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University for their constructive criticism of some earlier drafts within this research project, as well as to other



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*Maria Ericson*

Lund, Sweden,

9 July 2007

# INTRODUCTION

In this book I am concerned with encounters and relationships in church and society and especially with how the church environment could provide “safe spaces” that foster the kind of relationships and encounters that enable women and men of all “races”,<sup>1</sup> ethnic groups and social backgrounds to develop their full potential as well as to challenge, and be challenged by, each other. Since my own personal involvement has been mainly in the ecumenical peace movement (rather than in any particular church denomination/institution or in the women’s movement), I will approach these issues using concepts and discussions not only from theology and religious studies, but also from peace and conflict research.<sup>2</sup> The ecumenical peace movement in Sweden has also had strong connections with people from the South African churches who struggled against apartheid, and it was some of these people who, while I was doing research for my doctoral dissertation,<sup>3</sup> also made me acutely aware of the need to discuss the relationships between women and men. In fact one of the persons whom I interviewed at that time said to me:

If you want to look at reconciliation here in South Africa you need to look not only at the relationships between blacks and whites, but also at the relationships between women and men.

Her statement was echoed by a few other South Africans across “racial” (and at times even gender) lines, and I became increasingly curious. What were these people talking about? What was “wrong” between men and women in South Africa? What were the issues at stake in their relationships? Ever since these first encounters I have

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<sup>1</sup> To me the term “race” implies too much of an essential difference between people with different shades of pigmentation. Hence I use the word “race” in inverted commas, and at times I try to use other expressions, such as “skin colour”.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes this research field is referred to as “peace and conflict research”, sometimes simply as “peace research”. I will use these terms interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Ericson 2001.

had reason to ponder this question, both in my personal encounters and relationships in South Africa,<sup>4</sup> and in my post-doctoral research project, from which I will now share some of my initial findings. But let me first turn to the issue of encounters and relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> I have been in South Africa in 1996 (1 month), 1999 (3 months), 2001 (2 months), 2003 (2½ months), 2004 (2½ months), 2005 (3½ months) and 2006 (1½ months). I have stayed mainly in predominantly black areas: in 1996 in various places across the country, and in the years 1999-2004 in a residence of the historically black University of the Western Cape (initially a residence for students at the Theological Faculty but subsequently for international students and guest researchers). Hence I have made my closest friends among Xhosa or Coloured South Africans (mainly postgraduate students), as well as among students and guest researchers from the rest of the world (especially from Africa). In 2005, I divided my time between Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town (UCT) and, for the first time, resided in predominantly white suburban areas. Ever since 1996, I have also met, and at times had more personal conversations with, white South Africans (mostly at universities or NGOs) but most of them had limited time to socialise on a personal basis.

## BUILDING, RE-BUILDING AND TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS

In the Bible there are passages which imply that, as sinners accepting God's reconciliation, Christians should also be reconciled with one another as well as devoting themselves "actively to the task of mutual reconciliation".<sup>5</sup> This is especially clear in 2 Cor. 5:17–19, according to which Christians, as a "new creation", are entrusted with the "ministry of reconciliation", in Mt. 5:23–24, where the believers' relationship to God is intimately connected with the establishment of right relationships with their neighbours, as they are obliged to reconcile themselves with their neighbour before approaching God at the altar, and in Eph. 2:14–16 where Christ is seen as having broken down "the dividing wall" between the two groups (Jews and Gentiles) previously hostile to one another, making them one. The notion of Christ as "breaking down the dividing walls" has been particularly important in South Africa, where apartheid was rejected out of the recognition of such a "new community in which differences of race, nation, culture, language and tradition no longer had power to separate man from man".<sup>6</sup>

Peace researchers are also interested in relationships. Here reconciliation has been understood as a process of *relationship-building* across divisions, as a *transformation* of existing relationships, as well as a *creation* of new relationships after the horrors of war.<sup>7</sup>

On the South African scene one can argue quite strongly for the need to encourage people from the different so-called "racial" groups to

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<sup>5</sup> Bromiley 1988:55.

<sup>6</sup> *A Message to the People of South Africa* (1968). Note the lack of gender-inclusive language. The Swedish word for "human being" ("människa") is grammatically feminine: we speak of "the human being/the human person" as "she" when speaking of her in general terms, i.e. quite the opposite to the generic use of "man" in English as in the document quoted above.

<sup>7</sup> Ericson 2001:27. See also Lederach 1995 (a North American Mennonite who combines Christian theology with peace research).

meet, and *build relationships*, across the “dividing walls” created by apartheid. In many black local communities one would also need to *re-build relationships* between people who took different stands (or were perceived to take different stands) in the anti-apartheid struggle or in the conflicts between the ANC and Inkatha.<sup>8</sup> The same would be true of families divided along political or “racial” lines.

Yet reconciliation is not only about *building* relationships: one also needs to be aware of *what kinds of relationships are being built*. This is highlighted by the example of white-black<sup>9</sup> relationships, where there *were* actually (quite frequent) encounters even at the heyday of apartheid. Yet the only encounters and relationships that were encouraged by law and custom (in the public as well as in the private, domestic sphere) were those of “master and servant”. Thus, while most white people *did* let black people into their homes on a regular basis it was almost exclusively in certain, subordinate and servant, capacities. To a Swedish person, unaccustomed to letting another person into one’s home to do domestic chores (including tidying one’s desk and cupboards) on a regular basis such an ongoing, perhaps daily, contact may appear quite (perhaps too) intimate.<sup>10</sup> Yet,

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<sup>8</sup> As aptly pointed out in Van der Merwe 1999. See also Ericson 2001:376-380.

<sup>9</sup> In this book I use “black” as a generic term encompassing people from all “population groups” not classified as “white” under apartheid. However, I am also aware of the debates regarding identity and (self) definition in South Africa today, as well as of the need also to bridge divides between people from these groups. When referring to them separately I use the terminology adopted by the South African Census of 2001, i.e. “Black African”, “Coloured”, “Indian or Asian”.

<sup>10</sup> In South Africa I have stayed mainly in student residences where we were responsible for tidying up after ourselves. On the few occasions when I stayed in places where a maid, employed by my landlady near the UCT or by a (white) friend with whom I was staying over, was cleaning my room together with the rest of the house, I had mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I grew idle and accustomed to someone else washing up my dishes and vacuuming the floor. On the other hand, I felt uneasy about having a stranger tidying up my personal papers on the desk or putting my belongings into an order decided by *her*. I had no experience at all of domestic servants (neither within my family, nor among friends and colleagues) before I came to South Africa, apart from the people employed by the local municipalities

one must also ask critical questions about the quality of those regular, and in some respects quite close, relationships. If we look at the *historical relationships between South African women from various social locations*, we can assume that many “maids” certainly had perfect opportunities to learn about the lives of their “madams” (and masters), at least in those (over two-thirds of) white households that could afford and wanted to employ domestic servants.<sup>11</sup> Yet few of the “madams” interviewed by Jacklyn Cock in her groundbreaking study from the late 1970s expressed any deeper understanding of the life situation of their black “maid” and other black women.<sup>12</sup> Thus one can speak of other types of “dividing walls” than merely physical ones: mental dividing walls that might be there even when white people had quite affectionate feelings towards their black servants. As in the words of one of my informants (in her 30s) when talking about her childhood:

We had a remarkable woman working for us... we actually had a very close bond... but I never asked the question ‘Why are you... you are such a nice lady, why are you working here?’ That never popped into my mind. So that shows you the effect of the system and how well it works: [that] this is how it’s

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in Sweden to assist elderly and infirm people (including my grandparents) with domestic chores (something which is often necessary, since the younger generation might not live in the vicinity of their parents and hence cannot help them out on a regular basis). The persons doing the domestic chores (in a number of homes) are employed by the municipality, and receive a standard salary. Then the elderly people in need of such assistance should pay according to their own financial means, and the outstanding amount is financed through our tax system, although in the last few years, as cracks have appeared in the Swedish welfare system, the fees for such assistance have increased.

<sup>11</sup> The estimate of “over two-thirds” is given in Cock 1991:34.

<sup>12</sup> Cock 1989:113-122,139-147. This study, which is based on research conducted in the Eastern Cape in 1978 and 1979, was so controversial that the author’s home was subjected to a dynamite attack (Cock 1989:2). Cock interviewed the “madams” and her black female research assistant interviewed the “maids”.

supposed to be and you never even realise that something is wrong.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the potential for direct communication, through which both parties could be challenged by each other's (life) stories, was not exactly enhanced by the fact that those in a subordinate and dependent position (out of their need to earn their living) developed the art of hiding their real thoughts and feelings in order to appease their "bosses". In the words of one of my black interviewees in his late 20s (whose mother had worked as a domestic servant):

You can not disagree with the person that you are dependent on economically.... that is one of the reasons why you usually have [black] people who would talk badly about their bosses behind their backs. If you sit in trains, you'd hear people complaining, you know, telling each other how bad their bosses are, and all those types of things, but they would not dare tell that to their faces.<sup>14</sup>

This was one important reason behind Steve Biko's conclusion that black South Africans primarily needed to empower themselves before any genuine dialogue with whites was possible.<sup>15</sup> Today not only white South Africans but also black people in higher income groups are, of course, able to employ domestic servants, and the "maids and madams" dynamics *might* be a bit different.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the

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<sup>13</sup> Interview No. 1. Cf. Botman 1996, about the "metaphorical locking devices" that enabled white South Africans to close their eyes and ears to the suffering of blacks. While this woman stressed that her parents did not harbour any personal animosity towards black people (that their attitude was rather that "you should be kind to them"), there was no equal interpersonal connection. She had herself started to question the system seriously during her student years and now works closely together with black colleagues on an equal basis, something that her parents have nothing against.

<sup>14</sup> Interview No. 2. See also Cock 1989:67-76, 81-83, 87-94, 97-101, and Ericson 2001:191-192.

<sup>15</sup> Stubbs (ed) 1988 (1978):42-43, 92.

<sup>16</sup> A study of "maids and madams" in post-apartheid South Africa is currently being conducted by Dr. Fiona Ross at the University of Cape Town.

example of white-black relationships in (apartheid) South Africa highlights the importance not only of building or re-building relationships, but also of *transforming existing relationships*.

When looking more closely into the *quality* of existing relationships, the distinctions made by the peace researcher Harold H. Saunders might be of assistance. Saunders distinguishes between “close” and “not close” relationships: i.e. (close) relationships between nations (and among subsets of people or groups) whose interests bring them into frequent and intense interaction, and (not close) relationships between those that are far apart and have relatively little to do with each other. These relationships may in turn be *conflictual or cooperative, destructive or constructive*. They are affected by both internal and external factors, and they may change in character over time.<sup>17</sup>

According to such an understanding, ethnic/religious groups in conflict would have a close, albeit conflictual and destructive, relationship. Here reconciliation would involve *the transformation of conflictual and destructive relationships into cooperative and creative ones*. Or, more precisely, into relationships where all parties involved can *realise their own, and discover each other’s, potential*.

The notion of realising one’s potential stems from the debate among peace researchers on different forms of “violence”: a debate which was initiated by Johan Galtung in the early 1970s. Like many of his colleagues at that time, Galtung was uneasy with the conventional concept of “peace” as encompassing only “the absence of war and armed strife”, since research solely into how to achieve this objective could easily become research into how to uphold a *status quo* benefiting only those who are already powerful (e.g. an authoritarian regime). He therefore proposed a distinction between *various form of violence*: personal/direct or structural/indirect. Personal/direct violence takes place when a personal agent commits an act of violence e.g. by killing another person in a battle. Structural violence is present when, although no individual might do any direct harm to any other person, conditions that prevent certain people from developing their potential (e.g. the uneven distribution of resources) are embedded in the social structure itself. Peace is then seen as the

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<sup>17</sup> Saunders 1990:12-13.



absence of both personal and structural violence.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Galtung also proposed the concept of “*cultural violence*”, meaning cultural elements (e.g. religious ideas) that empirically or potentially can be used to legitimise direct or structural violence.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever criticisms have been raised against Galtung for obscuring conceptual clarity by using the term “violence” for something that others may prefer to call “social, economic or political injustice”, I still find the idea of “peace” not only as “the absence of war”, but also as the implementation of conditions that enhance the possibility for *everyone* (regardless of skin colour, origin and gender) to realise her or his potential, to be a constructive starting point for building, rebuilding and transforming relationships between people in a society coming out of armed conflict (or actually in *any* society, including my own). Among peace researchers the need for conceptual clarity has also been solved by distinguishing between *two different types of peace*: “negative peace” (i.e. “the absence of war or armed strife”) and “positive peace” (the thicker concept of “peace” as proposed by Galtung).<sup>20</sup>

Biblical notions of “peace” would also include the human relationship with God. Within the wider ecumenical community, “*peace*” has been viewed holistically, not merely as “the absence of war or armed strife” but set within the context of relationships: “true peace” meaning “*every human being dwelling in secure relatedness to God, neighbour, nature and self*”.<sup>21</sup> This vision is also affirmed by peace builders and theologians working out of an explicit Christian ethos. Referring to the Biblical notion of *shalom*, they argue that the goal of peace building and reconciliation cannot be merely a restoration of *any* type of relationships or of a coercive or superficial “harmony”, but that the spread of God’s Kingdom entails overcoming and transforming

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<sup>18</sup> Galtung 1975:57-61.

<sup>19</sup> According to Galtung, elements of “cultural violence” can be found not only in religion but also in ideology, language, art, empirical science, formal science, and cosmology. Galtung 1997 (1996):201-207.

<sup>20</sup> Ericson 2001:82-83.

<sup>21</sup> “Final document: Entering into covenant solidarity for justice, peace and the integrity of creation” 1990:17 (Affirmation VI). See also the WCC Decade to Overcome Violence: [www.overcomingviolence.org/en.html](http://www.overcomingviolence.org/en.html)

existing systems of domination.<sup>22</sup> *Shalom*, as it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, refers to “a condition of wholeness, of complete welfare that encompasses the whole person” and “pertains to the individual, the community and to the web of relationships in which a person lives”.<sup>23</sup> Here Annaletta van Schalkwyk, one of the few female South African theologians to have written about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), argues that “*race*”, *class* and *gender relations* must be addressed in a vision of *shalom* for South Africa of today:

If justice is to be inclusive, it must be “gendered” in the sense that it must include the restoration of the human rights of both women and men, and not only of the rights of the dominant and “public” male figures in society. Healing is therefore about the equalisation of power imbalances between men and women, rich and poor, black and white. And it is when justice and healing meet that reconciliation is possible... The vision of SHALOM as justice and healing in our society therefore includes more than only the work done by the TRC. It includes a comprehensive picture of the attempts to create healing, justice and reconciliation in our society through the contributions of women, men, the religious community, civil society and government structures which are building a society on the basis of gender-inclusive justice, restoration and healing.<sup>24</sup>

As indicted by the example of black-white relationships during apartheid, the *character of the encounters* are also of paramount importance. The “madam and maid” (and “master and servant”) encounters violated every condition laid down in the “*contact hypothesis*”, which was developed in the United States with the aim of fostering reconciliation between different ethnic or “racial” groups through challenging established views of (oneself in relation to) “the

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<sup>22</sup> Some examples are given in Ericson 2001:133-134.

<sup>23</sup> Bartoli 2004:154.

<sup>24</sup> Van Schalkwyk 1999b:33. Cf. peace researchers like Brock-Utne 1988:63-64, 71-72, 123, and Muthien 2003:7-9, who argue that “peace” includes an end to violence and discrimination against women *both* in the public sphere *and* in the private, domestic, sphere.

other". These "madam and maid" encounters did *not* take place between people with *equal status* (the blacks were always in subordinate positions); there was little potential or opportunity for *personal acquaintance* in a way that allowed blacks and whites to get to know each other as individuals in their own right; they rarely met "*non-stereotypical individuals*" from "the other group"; there was little or no *social support* (e.g. from family, friends, law and customs) that favoured inter-group contact on an equal basis, and they rarely *co-operated* in order to attain a *mutually desired goal* (since the "boss" defined the goal which the servants then had to work for).<sup>25</sup>

In the "contact hypothesis", parallels between gender and "race" relations have also been made when stressing that mere encounters *as such* would not be enough to challenge stereotypes and pre-conceived ideas, but that the character of these encounters is essential. As in the following example:

... no two groups have more contact than men and women, and yet stereotypes about both are still commonplace.<sup>26</sup>

This observation begs the question: *what is the character of the encounters between women and men in post-TRC South Africa*, and how is one, inspired by the distinctions made within peace and conflict research, to characterise *the relationships between them?* As close or not

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<sup>25</sup> According to this contact hypothesis there are *five characteristics* of encounters that would enhance the possibility for the participants to have their preconceived ideas and views of "the other" challenged, namely: 1) that the participants have *equal status* (i.e. the expectation and perception by the participants of equality in the interaction), 2) that there is the opportunity for *personal acquaintance*, so that they can get to know each other as individuals in their own right, 3) that they meet "*non-stereotypical*" individuals from "the other group" (whom they are then able to discover as individuals with similar aspirations, wishes, grievances etc. as themselves), 4) that there is *social support* (e.g. from family, friends, law and custom) for equality and inter-group contact, 5) that a situation is designed where the participants must *co-operate* in order to attain some *mutually desired goal(s)*. Atkinson, Atkinson & Hilgard 1983:532-536 and Gibson 2004:203 (who specifically addresses the South African context). For a more in-depth treatment of these issues see Allport 1954 (and subsequent editions).

<sup>26</sup> Atkinson, Atkinson & Hilgard 1983:533.

close? As conflictual or cooperative? As destructive or constructive? As violent or non-violent? As relationships between individuals with equal opportunity to realise their respective potentials, or as relationships between masters and servants? While *not* presuming to make too broad and sweeping generalisations, I will in the following sections of this book highlight a number of *challenges and points of conflict*: first in wider society and then in the churches.<sup>27</sup> Here the readers of this book may, of course, also ask themselves critical questions about their own encounters and relationships with people of the opposite sex in *their* various spheres of life (e.g. at home, at work, and in church).

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<sup>27</sup> Thereby I leave aside the many mutual and friendly interactions between women and men in South Africa that also exist, also according to my own personal experience.

THE CONTEXT OF RELATIONSHIPS  
BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN IN  
SOUTH AFRICA TODAY  
*Some challenges for church and society*

With its high profile and public hearings, the TRC quite naturally came to shape much of the reconciliation discourse in South Africa.<sup>28</sup> Yet, with a couple of notable exceptions,<sup>29</sup> South African female theologians seemed to be less interested than their (admittedly much more numerous) male colleagues in participating in this reconciliation discourse. The silence about the TRC is particularly loud among black female theologians.<sup>30</sup> So what are then the main concerns of South African female theologians? My tentative conclusion is that their primary concerns are liberation and transformation: *liberation* from gender-based violence in the public as well as in the domestic sphere, from HIV/AIDS and the stigma attached to it, from oppressive church structures and religious doctrines. *Transformation* relates to relationships between women and men in the family, in the local community, in wider society *and* in the church.<sup>31</sup> Another common theme is the *sharing of their personal life-*

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<sup>28</sup> E.g. a very common response that I received when telling people I met “on the street” in 1996 and 1999 that I was doing research into reconciliation in their country was “aha, you are studying the TRC”.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Ackermann 1996 & 1997, and Van Schalkwyk 1999a & 1999b.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Maluleke 2005:109. Both Ackermann and Van Schalkwyk are white South African women.

<sup>31</sup> Challenging oppressive church structures and religious doctrines began seriously in the mid-1980s. Space does not permit any complete list of references in this footnote. For overviews see e.g. Landman 1995 and *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa & Africa* Vol. 4, No. 2 (1997) which also provides an extensive bibliography. On violence against women see e.g. a special issue of *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114 (2002), on HIV/AIDS e.g. Ackermann 2001; Phiri, Haddad & Masenya (eds) 2003; Pillay M 2003.

*stories, and those of their foremothers, and their search for a new identity, and a constructive role, in the "New South Africa".*<sup>32</sup>

Their concerns about "breaking the silence", about liberation and transformation, may be explained by the fact that, during the anti-apartheid struggle, women were often advised to wait patiently with their concerns and demands until the country was truly liberated, since apartheid was seen as the main enemy.<sup>33</sup> But now they appear to be fed up with waiting. Despite the scarcity of writings about the TRC, all of their concerns also highlight *links between the past, the present and the future*. Hence, their relevance for any official reconciliation discourse about building, re-building and transforming relationships in the South Africa of today.

One important link between past and present might be found in the extremely high level of *violence against women* in South Africa.<sup>34</sup> Lack of reliable statistics from the apartheid era makes it difficult to compare with certainty today's situation with what it was like in the "bad old days". Nevertheless, research from around the world

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<sup>32</sup> E.g. Landman (ed) 1996. Ackermann, Getman, Kotze & Tobler (eds) 2000. Phiri, Govinden & Nadar (eds) 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Bennett 1999 (1995):82. Maluleke 2005:108.

<sup>34</sup> According to police statistics South Africa has among the highest ratios of reported rape cases in the world: 126 per 100 000 people in 1996, and 118 per 100 000 people in 2004/2005. Such statistics are available at <http://www.saps.gov.za/> (for the years 1994-2004 in the *Country Report to the 11<sup>th</sup> United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention & Criminal Justice*, at that website). See also Bollen, Artz, Vetten & Louw 1999. However, since most cases of domestic violence and rape are not reported to the police, regular surveys asking people about crimes that they have recently experienced and whether or not they reported the matter to the police, are also necessary. A Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) national crime survey found that one-in-two rape survivors reported the matter to the police, while the three province survey by the Medical Research Council (MRC) on violence against women found that one-in-nine victims reported the matter. Given its specific focus on rape, the MRC's findings are, according to Vetten, likely to be more accurate. Both studies were conducted in the late 1990s and no follow-up survey had been conducted by 2005. Vetten 2005. Despite exact statistics being difficult to come by, the high prevalence of rape is however not disputed.

indicates that rape and domestic violence “happens in peacetime, is intensified during wartime, and continues unabated in the aftermath”.<sup>35</sup> A “*culture of violence*”, in the form of violent ways of relating to each other and handling conflict, frustration and post-traumatic stress, tends to remain, and take on a life of its own, even after the political conflict is resolved. Physical force becomes a socially sanctioned means to achieve one’s goals and to cope with difficulties in general, and women (and children) easily become the targets of male frustrations.<sup>36</sup> Evidence from the UN Population Council also points at *links between gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS*, since HIV-positive women were more likely to have experienced violence from their partner.<sup>37</sup>

Together with such *existing patterns of violence to resolve conflicts*, three additional factors have also been listed as characteristics of a society where gender-based violence is more likely to occur and/or to occur in more severe forms. These factors are *economic inequalities*, men preferring to share power among themselves and *excluding women from decision-making processes*, and finally *restrictions on women’s ability to leave the family setting*.<sup>38</sup> All of these factors can be found in South Africa.

A connection between past and present is evident also with regard to the second factor, namely *socio-economic inequalities*. Being seen as those with the primary responsibility for childcare and support, Black African women during the apartheid era were less welcome than their men on the labour market and in the cities. Influx control

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<sup>35</sup> Pillay, A 2001:36-37. Cf. Tickner 1994:35-36.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Hamber & Lewis 1997; Mulheir & O’Brien 2000:152, 155, 163. Sørensen 1998:49-53, 56. See also *Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Final Report*, “Consequences of Gross Violations of Human Rights”, Vol. V, Ch. 4, § 77, 132-134 on the link between domestic violence and experiences of trauma by ex-combatants from both state and anti-apartheid forces.

<sup>37</sup> In general, HIV-positive women were found to be 2.68 times more likely than HIV-negative women to have experienced violence from a current partner, and young HIV-positive women (18-29 years) were ten times more likely to report partner violence than young HIV-negative women. Muthien 2006.

<sup>38</sup> These four factors are listed in Muthien 2003:22.

regulations restricted them to the impoverished “homelands”, waiting patiently for their husbands, and when they made it into the urban areas they were largely confined to low-paid domestic or manufacturing work (quite often having to leave their children behind in the “homeland”).<sup>39</sup> No wonder then, that they saw apartheid as the greater enemy against which to mobilise. However, their patience as regards raising their own particular concerns during the struggle years has, in the words of Maluleke, left many of them “still waiting, without skills, without confidence, without health, without power”.<sup>40</sup>

These even greater economic and social burdens imposed on Black African women were not fully recognised in the *TRC discourse*, with its focus on gross human rights violations (more precisely the “violation of bodily integrity rights”<sup>41</sup>) in the form of killing, abduction, torture or severe ill-treatment. Furthermore, rape was not highlighted as a particular kind of human rights violation, despite evidence of the use of rape as a way of asserting male power in various armed conflicts around the world (including South Africa).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Graybill 2001:2-3.

<sup>40</sup> Maluleke 2005:108-109 (whose mother was one of these women waiting in the “homeland”).

<sup>41</sup> As enshrined in the Geneva Conventions. *TRC Final Report*, “The Mandate”, Vol. I, Ch. 4, § 54-56.

<sup>42</sup> The Geneva Conventions have in themselves been ambiguous in this regard, making no direct reference to rape or other gender specific crimes within their definition of “crimes against humanity”. Whilst Article 27 stated that all people should be treated humanely and be protected against acts of violence, it considered rape in a different category, namely as a crime against honour (against which women should be protected). Rape has thus been linked to the violation of family honour and rights (cf. the idea of women as “the cradle of the nation”), something which, according to Mulheir & O’Brien, would reinforce “the societal stigmatisation of raped women as dishonourable”. Mulheir & O’Brien 2000:42-44 (quotation from p. 42). However, in the course of the two war crime tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda there have, according to Sarkin, been “significant gains as far as rape as a war crime is concerned”. Sarkin 2004:352. Rape was classified by the South African TRC as “severe ill-treatment” and was explicitly mentioned in over 140 statements to the Human Rights Violations Committee. However, only about 10% of those who made statements were likely to



Thus, not only was the responsibility of those upholding and/or benefiting from apartheid (e.g. from forced removals) obscured (as people criticising the narrow focus of the TRC have argued<sup>43</sup>), but also the responsibility of those upholding and/or benefiting from sexism.

While violence against women occurs in all social classes, global studies also show that a woman's ability to leave a violent family setting would depend on her own socio-economic position and degree of *economic dependency*.<sup>44</sup> In South Africa legal and political reforms aimed at women's emancipation have proved to be futile if the women are not financially and socially self-sufficient.<sup>45</sup> Hence one woman involved with an ecumenical economic justice programme stressed that women in the church need to be empowered, especially economically and through education (e.g. through food gardens, small-scale business and economic literacy) because "it is difficult for women to set the boundaries vis-à-vis the men if they depend on the men for a living".<sup>46</sup> Their ability to make their own choices and combat both gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS would of course also depend on their access to information.

Evidence from the global arena also suggests that *women on the whole (or on the average) tend to have less power, influence and material resources than men within the same social and cultural group*.<sup>47</sup> This may not be

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appear at a public hearing, and women were more likely to give written statements, rather than public testimonies, about such ordeals. Rape was brought up only a few times by amnesty applicants. This might, according to Sarkin, have to do with a statement made by the TRC Commissioner Dr. Mapule Ramashala at a public meeting in March 1996 (i.e. well before the deadline for amnesty applications, which in the end was extended to midnight 30 September 1997) that those who committed rape or killed children were not eligible for amnesty. On the whole the Amnesty Committee denied amnesty in these few cases of rape. See further Sarkin 2004:348-354.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. Maluleke 1997 & Mamdani 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Mulheir & O'Brien 2000:10-11.

<sup>45</sup> Bennett 1999 (1995):83.

<sup>46</sup> Interview No. 3. Similar points are made in e.g. Ackermann 2001; Muthien 2006; Sideris 2000:154.

<sup>47</sup> Ericson 2001:90; Jarl 2003. For up to date statistics see the United Nation's website on "Women Watch": [www.un.org/womenwatch/](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/)

perceived as a problem as long as those with more resources are willing to share them, but it nevertheless makes certain people dependent on the good-will of others and, as pointed out by one of my black informants earlier in this book, “you can not disagree [at least not that easily, my comment] with the person that you are dependent on economically”.<sup>48</sup> The person who made that statement also told me that he had noticed that many men, including those who zealously fought against apartheid, would still be “kind of reserved when it comes to women’s issues”: something which he interpreted as these men “wanting to have the monopoly on power”.<sup>49</sup> In this context it might be worth noting that motivations for female submission have actually been similar to motivations for keeping black people down. Both women and black people have been described as “irresponsible”, “childlike”, “incompetent”, “passive”, and with “poor ability for abstract thought and logical argument”.<sup>50</sup> Hence even some men within the anti-apartheid struggle made

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<sup>48</sup> Interview No. 2

<sup>49</sup> Interview No. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Cock 1991:44–45. Such ideas have, of course, not been exclusive to South Africa. One argument against giving women access to Swedish universities in 1870 was that women were not “equipped by the Creator with the physical vigour that is necessary to endure prolonged contemplative study” and that every attempt to set oneself above God’s creation was doomed to fail. Hammar 2003:28. There was also a concern that women’s appearance in public life would imperil decency. The counter-arguments were that the lecture hall offered far fewer opportunities for indecency than the ballroom, that education was *part* of the struggle for decency, since it would improve women’s ability to make a decent living independently of men, and that, with their God-given decency, women would exert a good influence on academic life. Hammar 2003:27–28. The outcome of the debate was that women were admitted to the universities in 1870, albeit with restrictions regarding studies in law and theology, although it took another 30–50 years before professions that required university degrees were opened up to women. Women became eligible for government employment as medical doctors in 1903, as teachers in all government high schools (rather than primarily as teachers in private girl schools) in 1918, and in the early 1920s all higher positions in government employment (except in the military, in the police or as ministers in the Swedish Lutheran Church, at that time the established state church) were, in principle, opened up to women.

parallels between the situation of women and the situation of black people, pointing out that they were both penalised for physical characteristics which they could do nothing about, and that the liberation of women and the liberation of black people go together.<sup>51</sup>

The tendency of *men to prefer sharing the power among themselves* ties in with observations from various conflicts around the world that *men tend to assume the role as main actors in the “public sphere”: as combatants at the “war front” or as political leaders*. While war and social upheaval might bring about a shift in traditional gender roles (e.g. for women in the MK, the armed wing of the ANC<sup>52</sup>), women also tend to be associated with “hearth and home” and are expected to stand by “their” men, their families and communities, often assuming caring and supportive roles. Especially in nationalist and male-dominated cultures (e.g. among both blacks and whites in South Africa), the family tends to be highly valued as the “cradle of the nation” and women are to give birth to, and raise, “children for the nation” (i.e. for “their own side”). This can also make for rape of women from “the other side” as a war strategy, thereby driving home to the men from “the other side” their failure to protect “their” women, and possibly also (as in e.g. the civil war in former Yugoslavia) trying to make the rape survivors pregnant so that they will give birth to children not for their own group but for “the enemy nation”. Such examples of *women’s bodies being used as sites of male power struggles* are found in numerous accounts from armed conflicts around the world (including in the ANC-Inkatha conflict in KwaZulu-Natal). Nor might reporting abuses to the police be an option in a society where the police are associated with one of the opposing groups, and are perhaps even carrying out abuses themselves.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> E.g. Tutu 2004:48.

<sup>52</sup> By 1989, women made up about 20% of the MK, where they also trained together with the men. Cock 1991:162-166. Here the female MK cadre became “a popular mass image of the strong, liberated woman”. Cock 1991:198.

<sup>53</sup> On international examples see e.g. Ericson 2001:251-252 (on the taunts that the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, uniting Catholic and Protestant women, had to endure when entering into the political negotiations leading up to the peace agreement, the *Good Friday Agreement*, arrived at in April 1998); Höglund 2003; Mulheir & O’Brien

Furthermore, *stories of abuse and discrimination committed by people within one's own community tend to be silenced* as long as unity is required (or even enforced) against an outside enemy. Women belonging to an ethnic or "racial" group already discriminated against may be particularly reluctant to report abuses from men in their community for fear that such testimonies would only reinforce stereotypes of "their" men as being violent or sexist.<sup>54</sup>

The *loyalty* which women in the anti-apartheid movement expressed towards "their" men in setting the common struggle first is thus not an uncommon phenomenon. In fact, such loyalties appeared to prevail across the board. It was, for instance, striking that the female members of both the MK and of the South African army interviewed by Jacklyn Cock between 1986 and 1990 (i.e. in the heat of the struggle) were quite reluctant to mention sexism within their own (state or liberation) forces, despite other reports of cases of sexual harassment or even rape. Even after their struggle was won, former MK women were reluctant to come forward, partly due to a general shame at talking openly about such abuses, but also for fear of discrediting the liberation movement and out of fear of their rapists who might now be in high political positions. Hence it is of course difficult to know the actual number of cases and the actual names of individual perpetrators.<sup>55</sup>

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2000:17-35, 165-166, 169-174; Sørensen 1998:8-9, 15-18. On South African and other examples, see Sideris 2000. More specifically on South Africa, see Cock 1991:37 (on women in Durban being urged to become pregnant in order to replace the black people killed in the struggle), 49-50 (on the idea of women as "the mothers of the nation" found in both African Nationalist and in Afrikaner culture), 116-124 (on the loyalty and support expected of white women whose husbands served in the army); Graybill 2001; Ericson 2001:175; Ross 2000:77-78. As well as *TRC Final Report* "Regional Profile: Natal and KwaZulu", Vol. III, Ch. 3, § 410-423, and "Special Hearing: Women", Vol. IV, Ch. 10, § 64, 67-68.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Mulheir & O'Brien 2000:11, 14.

<sup>55</sup> By 1989, women made up almost 14% of the Permanent Force of the South African army (called the South African Defence Force, SADF) but did not have combat roles. There were reports of sexual harassment within the SADF. Yet, one high-ranking SADF woman interviewed by Cock stressed that their problems were "not with the men" but with

Yet the mere possibility of some of these *men today being in positions with the power to decide over policies affecting women's health and security*, as well as a recognition of the numerous abuses carried out by members of the police and army (during the war in Namibia, in

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“lesbians”, “loose girls” and some “jealous wives” (Cock 1991:98, 145). The two ANC submissions to the TRC acknowledged that some female MK soldiers had been subjected to abuse, exploitation and even rape (euphemistically called “gender-specific offences”) by some of their male “comrades” in the MK camps in Zambia, Angola and Tanzania. However, the names of the perpetrators were not disclosed in the submissions, and they choose to be part of a collective amnesty application submitted by the ANC rather than applying for amnesty individually and making full disclosure. One female MK soldier who initially testified before the TRC about having been raped by fellow “comrades”, retracted her testimony when Mathews Phosa, at that time the ANC premier of the Mpumalanga Province in South Africa, threatened to sue her. This, according to Graybill, “no doubt had a chilling effect” on other women who were thinking about coming forward. Graybill 2001:3-6 (quotation from p. 6). On rape or sexual assault within the liberation movements, see also *TRC Final Report*, “Special Hearing: Women”, Vol. 4, Ch. 10, § 48-50. Cf. Curnow 2000, where one of the female MK soldiers (interviewed also in Cock 1991:150-155) was now more outspoken about sexism within the movement: how she and her female colleagues often had to “prove themselves” (e.g. regarding strength, courage and endurance) and how they could also be subjected to sexual harassment (although she did not mention rape). On gender relations in the MK, see also Cock 1991:161-169. Regarding my personal position on this sensitive matter, I should add that during my childhood, youth and student years in Sweden, I remember the ANC being portrayed as the “good guys” fighting the evil and absurd apartheid system. Thus, the revelations of such abuses also carried out by some of the members of the liberation movements came as a great surprise and shock during my doctoral research. Being one of the beneficiaries of the liberation struggle (without which I would never have been able to make the friends that I have made, and visit many of the places that I have visited) I certainly do *not* have any interest in discrediting that struggle and those who took part in it. *Nor* do I wish to perpetuate any generalised stereotypes of black men as inherently violent. However, the problem is that, as long as the individual men who *did* commit abuses do not come forward (and are not encouraged or coerced by their colleagues to come forward), many innocent men might remain part of the “suspected collective”.

“policing” the townships, and against female anti-apartheid activists in detention<sup>56</sup>) *raise questions with regard to the transformation of structures and relationships within post-apartheid (and post-TRC) South Africa.*

With regard to *sharing power in the public arena in the South Africa of today*, the new post-apartheid constitution has established non-discrimination as a guiding principle. South Africa has signed the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and is also among the countries in the world with the highest number of women in Parliament (just over 30 percent).<sup>57</sup> Yet, regarding practical implementations, the budget for the Commission on Gender Equality was (in 1998) only 1/3 of the budget for other Commissions<sup>58</sup> and the political bargaining process (and informal networks) may in practice quite often exclude female politicians.<sup>59</sup>

With regard to the *domestic sphere*, men have (in black as well as in white families) traditionally been expected to make the major decisions and to earn (and control) family income.<sup>60</sup> Such gender roles were also (in particular for Black African women under “Native Law”) supported by the legal system during most of the apartheid

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<sup>56</sup> Cock 1991:215-217; Ericson, 2001:175; Esau 1997:44-47; Ross 2000: 75-79.

<sup>57</sup> See further in Bennett 1999 (1995):82; Graybill 2001:1. The proportion of women in the South African Parliament was 30% after the 1999 election. The global average regarding the proportion of women in parliament was at that time 13,4%. *The SADC MPs companion on gender and development in Southern Africa* 2002:85. With the April 2004 election the proportion of women in the South African parliament increased to 32.8%. Women make up 47% of the Swedish parliament: ([www.riksdagen.se](http://www.riksdagen.se)).

<sup>58</sup> Such as the Human Rights Commission and the Youth Commission.

<sup>59</sup> One political analyst has pointed to “the masculinity of party politics, elite bargaining, and functioning of state bureaucracies as impediments to implementing an agenda that puts a priority on improving the status of women” and that women MPs were often “ridiculed and excluded from key informal discussions and important committees”. Graybill 2001: footnotes 20-21 (referring to Goetz 1998). Cf. Sørensen 1998:25.

<sup>60</sup> Morrell 2001:18.

era.<sup>61</sup> Quite a few (black as well as white) women interviewed in the late 1970s and late 1980s<sup>62</sup> expressed a sense of powerlessness and inequality in relation to their own husbands. While no such thorough study has yet been made of post-apartheid South Africa,<sup>63</sup> things *might* begin to change at the grass root level. The same woman who stressed that “women in the church need to be empowered, especially economically” also told me that in her own community (i.e. the working class Coloured community in the Western Cape), the wife is quite often the person in the household “controlling the purse” because she is regarded as more responsible. Also in middle-class families the wife would want to know how the money is spent.<sup>64</sup> Yet there may also be plenty of examples of men being reluctant to share power, and where challenging established traditions in the home may

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<sup>61</sup> Well into the 1980s, married women were relegated to the legal status of minors. A woman could not sign a contract without the permission of her husband, and he had to represent her if she was sued. New legislation in 1984 provided for the abolition of marital power, except for Black African women, who were still subject to their husband’s marital power according to the “Native Law” which the apartheid government regarded to be in line with “African tradition”. For further details, see Cock 1991:42-43. On current challenges for women under African Customary Law, see Bennett 1999 (1995), who also (pp. 84-85) points out that the bulk of this official version of African Customary Law in South Africa was recorded by European administrators, missionaries and anthropologists who were blinkered by their own European (at that time very patriarchal) culture. Their main informants were African male elders, since it was assumed that only men controlled significant information. This gender bias tended to conceal many of the rights and powers actually enjoyed by women in African cultures.

<sup>62</sup> I.e. women interviewed in Cock 1989:96, 125, 133-135; Cock 1991:40-41.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. note 16.

<sup>64</sup> Interview No. 3. Cf. Field 1991. However, in his study of a working class Coloured community on the Cape Flats, Field found that even if the man generally allowed his wife to “control the purse” and co-ordinate household duties, insofar as it removed the burden of such domestic responsibilities from his shoulders, this did not necessarily mean that she had sufficient power and space to explore and realise her own desires, wants, needs and interests, or to break out of an oppressive and abusive relationship, since her power remained strictly within the confines of the terms laid down by her husband.

even exacerbate conflict.<sup>65</sup> For instance, while workers at a rural rape crisis centre reported growing support from men in denouncing rape (in particular rape by strangers), the very same men expressed concern when women contested men's power in the home. Men whose wives were employed demanded full control of their wives' salaries, and some of them claimed that they were being "abused" since their working wives no longer performed their domestic tasks with the same efficiency. Women who did not meet these demands were vulnerable to domestic violence.<sup>66</sup> It was also suggested that some of the men who saw their position in society being eroded (e.g. by unemployment which thwarted their traditional role as providers) might cling to power in the one area where they could traditionally assert their manhood, namely in intimate relationships.<sup>67</sup> This last observation begs the question about *the churches possibly also being among the last bastions of male power, and hence what might happen if this power is challenged?*

A number of other observations also warrant a *particularly critical look at the churches (and in principle also at other faith communities)*. First of all it is a temptation for churches all over the world to become mirrors of society. This was also the case in apartheid South Africa, where even members of the same denomination experienced apartheid quite differently and took different stands in the struggles.<sup>68</sup> So *in what*

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. the point made by Morrell: "...the country's history also produced brittle masculinities – defensive and prone to violence. For white men, the uneven distribution of power gave them privileges but also made them defensive about challenges (by women, blacks and/or other men) to that privilege. For black men, the harshness of life on the edge of poverty and the emasculation of political powerlessness gave their masculinity a dangerous edge. Honour and respect were rare, and getting it and retaining it (from white employers, fellow labourers or women) was often a violent process." Morrell 2001:18.

<sup>66</sup> Sideris 2000:155.

<sup>67</sup> Sideris 2000:155-156. Cf. Morrell 2001:22, 28-30; Sørensen 1998:56. See also research conducted by the Gender Desk of the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA) which suggests that men too feel victims of society and are struggling to cope with changing roles and societal expectations. Kesavan 2001.

<sup>68</sup> Faith Communities and Apartheid.... 1999. What made for this diversity of experience in the denominations that came to South Africa



*ways do the churches of today mirror society with regard to relationships between women and men?*

*Secondly*, the notion of “*cultural violence*”, as proposed by Galtung, highlights the importance of *exposing and discussing religious ideas that can be used to legitimise conditions that hinder everyone from developing her (or his!) “true potential”*. *Thirdly*, in accordance with the *contact hypothesis*, we may ask *what kinds of encounters are offered in church environments, and what attitudes, norms and customs are communicated* not only regarding the “proper” relationships between blacks and whites but also between women and men? Bearing in mind that (as noted earlier) no two groups of people have had more contact than women and men, and yet stereotypes of both are still prevalent, we may also ask about the prospects for women and men of meeting in a setting of equal status with non-stereotypical roles in South African church environments?

Here teachings (and practices) regarding power and authority would be of particular interest. Why are *women* (and children) so frequently the targets of *male* frustrations rather than the other way around? What do (people within) the churches say about the “right relationships within the family” and are there certain religious norms and values that (apart from socio-economic dependency) restrict women from leaving the family setting? How are such norms and values connected with prevailing images of God and how (s)he has ordered creation?

In exploring these issues, I will focus on *two critical cases*: 1) *violence against women*, 2) *women assuming “non-stereotypical” roles in the churches*. Yet, since I do not simply want to dwell on the existing situation(s), I will, above all, give space for some alternative visions

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in the course of colonialism was that they faced the challenge to cater both for their white members of European descent (“Settler Christianity”) and for their Black African, Coloured or Indian converts (“Mission Christianity”). “Settler” and “Mission” Christianity have either coexisted within the same (multiracial) church structure (e.g. in the Roman Catholic Church and many Protestant churches of Anglo-Saxon origin such as Anglicans and Methodists), or separate church structures were set up for the various “racial” groups within the same denomination (e.g. in the case of the Reformed Churches of Dutch origin).

by South African women challenging their respective church institutions.<sup>69</sup> In doing this I will take my starting point not only in the notion of a gender inclusive *shalom*, but also in the need to create “safe spaces”.

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<sup>69</sup> Even though I recognise the huge importance of the African Initiated Churches (AICs), the women I refer to in the following sections come either from the “mainline” churches of European origin or from Pentecostal churches. There are a number of reasons for this limitation. First of all, I did not meet any women from the AICs pursuing postgraduate studies in theology in the Western Cape region during the period of my research and I mainly found published works *about* them (e.g. Heuser, Körner & Rosenfeld 2004) rather than *by* them. My own European background, lack of personal contacts in any AIC (since my Black African friends belong to “mainline” churches), linguistic limitations and inability to stay in South Africa for more than a couple of months at a time, also made me conclude that it would not be feasible for me to get to know any particular AIC congregation or women’s group well enough to make an “in-depth enough” study. Hence I concluded it to be more in accordance with my personal and academic competence to look at “mainline” churches of European origin and (as it turned out in the course of my interviews) also at Pentecostal churches.

## THE CHURCHES AS “SAFE SPACES” OR SPACES AND AGENTS OF SHALOM

### *The notion of a “safe space”*

One important expression that I frequently came across (both in Northern Ireland and in South Africa) in the course of my doctoral research was that of a “safe space”. A common strategy for various reconciliation initiatives was to give people the opportunity to share their stories. Talking about their own experiences, and listening to people from “the other side”, would enhance the development of common ground, understanding, empathy and relationship building between people from various “sides” in the conflict. Therefore, such encounters had the potential to *challenge and transform existing relationships and existing stereotypes about “the other”*. But in order for that to happen, one first needed to create spaces where people could come together, and where they felt *“safe” enough to be challenged*.

A “safe space” would, first of all, mean *physical safety*, i.e. a space which people could enter without being killed or injured. Food, shelter, medical care, etc. would also be necessary, since a daily struggle to secure such basic needs leaves people with very little space to deal with their past or reach out to others. Secondly, it meant *psychological and social safety*, in the form of a space where people could speak about their personal experiences without being interrupted, ridiculed or disputed. For the unofficial story-sharing initiatives, it also meant a *confidential space*, which on the South African scene could serve as an important complement to the official space (and public acknowledgement) provided by the TRC. Furthermore, the establishment of safety would be integrally linked to power, and hence the power dynamics between the participants would need to be taken into consideration. Yet, not only being in a subordinate position, but also losing one’s dominant position, could make people less confident and less able to express themselves and/or listen to “the other side”. In the story-sharing initiatives, the participants were, therefore, (e.g. through jointly formulating their rules for

interaction<sup>70</sup>) to ensure *an equality of space and power* between themselves. Thus, by the very way in which they were structured, these initiatives challenged remaining power discrepancies in society at large.<sup>71</sup>

These observations highlight the need for economic and social empowerment, for spaces where people (including women) can speak about their personal experiences (including experiences of violence) without being interrupted, ridiculed or disputed, and for spaces where people from traditionally subordinate as well as from traditionally dominant groups (including women and men) are encouraged jointly to ensure an equality of space and power between themselves. So: *what are then the prospects for the churches to be(come) "safe spaces" in these various respects?*

Other aspects of safety would include the opportunity to work through one's own trauma and achieve a sense of security in one's own identity before meeting with people from "the other side": an observation which also made for a variety of "*preparatory safe spaces*". First of all *people who had experienced violence* needed their own "safe spaces" where they had the opportunity to express their feelings of pain and anger and have their suffering acknowledged: to mourn the past, but also to incorporate the lessons of the past into their present life, transforming the story of their trauma into a "new story", no longer of shame and humiliation but of human dignity and survival, and to recover hope for the possibility of human community (possibly also in support groups with victims from both "sides" in the conflict).<sup>72</sup> Here one psychologist at the Trauma Centre in Cape

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<sup>70</sup> This was most explicitly expressed in the case of the Corrymeela Community (the biggest and oldest reconciliation group in Northern Ireland), where the participants were asked to formulate their rules for interaction on the basis of their answers to the question: "what would help you feel confident enough to talk about difficult things?" The rules formulated by the group tended to include: confidentiality, mutuality, and asking questions in a way that enabled others to speak. I experienced a similar process, leading to similar rules, in the Healing of Memories Workshop in Cape Town in which I took part in 1999. Ericson 2001:318-319, 419.

<sup>71</sup> Summarised in Ericson 2001:436-442. See also Ericson 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Ericson 2001:99-102, 262-265, 377-379, 436, 443.

Town pointed out that religious bodies (be it Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Hindu) might have a particularly important role to play, since

most people when things have happened to them would ask “where was God?... if I pray every day, if I am a God-fearing, life loving individual, what has happened? Is it something that I have done... that has made God forsake me, or is it something that I have to change for God to protect me? Is it God testing me to stay away from certain things?”<sup>73</sup>

In accordance with one of the specific challenges highlighted by South African female theologians, namely *violence against women*, this observation of course invites the question: *what kinds of safety does the church environment have to offer women who have survived rape or domestic violence? What hope for human community do the churches provide, and what message is communicated about God’s will, meaning and purpose?*

Another form of “preparatory safe spaces” would be spaces where people from “the same” (e.g. ethnic, “racial”, or religious) group could first *meet among themselves and explore their past (including their own part in the conflict) in order to achieve a sense of security in their own identities*.<sup>74</sup> This observation highlights the importance of another theme in the writings by South African female theologians: namely the sharing of their personal life-stories, and those of their foremothers, in their *search for a new identity, and a constructive role, in the “New South Africa”*. This search could, of course, also be pursued jointly, and the anthologies that I have come across actually seek to be inclusive of voices from women “across the board”, even though the hierarchies of power, reflecting who is most likely to be able to pursue higher education, *and to write an international (or at least nation-wide) publication in her first language, also do shine through*.<sup>75</sup>

An awareness of such hierarchies between women in South Africa also highlights another important meaning of a “safe space”, namely a

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<sup>73</sup> Interview No. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Ericson 2001:313-315, 406-407, 440-441.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Mairtin-Cairncross 2003.

*space where those normally in a subordinate position can find refuge from, and possibly empower themselves to interact with, those normally in power over them.*<sup>76</sup> With this observation in mind, let us now turn to some initial observations regarding the spaces, tasks and relationships of women in the South African churches.

### *Women in the churches: some initial observations*

When going to church in South Africa, I was struck by the strong position that the churches still have in South African society, especially in comparison with my home country, where regular church attendance is less than 10%.<sup>77</sup> I subsequently learned that in many South African communities the churches constitute the most important grass root structure, and that women's organisations are often the backbone of the parish or congregation: in social work, lay ministry, fundraising, cooking, baking and cleaning the church.<sup>78</sup> I also realised that such *gender roles*, and *separate organisations* for women and men, have a long history, dating back (at least) to the early Christian missions to Africa and other non-Western continents.<sup>79</sup> Another observation is that the preference of women for organising themselves separately in their churches (where men are still overrepresented in leadership and in the ordained ministry),

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. the observation, from my doctoral dissertation (Ericson 2001:439-440) and from the introduction to this book, that those normally in a subordinate position would first need to reclaim their human dignity and empower themselves before a genuine dialogue is possible.

<sup>77</sup> In Sweden most people belong to Christian churches. Almost 80% belong to the Swedish Lutheran Church (previously the established state church). While some people do not have any formal religious allegiance, others may belong to any of the denominations arriving or arising in Sweden in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century through various Protestant revival movements, or (especially among immigrants) to the Roman Catholic Church or various Eastern Orthodox Churches, or to other faiths such as Islam (see further: [www.sweden.se](http://www.sweden.se) and [www.skr.org](http://www.skr.org)). However, most Swedes attend church mainly on ceremonial occasions (e.g. christenings, weddings and funerals) rather than for regular worship, and in a recent survey only about 1 in 10 saw religion as important in daily life. Celsing 2006.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Esau 1997:47, 52; Mouton 2001:80; Theilen 2005:79.

<sup>79</sup> Okkenhaug (ed) 2003.

might, at least partly, be based on a need to create their own “safe spaces”, where they can handle their own affairs, independently of those normally in charge (i.e. the men).<sup>80</sup>

Being aware of the hierarchies of power also *between* women from various social locations within South Africa, one may note that the descendants of the “missionised” peoples have also articulated *their* need for “safe spaces” away from their madams and bosses: spaces where they can articulate their own (more oral and participatory) spirituality, and where they do not risk being dominated.<sup>81</sup> As in the words of one of the persons interviewed in a recent study of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) when explaining the resistance of the Manyano (i.e. Black African women’s groups) towards “too close” a cooperation with the other women’s organisations within the MCSA:

... since they work for the whites, they would be seeing some dominance again. They might think: “Monday till Saturday I am with Madam and Sunday I have to come and meet her again. Monday till Saturday I am used to say “Yes madam, yes Madam”. On Sunday it’s impossible for me. Now from Monday to Friday to Saturday she ... is used to say “Do this and do that” and then all on Sunday she should be able to say “Lets do it this way”. And on Monday I am going back to her work. Now, if there was some misconception or a point of departure on Sunday when we meet, I wonder if my Madam is going to bring that out in my work, she might say: “I did not like your attitude yesterday”.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Even the women’s missionary societies of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe had an emancipatory role, since they gave women the opportunity to engage in charitable activities outside the confines of the home and allowed them the space to handle religious and organisational affairs without the control of their menfolk. Mikaelsson 2003:39; Okkenhaug 2003:11-12. In South Africa, the variety of auxiliary services, associations and guilds for women in the (traditionally white) Dutch Reformed Church might also serve such a function. Mouton 2001:80.

<sup>81</sup> E.g. Goedhals 1998:93; Theilen 2005: 84-85.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Theilen 2005:84.

In an integrated women's organisation they also feared being subjugated or laughed at by white and coloured women.<sup>83</sup> Even when the power imbalance, and socio-economic difference, is not that stark (e.g. among fellow academics) it has been argued that black women still need their separate spaces of freedom (be it for coffee and gossip or in politicised women's organisations), because elsewhere they always have to "function in integrated environments which are defined by structured inequalities of power" forcing them to operate "on the defensive".<sup>84</sup>

Unfortunately I am not in a position to offer a "quick fix" to the challenge of sisterhood across "racial" and socio-economic divides. Nevertheless, one important observation is that the churches might, ironically enough, have the potential for promoting relationship building between women across many other barriers, by providing them with one *important source for empathy and common ground*: namely their *experiences of religious ideas and institutions as in certain respects being oppressive*. Quite a few female theologians (across "racial" lines)<sup>85</sup> have experienced constraints, and a denial of their potential, as a result of imposed gender roles: experiences ranging from being assigned the role of the "natural housekeeper" (whatever one's own personal talents and interests), to not being taken seriously as a theological student (or not getting a job in a congregation after finishing one's theological training). Another common concern is how their churches have addressed the issue of violence against women.

At the same time I do *not* want to de-value the traditional, and quite impressive, work of the women's organisations within the churches. My question is rather how the churches might be able to offer *space*

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<sup>83</sup> Theilen 2005:84.

<sup>84</sup> Abrahams 2002:62-63. Abrahams is an academic and activist who under the apartheid legislation would have been classified as "Coloured". She identifies herself as black and as an African Womanist. Cf. note 9.

<sup>85</sup> E.g. Ackermann, Draper & Mashinini (eds) 1991. Contributions by for instance Margaret Briggs (Anglican), Emma Mashinini (Anglican), Sister Bernard Mncube (Roman Catholic), Brigalia Bam (Anglican), Thoko Mpumlwana (The Order of Ethiopia, i.e. one of the African Initiated Churches). More recent examples will be highlighted in the following sections of this book.



*for the potential and talents of each individual (beyond “racial” or gender stereotypes): be it the potential and talent for leadership and ministry, for childcare and youth work, for cooking and baking, for fundraising, for social work or for theological reflection.<sup>86</sup>*

### *Violence against women and the churches as potentially safe or unsafe spaces*

Rape recovery centres often use the term “*a safe space*” to signify *a protected environment where rape survivors can find refuge*,<sup>87</sup> an observation which begs the question: how safe may the church environment actually be for women (and children) who have survived rape or domestic violence?

One statement which I still remember was made by a woman whom I met during a two-day workshop for active church women in the

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<sup>86</sup> It is important to underline that, although this book focuses on the experiences of women, *men* too might be denied the opportunity of developing, or showing, their full potential because of existing gender stereotypes. As in the case of a Swedish friend of mine who spent six months as an intern in a Coloured (Lutheran) congregation in the Western Cape in the early 1990s. He enjoyed being among the people, and to them it was probably a new experience to interact with a white person as an equal. Yet, at times he missed not being given any particular tasks, except for just being among the people. Towards the end of his stay, when they had got to know him better, some of the leaders of the congregation told him that they had actually asked their Swedish partner church (the Swedish Lutheran Church) to send them a young woman who could work in their crèche. His spontaneous reaction was “but why did you not tell me that from the beginning? I would have been happy to do that”. However, they had just not been able to imagine a young man (and a theological student at that) working with children on a regular basis (even though he had occasionally come to the crèche to play with the children). Hence they lost out on his competence. My friend had actually worked at a crèche in Sweden just before he went to South Africa, so his home church probably assumed that they sent just the right person to their partner church in the Western Cape. However, I must admit that men are, in practice, still quite rare (although not totally nonexistent) among the regular staff in Swedish crèches as well.

<sup>87</sup> Van Heerden 2003:86.

Western Cape in early 2003 – a workshop which was about how to address gender-based violence. She said that the first step in her work would have to be to find a venue *that was not part of the church building*. So, why was the church building not considered a suitable space for abused women? While there was no good opportunity for me to ask that question directly during the workshop, I later on mentioned that statement to one of the facilitators, asking her why abused women might not want to approach their local church. Her explanation was the following:

I think there's some people who believe that when you go to church there are certain things that you don't talk about there, like you don't talk about sexuality, even the church don't... you come to church to think of nice things, to think of God and how God loves you and to get strength to go back to the nasty things at home.<sup>88</sup>

The *tendency to avoid, or down-play, such sensitive issues, and rather keep up a superficial harmony*, is also evident in a story told by another woman about how her (Pentecostal) church had handled a situation of child abuse in their midst:

There were about six children. And the father abused basically all of them, for years and years and years. And the church knew about it. Yet, there were no social services like counselling that were offered to the family. The father was put under censure [i.e. he was allowed to attend church but not to give testimonies during worship or partake in the Holy Communion or serve on any committee] for an undetermined period basically, but that's all... It never went to court because that is not how things are dealt with in general in our kind of communities. The mother had a nervous breakdown, but... the Bible teaches, Pentecostal preaching teaches, that as a women or as a wife you have to be submissive to your husband. So, you don't go against your husband, you don't go to court saying that: "Oh, my husband is sexually abusing my children". You hope that it will stop by itself and if not you try to sort it out with your husband... praying for him, speaking mildly to him,

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<sup>88</sup> Interview No. 5.

and the husband would maybe say... “Oh, I confess my sin”. If it still continues for years you’ll call in maybe one or two of the elders of the church or maybe the pastor. And they speak and they pray for the husband: “In Jesus name”, they would say, “we bind the spirit of sexual abuse over him. Lord, he will never do it again... and we trust that he is cleansed.”... And they pray for the children, yes. That the Lord will also set them free and that the Lord will help to, they need to forgive their father, that’s very important. They pray that the children must please forgive their father... The same goes for the mother. They would pray for the family and that the relationship between the mother and the father would, you know, heal. [But] they won’t go further than that. They don’t go beyond that, and then they leave with a handshake normally or a hug, saying “My sister be blessed, you know, just trust in the Lord... the Lord will see to all your needs” That kind of thing. And they leave the family behind, who is still sitting with exactly the same problem... And what makes it bad probably is that these are Christian people; not only Christian people, but people who claim that they have received salvation. They are born-again... And these are the things that are not addressed by the Pentecostal churches in general. On a small scale it is changing, but there is still a lot to be done.<sup>89</sup>

Similar observations: about avoidance and silence (and emphasis on female submission and endurance) can also be found in accounts from other churches, as in a dissertation presented in 1997, where the mainline Protestant churches, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, in South Africa were criticised for their silence on rape, and where the author made an explicit link between the past and the present in her observation that even the classical documents of the ecumenical resistance movement (e.g. the *Kairos Document* of 1985) had failed to address the use of rape as a political and war weapon in South Africa,

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<sup>89</sup> Interview No. 6. Cf. Phiri 2000 (on a case study of domestic violence among members of a Pentecostal congregation in a former South African Indian neighbourhood in Durban).

and this at a time when “many women were raped and sexually harassed by policemen”.<sup>90</sup>

Here, and in subsequent articles by female theologians on rape and domestic violence, a number of beliefs and practices were identified as still promoting the abuse of *women* (rather than of men) and leading to the continuing silence within the churches in South Africa on rape even after the transition to democracy. These beliefs included first of all certain patriarchal theological traditions according to which *God intends men to dominate and women to submit* and that *women (as “descendants of Eve”) are morally inferior* to men and cannot trust their own judgement (and hence are in no position to criticise their men).<sup>91</sup> A related factor would be the hierarchical structure of the church with the (usually male) minister as head of the congregation and as someone whose authority is not unnecessarily questioned:

This hierarchical structure of the Church most often exemplifies the parishioners’ relationship to God. God is on

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<sup>90</sup> Esau 1997:47. Cf. my observation at the beginning of this book (note 6) about the lack of gender-inclusive language in another classic anti-apartheid document (*A Message to the People of South Africa* of 1968).

<sup>91</sup> Phiri 2002:21. One worldview which developed within the Early and Medieval Church was that of the world as a divinely sanctioned hierarchical order (first God, then spiritual creatures, then men, then women, then children, then animals, then matter), where the image of God mirrored the patriarchal concept of the man as the head of the family, ruling his people. Moreover, referring to the story of the Fall, women came to be seen as “the Devil’s gateway” and a “natural temptation” to men. Eve, who persuaded Adam to eat from the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, was seen as representative of *all* women, and part of the curse of the Fall was God’s command that from now on the man should rule over her. The mind-body dualism in Western Christian thinking (developed under the influence of Greek philosophy) also led to a negative view of women as subordinate and inferior, associating them with the “lower”, weaker and evil part of human nature, while men (and God) became associated with the “head” of human nature: spirituality, morality, intellect, rationality. These ideas are described (and challenged) in e.g. Ackermann 1991, Rakoczy 2004:32–39, and Van Schalkwyk 1999b:51. Then of course, according to apartheid cosmology black people (female and male alike) were regarded as closer to the animals in this “divinely sanctioned” hierarchy.

high, for God is holy, and they are low because they are human and sinful. The minister becomes a mediator between God and humans. Whenever the minister speaks, they believe God has instructed it, and therefore they listen... If the ministers and therefore the Church leadership are silent on rape, it is to be expected that the Church and the wider community will be silent on rape too.<sup>92</sup>

While stories of abuse might sometimes be shared within the women’s own church groups, the preference of the women to organise themselves separately easily leads to such stories being dealt with as “women’s issues” separate from the whole life of their church.<sup>93</sup> Thus the church as a whole, and its leadership, is not adequately challenged.

Here the men would possibly also need to ask themselves critical questions about *why* the women prefer to organise separately (is it out of a desire for a “safe space” away from male dominance?), and if there have been enough efforts to encourage them to take part in the official decision-making bodies and theological debates. Or are the men just all too happy with letting the women quietly carry out their traditional supportive work and nothing else? *How can women and men jointly create a space within their church where they are challenged by each other’s life stories (including stories of abuse experienced by women), share power between themselves and care for the safety and well-being of each other?*<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Esau 1997:50.

<sup>93</sup> Esau 1997:51-52.

<sup>94</sup> It is important to note that I am not criticising separate spaces *per se*. At times there might be good reasons for women to meet with other women and men to meet with other men. However, the critical issue is how space, power and tasks are divided in an organisation (or a society) as a whole: what kinds of shared spaces exist and if certain people tend to be silenced, excluded or subordinated. E.g. one of the victims/survivors support groups that I visited in Northern Ireland in 1998 had found that it worked better to organise their self-help groups for youngsters along gender lines. At the same time the organisation as a whole (*and* its leadership) was inclusive of women and men, and of Catholics and Protestants.

A second type of belief that has been identified as promoting abusive relationships is the belief that God commands Christians to hurriedly (or even automatically) forgive and reconcile with those who sin against them. Here sermons on *love and forgiveness* “can help to sustain relations of domination and help subordinated men and women to accept violence against them”,<sup>95</sup> As can a “suffering Christ” theology which emphasises *suffering and endurance as desirable qualities* for a “good Christian” and that women in particular have been chosen to be “suffering servants”.<sup>96</sup> As in the following account from a woman in the Western Cape:

Sometimes I wonder why I was raped. All the suffering is driving me crazy, sometimes I wish I was dead. Why do you think we suffer so much and yet God is someone who loves us? I guess Christ also suffered much and he did not complain. Maybe that is what I need to do: be silent about my suffering and accept it.<sup>97</sup>

Jesus is seen as setting an example of self-sacrifice who thereby redeems humankind. An abused woman might, therefore, choose to endure suffering because she believes that, through her suffering, she will redeem others or that through her passive acceptance the perpetrator might repent and become more righteous and responsible. She might be more concerned with the well-being of the perpetrator than with that of herself, and even protect him by arguing that he did not mean it that way, that he was drunk, angry and had lost his mind.<sup>98</sup>

Given the testimony of the New Testament that Jesus was (incarnated as) *male*, the idea that *women* in particular (rather than all Christians equally, *or*, for that matter, all *men*) have been chosen to be “suffering servants” to me appears somewhat inconsistent. One possible explanation might be that the idea of female subordination, together with general stereotypes about desirable “feminine characteristics” (i.e. gentleness, kindness, softness, chastity, obedience

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<sup>95</sup> Esau 1997:37. Cf. Phiri 2002:21.

<sup>96</sup> Phiri 2002:21.

<sup>97</sup> As quoted in Esau 1997:54. Esau had been working as a hospital chaplain, counselling abused women.

<sup>98</sup> Esau 1997:58-60.

and dependence on men<sup>99</sup>), fits well with the ideals of self-sacrifice and suffering for the sake of others. Yet I cannot help wondering *what course South African history would have taken if black people under apartheid had been instructed to uncritically assume the role of “suffering servants”?* If they had believed that through their passive, accepting suffering and unselfish labour, they would eventually be able to “redeem” their white bosses? If they had said to themselves “Oh no, the apartheid architects surely do not quite understand what they are doing, they have just lost their minds, they are normally quite decent people, and if we just suffer patiently then they will, in due time, change their ways”? If black people had interpreted their situation in that way, then surely we would not have been able to be here today, as whites and blacks together? So why should abused women be more patient?

Yet, the suffering Christ theology *is* traditionally a very important part of the life and teaching of the Christian church. So what alternative interpretations are offered by South African women?

### *Alternative visions and interpretations of suffering, servanthood, love and forgiveness*

First of all, the image of God as someone who through the incarnation in Jesus Christ, *came to share the ordinary life and suffering of humankind*, and who therefore can understand us, can be of great comfort to women (and men) who have experienced violence. As in the testimonies of a couple of Black African female small-scale traders at the local minibustaxi-rank in Pietermaritzburg, interviewed by another overseas researcher:

God, he was man when he was on earth, and he was a real man, I mean he must have felt hunger and thirst and sore feet and feel thirsty and tired and all that. And when these people *sjamboked* him, I mean, he must have been bleeding all over, and all this cross business. And then he is dead and God makes him alive again. And then Thomas comes and wants to feel if Jesus has really all these wounds [John. 20:24-29]. And that I can understand... God, he is so much more real if you feel that

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<sup>99</sup> Maluleke & Nadar 2002:14-15.

he is also somehow, how can I say that? somehow disabled. Then God... he knows how it feels when someone breaks your body apart. And then he can weep with you. And when God weeps with you, then you know that your pain matters and all that.<sup>100</sup>

And in the words of the second woman, who spoke of the Eucharist as allowing space for mourning a body broken by rape:

Christ, his body is broken for us, so then, he is in pain for us, so if our bodies are bleeding, then he knows our pain. And then it is like Elijah, so you feel like you sit under a broom tree, all alone [1 Kings 19] and you want to die... and then God comes to you and says: Take, and eat and get up, you are my child, then you feel: Yes, God wants that I live. And then you can go. God, his body was broken, so he will understand. And he wants us to live nicely... he died so that we can live nicely, there must be bread and justice also from Monday to Saturday, and also in the world.<sup>101</sup>

Such accounts of *Jesus as a compassionate fellow traveller and liberator* would certainly challenge any hierarchical worldview and idea of God as the stern “patriarch” ruling his people.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore it has been pointed out that with his life and example, Jesus can also serve as an *alternative role model for men*, as someone who (contrary to established stereotypes about the behaviour of so-called “real man”<sup>103</sup>) showed his feelings, admitted to weakness, stressed the connection between leadership and service, and (as will be further explored later on in this book) interacted with women in ways that challenged the patriarchal culture of his time.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Fröchtling 2002:47. To be *sjamboked* is to be hit or beaten with a *sjambok*, i.e. with a heavy whip, usually made of animal hide.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Fröchtling 2002:50.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. note 91.

<sup>103</sup> Maluleke & Nadar 2002:14-15.

<sup>104</sup> Such an alternative masculinity could serve as an inspiration for young white men refusing conscription into the South African Defence Force (SADF) during apartheid. When asked to comment on the recruiting slogan “let the army make a man of you”, one of them replied: “The



Esau also points out that Jesus confronted suffering, embraced life and preached the Good News to the oppressed. Thus she makes a distinction between suffering imposed on the victim because of the sin of others (e.g. in rape) and suffering taken upon oneself to further a particular cause of love and justice and assist others to gain release from bondage (as in the case of Jesus Christ whose death and resurrection confronted the destructive powers of the world and refuse to give suffering the last say in our lives).<sup>105</sup> Hence the churches are seen as responsible for spelling out a theological vision that *celebrates women’s lives as a gift from God*, a gift which should not be taken away through violence and abuse.<sup>106</sup>

A *more liberating and life-affirming* notion of servanthood, with the *Christian servant ideal* as a source of inspiration, can possibly also be found in the tradition, especially among black women, of co-operative service to one’s community. One example is the life of Sheila Masote (one of the many women who testified before the TRC) who spoke of how her Christian faith had enabled her to survive. God, to whom she prayed while in detention, was the pillar of her life. Her faith was intertwined with *community service* (starting food gardens) from which she also gained solace and strength in the face of poverty and oppression. Serving was her way of being religious, and she identified with *Christ as the great servant of humankind*.<sup>107</sup>

Here I can also recall two examples given to me by the organiser of the Survivors Support Programme of the Diakonia Council of Churches in Durban whom I interviewed in 1999, when I asked her to tell me a couple of “success stories” about how people who had come to their stress and trauma healing workshops had recovered and again started to embrace life. Both of these examples were women who had become involved in various projects to support their communities. The first example was a woman whose husband had been killed before her eyes when she was expecting their child. He

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more manly thing to do is not to be a soldier. To acknowledge weakness is the greatest strength. Christ was the greatest and most manly man who ever lived. He wasn’t afraid to admit weakness”. Quoted in Cock 1991:87. Cf. Rakoczy 2004:100.

<sup>105</sup> Esau 1997:53-54, 60-63.

<sup>106</sup> Esau 1997:63.

<sup>107</sup> Sheila Masote interviewed in Van Schalkwyk 1999b:118-121, 147-151.

was a pastor who had always helped others in the township, and when the other pastors had fled, he was the only one left to bury those killed during the violence. During the workshop this woman came to think about other women who had also lost their husbands. She went back to the township and gathered them together. They started to develop ways of supporting themselves and their children, such as a food garden, a sewing club, and literacy training. Then she began to think about the children who had lost not just one but both of their parents. She gathered the women together and started a crèche for those orphaned by violence, as well as for other children in the township. They also started a small school for handicapped children. Later on she took the initiative to develop home-based care. Young people from the township were trained to visit and help old and chronically ill people. At what she called a “medication party” she asked the local minibus-taxis to transport patients to the clinic, where the doctors then treated them on a voluntary basis. The second example was of a woman who looked after street children, most of whom had taken to the streets during the violence of the apartheid and the (1990-1994) transition era. She opened a house where they could come during the day: to get counselling, to do arts and crafts, to hear African folktales and to get food.<sup>108</sup>

Such examples of active, life-giving service (rather than merely passive suffering), often combined with their own economic empowerment, might have the potential to *teach “us” individualistic Westerners (and here I include myself) an alternative interpretation of Christian servanthood and community* (for women and men alike).<sup>109</sup> It

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<sup>108</sup> Interview referred to in Ericson 2001:383. Unfortunately I never got the opportunity to meet with these women in person.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. the emphasis that African female theologians put on hospitality and life-giving service to one’s own family and community as well as to strangers and guests, which they identify as a core value of African traditional culture and spirituality (Oduyoye: 2001:90-109). However, they also combine this notion with an understanding that “men too are made in the image of God and so must be helpers, nurturers and sustainers *of all that God cares for*” (Oduyoye 2001:105), and further highlight that one must guard against hospitality being exploited (Oduyoye: 2001:73-74, 94-95). Maluleke & Nadar also make the point that there is an inherent danger in romanticising the ways in which people belonging to poor and marginalised communities are actively

also gives an alternative perspective, at least from some women, about the potentially empowering role that the traditional (female) work of service to their communities might have for them when carried out on *their own* initiative.

The notion of *forgiveness and reconciliation*, too, is an important part of the Christian message. Yet ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation as virtues have also, as already in the South African *Kairos Document* (1985), been criticised for glossing over past and present evils and leaving oppressive power structures unchallenged. Later on, forgiveness was identified as *problematic from the victim’s perspective* also in the TRC process. Some of the victims who testified found calls for forgiveness and reconciliation helpful, while others felt that the TRC censored their feelings of anger and grief by expecting them to reconcile too hurriedly. While no one whom I have talked to among victims/survivors support groups advocated unrestrained revenge, they nevertheless argued for reparation and restitution as a necessary part of reconciliation, and some of them found the granting of amnesty to seemingly unrepentant perpetrators to be quite offensive.

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engaged in strategies for survival and transformation. While their activities might be impressive, there is a danger that people in more privileged positions may conclude that these poor (but very active) people “are in fact not that destitute and that they actually have survival tactics and liberating traditions and resources after all”: a conclusion that might become “a perfect rationale” for the privileged to escape responsibility for “reparative actions of repentance”. Maluleke & Nadar 2004:15. While Maluleke’s and Nadar’s prime targets for criticism are certain white (especially male) South African theologians who are proponents of the so-called “agency-of-the-oppressed discourse”, such criticism also has something to say to members of the international community who might be impressed by the active and life-giving service of black women while not asking critical questions about *why* these women are in a position where they have to work so hard. I.e. questions such as “why was the husband of the first woman killed in the first place (who instigated and benefited from the violence)?”, “why are there so many orphans and street children?”, “why did the patients at the medication party not have enough financial means to pay for regular health care?”, “what is the responsibility of the South African government, of white (and more economically privileged black) South Africans, of overseas visitors and researchers and of the wider international community?”.

Christians working with victims also stressed that victimised people initially needed to be allowed to express *all* their feelings in a contained (or “safe”) space, not suppressing anger but channelling it into something constructive.<sup>110</sup>

Hence notions of forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be approached in a simplistic way. There are, as formulated in my previous research, *a number of questions to be considered in each particular situation of conflict and abuse*. This includes an analysis of the power dynamics between victim and perpetrator and of how much of a common ground and a harmony of interest they might have. It includes an analysis of the nature of the violation, its consequences (physically, mentally, economically, socially) in the life of the victim and perpetrator respectively, and what efforts that have been (or can be) made to address these consequences. It includes an analysis of how well prepared they might be for a meeting where the perpetrator can be truly challenged by the victim’s story and be prepared to enter into a process of restorative justice (which includes confession, forgiveness, restitution and reparation). In short one would need to ask: *what is the prospect for building or restoring a “non-violent” relationship between them, or for transforming a destructive relationship into a creative and constructive one? Or might it be better to assist the victim to recover and re-build her life independently of the perpetrator?*<sup>111</sup> Surely it would also be important to ask such questions in instances of rape and domestic violence?

With regard to domestic violence, one specific problem has to do with the churches’ teaching on divorce. *Is marriage to be regarded as a particular kind of relationship so sacrosanct that it should be upheld at all costs?* In the experience of one psychologist at the NICRO Women’s Support Centre in Cape Town:

Many of the women whose stories I have heard... are churchgoing [from different denominations]... Some have received help and support from their churches, but many have

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<sup>110</sup> Ericson 2001:345-351, 361-364, 421-427. See also: [www.khulumani.net](http://www.khulumani.net)

<sup>111</sup> Ericson 2001:457-458. On restorative justice, which was a guiding principle of the TRC, see Ericson 2001:420-427; *TRC Final Report*, “Concepts and Principles”, Vol. I, Ch. 5, § 82.

kept quiet about their abuse for fear of not being believed, or have not been helped at all because they have been told either that it’s their fault, or that they must try harder to mend the relationship and must go home and pray about it.<sup>112</sup>

In the workshop that I attended in 2003 for active church women on how to address gender-based violence, the issue of divorce also came up, and whether it was always a sin. One of the facilitators would give the following answer to a Christian woman who saw divorcing an abusive husband as breaking her promise to God:

First of all you don’t make any promises in our liturgy to God, you make your vows to the other person. And the second thing is that we teach people that when a man has beaten you and abused you and shown no respect for you then *he* has broken those vows – not you... this man has already divorced you, you’re no longer one, so if he has been mutilating you it means that he has already caused the separation, not you.<sup>113</sup>

In practice she believed that the approach would differ among the clergy: some would still counsel an abused woman to stay in the marriage and make sure she did not upset her husband so much so that he would beat her, while other (male and female) clergy would enable women to get out of abusive relationships.<sup>114</sup> We did not come

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<sup>112</sup> Ahrends 1999:21. Similar experiences of how women have been instructed by elders or pastors to try harder to mend the relationship and not upset their husbands too much have also been reported in other writings, e.g. Maluleke & Nadar 2002. Such experiences are not necessarily exclusive to South Africa: Ahrends, for instance, also refers to a study carried out in one Anglican diocese in Australia between 1989 & 1993.

<sup>113</sup> Interview No. 5.

<sup>114</sup> Interview No. 5. Even in *Sexual violence in South Africa: A search into its causes (A study presented to the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference by its Theological Advisory Commission)* 2000, it was argued (on p. 18) that “While separation and divorce as the breaking of a vowed commitment are tragic, the greater tragedy is to tell a woman to stay in an abusive relationship as ‘God’s will’ for her”. Another interesting issue would be the role of the Women’s Manyano groups or the Mother’s Union within the churches. According to Theilen’s study of the women’s

to talk about what an alternative notion of forgiveness and reconciliation in such relationships would entail, since the main concern at the workshop was to save the life (and safeguard the physical, psychological and spiritual well-being) of the woman rather than to rebuild any relationship between her and her abusive partner.<sup>115</sup> Other Christian initiatives to combat violence against women also stressed that the task was to engage in a “justice-making” that would unbind violated women, something which involved *holding the perpetrator accountable*:

Taking responsibility for his own actions, being accountable for and facing the consequences (even the legal consequences or the ending of the relationship) allows him to change, because he has owned his problem. Quick or cheap forgiveness – with an emphasis on understanding why he does it or compassion for his suffering and anguish that comes out in violence – is not helpful. It must run deeper, otherwise the violence continues. He must be held accountable and face the consequences of his actions long and short term.<sup>116</sup>

The churches have also been challenged to promote an ethics of “rectificatory justice and love” (which involves the righting of wrong)

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organisations within the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), women who got divorced had to leave the (Black African) Women’s Manyano, but could ask for readmission by undergoing another six months trial period. Theilen 2005:89. However, since she focused on the relationship between women of different “races” (as well as the place and role of African traditions) in the MCSA, Theilen did not further explore whether testimonies about domestic violence might be heard in the Manyano groups, and what kind of instruction that a group would give to any of its members who was abused (or whose children were abused) by her husband (e.g. if she was instructed to remain in, or leave, the abusive relationship).

<sup>115</sup> In the workshop we also had exercises in “assertiveness”, i.e. being able to communicate within a relationship in a way that is neither docile nor aggressive or threatening. This might be seen as a tool to enable women to *transform* an existing relationship in circumstances where it is still deemed to be transformable (e.g. when discussing the division of housework in a household where the wife works full-time outside the home).

<sup>116</sup> Buckenham & Dlamini 2000:36.

for communities ravaged by rape.<sup>117</sup> In comparison with the TRC process, one might thus conclude that the people whom I came across supporting abused women stressed accountability (including facing the legal consequences) and (if possible) reparation and restitution, while being more sceptical of reconciliation and forgiveness.

### Theory versus practice

Since 1997 there *have* been some more discussions and church publications on violence against women.<sup>118</sup> Yet it still appeared to me as if “*women’s issues*” in practice tended to remain at the bottom of the priority list (e.g. when it came to the allocation of resources). During the first years of my research in the Western Cape (2003-2004), it turned out to be quite difficult to find any regular, flourishing, stable work in the churches on gender issues and violence against women which I

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<sup>117</sup> Khumalo & LenkaBula 2003:32. Their call for an ethics of “rectificatory justice and love” comes towards the end of the article, so the authors do not spell out more concretely what such an ethics would mean in practice.

<sup>118</sup> E.g. Murray 1999 and *Sexual violence in South Africa: A search into its causes* 2000 (presented to the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference, SACBC). The first document is a course manual written at the request of the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town (Church of the Province of Southern Africa) to be used within parish groups during Lent 2000 (or any other time of the year). The second document has a long history. In 1992, Prof. Denise Ackermann and Prof. Susan Rakoczy began working on a position paper on sexual violence against women for the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the SACBC. This position paper was then subjected to critiques by members of the TAC and discussed by the bishops, eventually resulting in this document. When the TAC initially refused to publish the document, it became the centrepiece of a longer publication with contributors from other organisations, i.e. Rakoczy (ed) 2000. This longer publication was a cooperative effort that included the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA), the Gender Desk of the Justice and Peace Department of the SACBC, the Lumko Pastoral Institute and in the end also the TAC. The fact that it took so long to arrive at a published document is to me in itself a sign of how much effort that it took to break the “culture of silence” referred to by Rakoczy in her Introduction to this edited publication.

could follow on a long-term basis.<sup>119</sup> Even the initiative behind the workshop that I attended in 2003 constantly struggled with funding: a situation which negatively affected their ability to conduct more regular work. Another (probably related) big obstacle was the unpopularity of the subject:

One of the biggest obstacles in our work is that this is a very unpopular subject... very few in the churches say “oh, we want to hear a sermon about violence against women”, or the priest “oh, I’m going to do a whole series on this”, you know, priests do series about how to read the Bible and how to pray and how to fast etc. etc... so it’s a *very* unpopular subject and makes many people to feel very awkward. Even women are not ready to talk about it easily... especially in the church.<sup>120</sup>

Furthermore, even *the church environment itself might not be a “safe space” for women*. As in the case of one woman who is by now one of the few ordained female ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church

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<sup>119</sup> This was one of the reasons behind my decision (in late 2004) to concentrate on the writings of female theologians as well as to approach women pursuing postgraduate studies in theology and women in key positions in their churches or in some NGOs working with victim empowerment and/or gender issues.

<sup>120</sup> Interview No. 5. Struggle to obtain funding, while at the same time having to re-orientate their work towards identifying and addressing the burning issues of post-apartheid South Africa, actually appeared to be a common phenomenon among quite a few of the church-related organisations that I visited already in the course of my doctoral research. Previous overseas sponsors who had supported their anti-apartheid struggle now began to support other projects (e.g. those run by the government, or projects in countries deemed to be in more need than South Africa). Ericson 2001:77. Thus, people addressing gender-based violence would not be alone in having to struggle to obtain funds. *However*, their focus on an “unpopular” topic, which makes people “feel very awkward”, might (at least according to my “qualified guess”) easily give them a lower place in the “funding hierarchy”. However, this particular initiative actually made a breakthrough in relation to their church just before this book was finished.



(DRC).<sup>121</sup> In her initial letter, she told me that in her first congregation in a rural area (where she had a part-time post) she “could have sued the whole church council for sexual harassment”.<sup>122</sup> When we met later on, and I asked her to elaborate further on that statement, she explained that first of all the church council consisted of a lot of farmers who were used to be the ones in charge and boss everybody else around.<sup>123</sup>

Furthermore, most of *them* had never studied past matric, and there *she* came, being in her twenties, with six years of studies behind her and two academic degrees. The harassment took place when they all assembled in the vestry in order to go into the church together. She herself insisted on greeting the men in the church council simply by a verbal greeting but then *they* all came forward to kiss her on the mouth. She herself interpreted this treatment, which she had to endure each Sunday before worship, as a “power thing”.<sup>124</sup> This ties in

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<sup>121</sup> The DRC accepted the ordination of women in 1990. However, by 2001, only 25 of the 65 women who (since 1990) had completed their theological training at any of the three theological institutions of the DRC (Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Stellenbosch) had been called to congregations. 10 were in permanent positions and 15 served as part-time ministers. Mouton 2002:305. Under apartheid, the DRC was the white church within the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa, although today local DRC congregations (e.g. in more urban areas) may also have some black members and even ministers. The first coloured woman (Michelle Boonzaaier) was actually appointed minister in the DRC in May 2007 (in the DRC congregation of Helderberg, Somerset West). Merton 2007.

<sup>122</sup> Interview No. 7a.

<sup>123</sup> Interview No. 7b.

<sup>124</sup> Interview No. 7b. In my interviews I did not specifically ask the women if they themselves had experienced sexual harassment in their churches. My question was formulated more broadly, asking them about their “experience of the church as a woman”, and then it was up to them to spontaneously tell about the experiences that they found most relevant (or felt most comfortable talking about). Hence, I cannot tell how representative this experience is of female ministers in the DRC (or in other South African churches), but its mere occurrence might warrant a more thorough empirical study (or survey) in the DRC about how female ordained ministers and pastoral assistants experience their work situation.

with the observation, made in a study of women and the TRC, that sexual harassment (or even rape) might be used to punish *a woman who is “out of place”*, i.e. who has “broken the conventional boundaries of social placement” by becoming involved in the (“male”) public sphere.<sup>125</sup> In this particular case it would be a way for the men traditionally in charge of the church to show a woman who had taken on a traditionally “male” role (as a theological student and in pastoral ministry<sup>126</sup>) her “proper place”, i.e. a place with which *they* felt comfortable. Yet, she also acknowledged the difference between (often more conservative) rural areas and the more urban congregation where she has subsequently worked as an ordained minister,<sup>127</sup> and that some men in the central leadership of the DRC actually *do* want to make more space for women in the official structures.

This case does not only illustrate that the church might not even be a “safe space” for its female workers. It is also *one* example of what might happen to *women who assume “non-stereotypical” roles in the church*: women whom the men do not quite know how to relate to but still want to assert their power over. In her own words: “you can either be a mother, or a slut, or a virgin and I was neither”.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Quotation from Ross 2000:80. Female anti-apartheid activists could be taunted by police saying that they had joined the struggle because they could not find a man, or as unpaid prostitutes, and the few white women exposed for MK or ANC activities were portrayed by the white press as “failed”, or “misled”, women. Cock 1991:170-174; Ross 2000:87; *TRC Final Report*, “Special Hearing: Women”, Vol. 4, Ch. 10, § 91-92.

<sup>126</sup> The church council in question had never considered that it might be a woman coming, as evident by a couple of concrete examples mentioned to me in Interview No. 7b.

<sup>127</sup> Even though they did not want to appoint her in a position with more responsibilities because she was a woman, as they said in a meeting where she was herself present. Interview No. 7b.

<sup>128</sup> Interview No. 7b. These “typological characters” are in turn modelled on two opposite female characters from the Bible: “the seducer” (“Eve”) who tempts the man to sin (thus making *him* less responsible), and the “good woman” (modelled on the Virgin Mary as “mother” and “virgin” in one) who is idealised, worthy of protection, and held up as a good example to men. Ackermann 1991:96, Rakoczy 2004:341, Walker 1991:148-149. In Sweden a tendency to divide women into such “types”

## *Women in non-stereotypical roles and alternative visions of “making and sharing the space”*

The tendency of men to make educated women feel unwelcome in the sites of power that they as men have arranged (as “safe spaces” for) themselves (e.g. in the church council) does not appear to be the prerogative of (certain sections of) the DRC. When assisting me to find the dissertations in theology and religious studies presented by female students at the historically black University of the Western Cape (UWC), one of the librarians spontaneously began to tell me about the numerous talks that he had had with many of the (few) female theology students attending the UWC since the early 1980s.<sup>129</sup> Although most of them, according to him, were top of the

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has also persisted. It was a guiding principle in Christian pastoral literature on family life and sexual ethics well into the 1950s, although such traditional views came to be questioned especially from the 1960s onwards. Gustafsson 2001:47-48, 137, 141-142, 316-320, about the Swedish Lutheran Church (to which almost 80% of the Swedish population belong and which until only a few years ago was the established state church). The tendency to divide women into “good women” and “seducers” may persist even in secular contexts. As seen in a recent study of Swedish court cases, according to which rape victims were often repeatedly asked about how they had been dressed, their previous sexual history etc. while such questions were generally not asked to the men on trial for rape. Wennstrand 2002.

<sup>129</sup> The Theological Faculty of the UWC started out as a Faculty for the education of future ministers in the Coloured church within the Dutch Reformed family of churches (the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, DRMC), and the arrival of the first female theological students to the UWC took place during the same period as the DRMC began to open up its offices for women (in 1982 as ordained ministers). During the 1980s, the Faculty became interdenominational as students from other denominations joined, and staff members from other denominations were appointed. The Faculty also had Black African (and occasional white) students. Interviews No. 8 & 9; Smit 1999:note 3. At one of the very first conferences on feminist theology held in South Africa (in 1984), the arrival of (more than the scattered few) women at theological faculties was connected with the acceptance of women’s ordination into the ministry since women (especially from disadvantaged backgrounds) were unlikely to study theology if there were hardly any employment prospects. Landman 1984:22-23. A similar pattern can be seen in

class or second best, very few continued to go into the ministry, and one of the things that might have put them off was the church council meetings which they had to attend during their studies in order to learn how their respective churches operated:

And already there they had problems... the church councils are mainly men, and most of them are old, and if they're not old they're very conservative. That is the reality that women face, and now we have these young ladies coming in: they're learned, they're skilled, they're qualified, they can express themselves eloquently, and they have strong convinced ideas. Now, that against the old guard who will just argue in the same line of thought which they have done for many years, and because they are together they tend to sing the same song with the same refrain and the same melody, the same words, you see? So, they don't want anything new... And also they feel threatened by these young ladies coming in, young women having the education and qualification. So it was problematic, and if they [i.e. many of the female theological students or candidates for ministry] aired their view normally it was treated with if not outright contempt then it was questioned

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Sweden. In 1905 the first woman received permission from the Swedish head of state (i.e. the king) to take an undergraduate degree in theology. In 1912 the first two female theological students arrived at Lund University (which had had a Faculty of Theology dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century: [www.teol.lu.se](http://www.teol.lu.se)). However, female theological students were scarce, largely due to limited employment opportunities. Employment opportunities increased with the acceptance of the ordination of women to the ministry in the Swedish Lutheran Church in 1958. In 1962, the first woman presented a doctoral dissertation at the Faculty of Theology in Lund (more precisely in the field of Church History), but female postgraduate students remained scarce until the mid-1990s. I belonged to the first generation in Lund with a fairly even split between female (40%) and male (60%) doctoral students. Andrén 2001:40; Appendix 2 (Avhandlingar vid teologiska institutionen i Lund 1900-1999) 2001. On the basis of personal contacts and conversations, I strongly suspect that there would be a similar pattern at the other major (and slightly older) university in Sweden (Uppsala University) which has had a Theological Faculty for centuries ([www.teol.uu.se](http://www.teol.uu.se)).

over time and they had to continuously convince or to defend, and they realised quickly that it’s not going to be easy.<sup>130</sup>

While these students were black women and the DRC woman quoted earlier was white, there seem to be some similarities regarding their experiences of not being taken seriously by the church council. Many of them in fact opted not to go into the ministry, but rather be part of the diaconal work (e.g. socio-economic development, counselling) either in the church or in nongovernmental organisations or local government employment. In NGOs and local government structures they could even assume leadership positions.<sup>131</sup> It thus appears as if, to many of them, *non-church institutions offered a more enriching and inspiring space to develop their potential and give something back to wider society.*

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<sup>130</sup> Interview No. 9 (i.e. the formal interview with him after our initial spontaneous conversation). This might not only be a gender but also an intergenerational issue. In her studies of women’s groups in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), Theilen found a tension between younger and older women. While older women tended to be more conservative and eager to uphold traditional notions of hierarchy, young women (with higher education) considered gender equality a natural feature of life and demanded that a person should occupy a particular position because of her or his skills rather than for reasons of age or gender. This tension seemed to be greater among black women. Theilen 2005:241-242. The UWC Faculty of Religion and Theology was closed down at the end of 1999, and restructured into the (smaller) Department of Religion and Theology within the Faculty of Arts (see further [www.uwc.ac.za](http://www.uwc.ac.za)). At that time the URCSA moved the education of their prospective ministers to Stellenbosch Theological Faculty, where they, since January 2000, study together with prospective ministers from the DRC.

<sup>131</sup> Interview No. 9. I was given similar answers from a couple of other people at the UWC Department of Religion and Theology when I asked why there were so few female postgraduate students. They said that the churches are often not so friendly towards women, and hence women have less incentive to pursue theological studies. I was also told (Interview No. 9) that a woman with a postgraduate (Masters or Doctoral) degree might be perceived as *more* of a threat to male hegemony in the church.

I was also told about a number of concrete cases where *women who had successfully finished their studies with the intention of going into the ministry had been sidelined or excluded* by their churches.<sup>132</sup> In that regard the librarian found more similarities than differences between the Protestant denominations.<sup>133</sup> However, women from the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) for Coloureds and later on the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) where Coloureds and Black Africans unified, ironically enough the church of the much celebrated Confession of Belhar (1986),<sup>134</sup> appear to have had a particularly hard time even in receiving a call from a local congregation, and hence become ordained as a minister, after

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<sup>132</sup> Interview No. 9. A couple of these women were also known to me. On difficulties that female clergy might experience, see also Cloete 1999:11-12 on her experience of being one of the first female ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1994-97, Landman 2002 on female theologians and ministers in the Dutch Reformed Church, Theilen 2005:68-69, 244 on female ministers in the MCSA, and Rakoczy 2004:235-236 on the general situation for female ministers in many South African churches.

<sup>133</sup> With regard to his own (Roman Catholic) Church, he had actually come to believe that it might become *not only a safer space but also a more representative ministry if women were to be ordained*. In his own words: "If one looks at the scandals of sexuality then it's more male priests who do that. And I must say that the Christian church is actually a female church, because the people that carry the church here are females. Look at the nuns, you don't find these scandals. Look at the families, the women are there, taking the children, many of the males they stay at home, they're drunk or they don't want to go or whatever, the women go to church. So, instead of having a family church, we actually have a church driven by women. So why can't women be in there [as priests]?" Interview No. 9.

<sup>134</sup> The Confession of Belhar (1986) was initially formulated and accepted in the DRMC and subsequently became one of the foundational confessions of the URCSA. The former DRMC and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) united in April 1994 to form the URCSA. The so-called Dutch Reformed Bantu Church, later called Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) was founded in 1910 in the Free State, in 1932 in the Transvaal, in 1951 in the Cape and in 1952 in Natal, mainly amongst the Nguni-speaking and Zulu-speaking tribes of South Africa. Now URCSA operates in South Africa, Namibia and Lesotho. See further: [www.urcsa.org.za](http://www.urcsa.org.za)

completing their theological training. While one of the churches (the DRMC) coming together in the URCSA in theory accepted the ordination of women into the ministry as early as 1982, in practice the first woman was not ordained until 1992.<sup>135</sup> By the beginning of June 2007 there were only *nine* ordained female ministers (four of them ordained since September 2006) among all the 536 ordained ministers in the URCSA. Some of these women had had to wait for quite a while after completing their training and becoming legitimated by the Synod before they received a call from a local congregation and thus could become ordained.<sup>136</sup>

Out of her experience of rejection and exclusion from the ordained ministry, the first woman who completed theological training as an

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<sup>135</sup> Interviews No. 9 & 10a. NG Sendingkerk kry vrou as leraar 1992.

<sup>136</sup> Interview No. 10b. According to official statistics from the URCSA Synod, obtained 8 June 2007, 9 out of 536 ordained ministers in the URCSA were women. One of them was in Namibia (where there were 37 ordained URCSA ministers altogether) while the rest were in South Africa. In addition 3 women had been legitimated by the URCSA Synod and were still waiting for a call to a local congregation. The call-system is used in the Dutch Reformed tradition in South Africa whereby ordination into the ministry takes place only after a candidate has been called by a local congregation. The Synod does not play any role in the placement and calling of a minister to a particular congregation. The local congregation thus has the authority to call any person deemed eligible (i.e. legitimated) by the Synod, *and* also to exclude any person that they do not approve of. One of the women recently ordained in the URCSA had been waiting for over 30 years after finalising her theological studies before she could become ordained. Others had to wait for “only” 2-4 years. There were also women who dropped out of their theological studies because they saw few employment prospects. Interview No. 10a-10b. Women in the (predominantly white) Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa have experienced similar problems, Landman 2002. Here Landman also noted that women who had been legitimated by the DRC Synod (and hence were allowed to preach, but not to administer the sacraments without being ordained) were used as “cheap labour” in the church while congregations were reluctant to ordain them as ministers. Landman 2002:180 (a practice which was confirmed by one of my interviewees). On the position of women in the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa, see also Plaatjies 2003.

officially accepted candidate for ministry in the DRMC (in 1987) and then had to patiently wait for a “call”, wrote a dissertation in which she proposed an *alternative vision for the church* in the form of a *partnership model* based on what she called a “*round table ecclesiology*”.<sup>137</sup> According to such an ecclesiology, the church should be a place where everybody (irrespective of gender, “race”, social class and sexual orientation) can find their space in a fellowship of equals sitting down around a table which has no head-place, and hence allows for no hierarchy. In further describing such a table fellowship, she actually uses the concept of a “*safe space*” as well as the notion of *shalom*, arguing that the table fellowship should be inclusive of, and hospitable towards, people traditionally deemed to be “outsiders” and towards people marginalised by hierarchical thinking. The church environment should be such a “safe and welcoming space for persons to find their own sense of humanity and worth”, and thereby a space and agent of *shalom*.<sup>138</sup>

Through this alternative ecclesiology she wanted to challenge her own church to rediscover the liberating message of its own Belhar

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<sup>137</sup> Steinegger-Keyser 1995:63. While she was waiting for a call she worked with the Quakers and was greatly inspired by their fellowship of equals (based on their belief in “that of God” in every person) within which she experienced personal enhancement of her gifts and also “the empowerment of women together with men from a tradition outside of the dominant historical church tradition”, Steinegger-Keyser 1995:9. She told me that in 1995, she finally received a call to a local congregation. She declined this opportunity for ordination however as she believed that it would have restricted her primarily to a local parish where she would have been unable to apply her more widely acquired skills outside the church hierarchy. She decided to distance herself from leadership positions in the DRMC with its conventional, hierarchical, notion of ministry. Eventually she left South Africa and moved to the United States, where she has taken up leadership positions in the interfaith movement and in the field of conflict transformation. Interview No. 11.

<sup>138</sup> Steinegger-Keyser 1995:34, 55-63, 77-87 (quotation from 86).



Confession<sup>139</sup> in new situations (beyond the “race” issue) and to recognise God as being on the side of:

... everybody who do not experience their full humanity, due to beliefs, doctrines, structures and practices that exclude them from reaching their full potential as women together with men.<sup>140</sup>

Such an alternative vision of the church would involve an *alternative notion of leadership and ministry*, namely “the transformation of leadership from power over others to the empowerment of others” and “a ministry that generates relations of mutual empowerment”.<sup>141</sup> It also calls for people in subordinate positions (e.g. women) to move out of their “passive servant roles” and take up their responsibility for such an active ministry.<sup>142</sup> The *interactions between Jesus and women in the New Testament* are seen as a model for such a partnership and for a ministry through which women’s negative experiences are overcome. In this way, Jesus is regarded as having modelled a new way of life in God’s household.<sup>143</sup>

Many other South African (female and male) theologians<sup>144</sup> who stress gender equality also point to the Gospel stories of how Jesus broke with the prevailing patriarchal culture and treated women as equals: commanding them (in front of men) for their faith and

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<sup>139</sup> The Confession of Belhar condemned enforced separation on grounds of “race” and colour in church and society (as well as any theological justification for such apartheid) as contrary to the Christian message of reconciliation. It further declared solidarity with victims of oppression and stated that the church must “stand by people in any form of suffering and need” which also implied (and still implies) opposing “any form of injustice”. The Belhar Confession is available at: [www.urcsa.org.za/who.asp?id=106&sinid=1](http://www.urcsa.org.za/who.asp?id=106&sinid=1)

<sup>140</sup> Steinegger-Keyser 1995:48.

<sup>141</sup> Steinegger-Keyser 1995:66.

<sup>142</sup> Steinegger-Keyser 1995:67.

<sup>143</sup> Steinegger-Keyser 1995:56, 68.

<sup>144</sup> E.g. Cochrane 1991; Draper 1991; Rakoczy 2004:40-41, 106-107; Steinegger-Keyser 1995:33, 69-70. Cf. Hammar 2003 (on early Swedish feminists inspired by such interpretations of their Christian faith).

commitment,<sup>145</sup> discussing spiritual and theological matters with them,<sup>146</sup> and after his resurrection appearing first of all to his female followers and commanding them to spread the Good News.<sup>147</sup> They argue that this radical stance of Jesus is the original Christian message, which was subsequently obscured as the Early Church in the following centuries (as expressed in e.g. the Deuteropauline Epistles), came under increasing pressure to conform to the patriarchal social and political structures of the Roman world. They also point out that even Paul had some close and trusted female co-workers, that in the Pauline Epistles themselves there are some radical ideas about a potential equality “in Christ” (with baptism as

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<sup>145</sup> E.g. Matt. 9:20-22, Mark. 5:25-34 and Luke 8:43-48; Matt. 15:21-28 and Mark. 7:20-30; Matt. 26:6-13, Mark. 14:3-9 and Luke 7:36-50.

<sup>146</sup> Luke 10:38-42 (where Mary had assumed the position of a disciple, listening to his word), John 4:1-42 (where Jesus initiated a theological conversation with a woman who, as a Samaritan, should actually have been avoided by an orthodox Jewish man at that time).

<sup>147</sup> Matt. 28:1-10, Mark. 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-10, John 20. This was also underlined in the sermon preached on Easter Sunday 2005 in the Anglican (CPSA) church in the centre of Stellenbosch which I attended on a regular basis from mid-March until mid-April 2005. The minister (a coloured man in his early 60s) talked about how Jesus, through his resurrection, had gone against and transformed all established expectations and social structures by appearing first of all to *women*, whose testimonies were not recognised in the courts of that time and who (together with slaves, children and shepherds) belonged to those discriminated against in society. *Notes from my travel diary*. Although the vast majority of the congregation were coloureds with Afrikaans as their home language, the language used in the Sunday service (in this Afrikaans-dominated town!) was English: something which also attracted foreigners like me, and others with little or no command of Afrikaans, to their services.

an initiation into the Christian family for male and female alike),<sup>148</sup> and that the Pauline origin of the texts prescribing female subordination is actually a matter of scholarly debate.<sup>149</sup>

They also find inspiration and role models in *women who did play prominent roles in the Bible*, both women in the Hebrew Scriptures (such as Miriam, Deborah, Ruth, and Esther), and women in the Gospels (such as Mary the mother of Jesus, the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene and the other women being the first to encounter the risen Christ).<sup>150</sup> As in the words of one of the newer generation of female theology students at the University of the Western Cape, who as a minister in her own (Pentecostal) congregation aimed for a different leadership style (i.e. one of partnership), when I asked her about her sources of inspiration:

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<sup>148</sup> Gal. 3:26-28, about all Christians, through baptism, being “one in Christ”. The fact that *both* males and females were baptised (in contrast to the Jewish circumcision which was only for boys) has also been quoted in support of equality. Cf. Tutu 2004:48 who argues that “if gender cannot be a bar to baptism, which makes all Christians representatives of Christ and partakers of his royal priesthood, then gender cannot be a bar to ordination”. However, it is argued that Paul was less concerned about changing existing power relationships and social structures since he believed in the immediate return of Christ and hence gave priority to evangelisation rather than to challenging gender relations (or, for that matter, slavery). See further in Ehrman 2004:347, 395-407.

<sup>149</sup> The question of which Epistles were actually written by Paul, and which Epistles were, according to the established custom of that time, attributed to Paul although written by one of his followers in the Early Church, is an exegetical debate in itself. Among the texts cited in defence of female subordination, the authorship of Eph. and Col. has been (inconclusively) debated. Regarding 1 Tim. scholars widely agree that it was written around the year 100 AD (i.e. well after the death of Paul) by someone counting himself to stand within the Pauline tradition. Furthermore, a number of scholars actually believe that verses 33-36 are a later interpolation into 1 Cor. 14 (possibly made by men in the Early Church who wanted to keep women “in their place”). For an introduction to the scholarly debate on the Pauline Epistles, see e.g. Ehrman 2004:286-288, 291, 372-394, 402-403.

<sup>150</sup> E.g. Mouton 2005:15 (note 33); Rakoczy 2004:346-350; Umtata Women’s Theology Group, Booklets No. 2 & 3; Wittenberg 1991:5-10.

We're always thinking about Moses as the leader, but if we read the whole scripture then we must see that God sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam. So he said three leaders, and it's like the lady was the one who held the balance... and I'm encouraged to hear that even God knows that there must also be a lady.<sup>151</sup>

Finally, the belief that *all people* (women and men, black and white) are *created in God's image*<sup>152</sup> and thus equally valuable, which challenged the apartheid system, also serves as an inspiration for those challenging sexism. As does the image of *God as the One who liberated her/his people from slavery in Egypt, and who is still on the side of the oppressed (including women and black people) in their struggle for justice*.<sup>153</sup> In this context it is stressed that any "true liberation" cannot ignore the liberation of women.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Interview No. 12.

<sup>152</sup> Based on the first creation story of Gen. 1, where men and women together are created in the image of God.

<sup>153</sup> E.g. Ackermann 1991:98-99 and Rakoczy 2004:42-43 (on women and men as equally created in God's image); Jordaan 1991:124-125 (on God as the liberator of the oppressed as applied to the situation of black women); Phiri 2002:20; Tutu 2004:46-48. Cf. Cock 1991:85-88, 176, who shows how the idea of everyone being equal in the sight of God inspired white men resisting conscription into the South African Defence Force (SADF) during the apartheid era. See also Ericson 2001:231-232, 402.

<sup>154</sup> Tutu 2004:48.

## CONCLUSION

In this book I have asked critical questions about South African churches as *spaces and agents of a "ministry of reconciliation"* breaking down prevailing (mental or physical) dividing walls and transforming relationships not only between people with different shades of pigmentation but also between women and men. Having been rooted in (and in certain respects mirroring) a violent, unequal and divided society, in which relationships between women and men tended to take the backseat among other issues and concerns deemed to be more urgent, the churches face particular challenges with regard to being and creating alternative spaces for encounters between women and men from various walks of life through which they can be challenged by each other's life stories and inspire each other to discover and realise their respective talents and potential beyond gender or "racial" stereotypes.

While it would be going too far to claim that the church environment *mirrors contemporary society* in terms of a "culture of violence" (with physical force as a socially sanctioned means to achieve one's goals), I nevertheless found examples of church environments being steeped into a *"culture of silence"* where keeping up a superficial harmony becomes more important than exposing and confronting violence against women and children, and where the main concern is to uphold a relationship at any price rather than asking critical questions about the *quality* of the relationship. While acknowledging local variations and hesitating to make too broad generalisations, I could also not help noticing a *tendency for men to prefer sharing power among themselves, and employing various tactics to exclude or even intimidate women who assume non-stereotypical roles (e.g. in the ordained ministry)*. Here it is, just as in society at large, important *not to be content with studying official documents and decisions* aiming at the emancipation of women but also to seek out testimonies about how these decisions have actually been implemented, and what evidence for change can be found in concrete congregations and parishes.

I have highlighted such issues, *not* in order to point the finger at people who in many respects have plenty of challenges (e.g. poverty,

unemployment, violent crime, HIV/AIDS) already, but in order to give space for *voices that not only criticise established ideas and practices but also propose alternative visions*. These visions would have a bearing on an alternative *anthropology* (of equality and partnership), an alternative *Christology* (of Jesus Christ as a compassionate fellow-traveller and liberator and a role-model for a compassionate and sensitive masculinity which affirms women and relates to them as equals), an alternative *ecclesiology* (of partnership and mutual empowerment in a non-hierarchical fellowship), an alternative *notion of Christian servanthood* (based on the celebration of life and community), and finally on an *ethics of rectificatory (or restorative) justice and love* for abused women (where critical questions are asked also about the *quality* of their relationships and possibilities for transformation).

In highlighting these observations and (tentative) conclusions I hope to be able to contribute to your internal discussions on “being the church in South Africa today”. Finally, while not wanting to minimise the challenges of finding common ground across “racial”, gender, socio-economic and geographical barriers, I nevertheless do not want to give up hope in the potential for such a community. As expressed in a letter which I received from a friend and colleague at one of the South African organisations that I visited in 1996:

Indeed, it would be good to keep in touch. I believe half the battle is won when people of like mind link up with each other and share experiences.

Just like him, whose skin is a bit darker than mine, I still believe in the power of personal encounters and relationship-building beyond the stereotypes of this (human and fallible) world. And it is this belief that I have tried to communicate in this book.

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## SOME INFORMATION ABOUT THE INTERVIEWS

In the course of this research project, I conducted 37 interviews between late October 2004 and early July 2006, though I do not refer to all of them in this short book (which is intended as only one of the outcomes of this research project). I focused on the Western Cape region, with which I was already quite familiar (see footnote 4), although I also visited other parts of the country.

17 of the interviews were made with women of South African origin who were pursuing (or had very recently completed) postgraduate (masters or doctoral) studies in theology.<sup>155</sup> The rationale behind this decision was to gain access to the views and experiences of “emerging theologians” who have so far had little or limited opportunity to publish, thereby adding their voices to already published works by South African female theologians. Furthermore, they provided an insightful grass-root perspective from women assuming non-stereotypical gender roles: as academic theologians, in many cases as candidates for the ordained ministry and in a few cases already being ordained. Regarding institutional connection, the University of the Western Cape (where I managed to interview all such students) and the University of Stellenbosch were particularly well represented, while only a few of the women I interviewed were connected to the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town (where Christianity is only one focus area of study<sup>156</sup>).

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<sup>155</sup> At the Theological Faculty in Stellenbosch they also offered a postgraduate M.Div. degree (i.e. a one year advanced ministerial training programme). However, regarding masters students from Stellenbosch, my target group was those at the M.Th. level (which would be the equivalent academic level of the Masters degrees offered at the UWC and the UCT).

See further: <http://academic.sun.ac.za/theology/programmes.htm>

<sup>156</sup> Other areas of specialisation are African Traditional Religion (ATR), Comparative Religious Studies, Islamic Studies and Jewish Studies. See further: <http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/religion/about.php>

Only three of the current postgraduate students whom I interviewed were pursuing doctoral studies.<sup>157</sup> This was a reflection of the general scarcity of female theology students (and completed dissertations by women) at that level.<sup>158</sup> Therefore, I also interviewed three women (all of them white) who had been pioneers in that respect at these three universities. Coloured women were actually fairly well represented among the current female postgraduate students, by now even at doctoral level (with a couple of the women whom I interviewed being pioneers in that respect) but in order to increase the number of Black African voices, I included two female undergraduate students and two male doctoral students.<sup>159</sup> I also interviewed a few people (both female and male) in key positions at the universities in question (with occupations ranging from librarian to professor) about the history and character of their faculty or department of theology and/or religious studies, and the situation for their female students (e.g. in relation to their churches).

Additional perspectives were finally provided through interviews with women with positions (mostly in leadership roles, at times as ordained ministers) in their respective churches, or women who worked for certain NGOs addressing victim empowerment and/or gender issues (including violence against women). Even the women

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<sup>157</sup> 3 of those whom I interviewed were in an in-between-stage, having recently completed their masters and contemplating their doctorate. Furthermore, some of the South African women who had previously completed their M.Th. in Stellenbosch had gone overseas for their doctorates.

<sup>158</sup> I also made a focused review of the masters and doctoral dissertations in theology and/or religious studies presented by women of South African origin at the three universities in the Western Cape region.

<sup>159</sup> The scarcity of Black African female postgraduate students was, according to those of my informants who addressed this question, to be explained not only by the socio-economic legacy of apartheid but also by traditional gender roles being even stronger in Black African congregations (especially in rural areas). Coloured women made up half of the current postgraduate students whom I interviewed. Coloured people are in the majority in the Western Cape and the Northern Cape. According to Census 2001, the population in the Western Cape Province was 53,9% Coloured; 26,7% Black African; 18,4% White; 1% Indian or Asian. *Census in brief* 2003:10.

working for NGOs were active church members (and one of them was an ordained minister). I identified these women either through the advice of persons at the Department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape, or by approaching organisations which I knew through my doctoral research, or through the advice of some of the female postgraduate students and others whom I interviewed at the universities in question.<sup>160</sup>

Most of the people I approached were willing to talk to me. There was an obvious desire by some of my interviewees to “break the silence” about gender issues in the churches. Having fairly recently presented my own doctoral dissertation (and being fairly youngish looking) probably also decreased the social distance between me and the postgraduate students. In cases where appointments could not be made, this was primarily due to logistics and time constraints. A couple of people therefore answered my questions via e-mail, but in most cases I had a semi-structured oral interview lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. All but one of these interviews were taped, with the consent of the interviewee.<sup>161</sup>

Since the “theological family” is a “small world”, and certain persons provide personal or sensitive information, I have in this book simply labelled all of the interviews that I refer to as “Interview No. 1”, “Interview No. 2”, “Interview No. 3” etc. rather than writing out even the initials of my informants. However, when relevant to the specific paragraph, I have mentioned characteristics such as gender, “race”, church connection or level of academic education of the person I refer to or quote. In line with my initial intention to highlight the voices of “emerging theologians”, who have not (yet) had much opportunity to publish, I have also made particular use of two master theses

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<sup>160</sup> E.g. one of the persons whom I interviewed in Stellenbosch suggested some additional women with positions (including some of the very few ordained female ministers) in the Dutch Reformed Church whom I should talk to, and the librarian at the UWC (interview no. 9) suggested some contacts which I followed up (e.g. interview no. 11).

<sup>161</sup> With regard to the interview that was not taped (not quoted in this book), I had simply forgotten to bring my tape recorder. I do not think that the interviewee would have objected to being taped.

presented in the Western Cape context (by Esau and by Steinegger-Keyser) which address the issues at stake in this book.

The aim of this book is to explore how contemporary notions of reconciliation as a process of building, rebuilding and transforming relationships in the pursuit of a “just peace”, or God’s *shalom*, may be applied not only to “race” but also to gender relations in post-apartheid and post-TRC South Africa. After highlighting links between the past, the present and the future with regard to such relations in wider South African society, critical questions are asked about the churches as spaces and agents of a gender-inclusive *shalom*. The focus is on two crucial issues: the potential of South African churches to be “safe spaces” for abused women and children, and their potential to be spaces for women and men to encounter each other in non-stereotypical roles.

This critical examination is inspired by interviews with, and writings by, South African women active in various church environments and/or in the field of theology and religious studies. What lessons and challenges do they present with regard to “being church in South Africa today”?

*About the author*

Dr. Maria Ericson first visited South Africa in 1996. In 2001, she presented her doctoral dissertation at Lund University in Sweden on *Reconciliation and the search for a shared moral landscape: An exploration based upon a study of Northern Ireland and South Africa*. In the years 2003-2006, she conducted research on gender aspects of reconciliation in post-TRC South Africa, with a particular focus on the roles of Christian churches and the perspectives of South African female theologians. This book is one of the main publications from that research project.

