WOMEN WITHDRAWING

By BRIDGET REES

OUTSIDE SALISBURY CATHEDRAL is a statue which has become for me and for other women a symbol and a sign of hope. The statue is called the Walking Madonna and is very different from the statues and pictures of Mary which adorn many of our churches. Elizabeth Frink's Mary is old and wise, she is modelled on the nuns of El Salvador; she has suffered but she is strong and definitely not a victim. She strides purposefully and powerfully—and she strides purposefully and powerfully *away* from the cathedral. She is dwarfed, in spite of being seven feet tall, but is not overcome by the imposing building behind her, and for me it is the combination of the strength and wisdom of the statue itself and its position outside the cathedral which makes her such a powerful symbol.

Over the last 15 or so years in particular, more and more women have, like the Walking Madonna, felt the need to stride away purposefully from their Churches. Some have been more aware of making a positive decision than others—the conversion experience always affects people differently; for some there is the blinding flash and the immediate clear response, for others it is a slower process. Many, perhaps most of us have not actually left our Churches totally but have felt the need to withdraw at least temporarily and periodically to get things into perspective, to think things through, to share thinking and experience with other sympathetic women and men. For several of us the language of the wilderness and desert has been particularly helpful—recalling the wilderness experiences of Moses and the Hebrews after their exodus from Egypt or Jesus's withdrawal into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry.

The context for this withdrawal or disengagement has been the whole women's movement, which has gathered momentum both here and in many other parts of the world—especially over the last twenty years. Although the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–1985, had much less apparent impact here than in other parts of the world, particularly the so-called third world, it can still be seen as the tip of a worldwide iceberg—a small tip with a much

bigger hidden movement supporting it. There are little, and not so little, signs of it all over the world, and underneath all sorts of groups are meeting, networking, sharing experiences and thinking. The Women's Movement is of course much older than the last twenty years but it does seem to be gathering momentum slowly but surely.

In the Churches the debate over the ordination of women has been the trigger for a much wider discussion on the position of women on issues such as inclusive language. Most of the Free Churches managed to ordain women many years ago though sisters in those Churches often remind us that ordination is not the only issue, and having ordained women does not mean that sexism is tackled seriously. Women ministers in these Churches often meet for support and study to strengthen themselves because of this.

When in 1978 the General Synod of the Church of England failed to pass a motion to remove the legal barriers to the ordination of women (in spite of having in 1975 agreed there were no fundamental objections to it), the ripples of this particular rock thrown into the pool were felt by many more than just Anglican women. Since 1978 a whole variety of groups have come into existence—some women only, some mixed, Anglican, Catholic, ecumenical, but all focussing on injustice to women in one way or another. Some groups, especially within the Anglican Church, have focussed on the issue of the ordination of women, but for many groups this is increasingly but one issue among many which women and men concerned about sexism wish to tackle.

Anglican women go into the wilderness

When the Movement for the Ordination of Women[1] came into existence from a number of other groups to work towards the ordination of women as priests in the Church of England, it was an organization with one basic aim and expected to cease to exist once that aim is achieved. Most early members did not expect to celebrate ten years of MOW's existence as they did in 1988. Membership of MOW is large and, though members are agreed on the basic aims, they often disagree over tactics and other feminist concerns. So inevitably other groups have sprung up to meet these concerns—Women Seeking Ordination groups, action groups, Women in Theology, the St Hilda's Community and Radical MOW.

Ordination services were from the beginning a focus for MOW's witness. Leafleting of people, attending services, silent and not so silent acts of witness were held. As time passed people felt increasingly frustrated as things did not seem to move. In Southwark diocese in 1983 attempts were made to get this frustration recognized at the Ordination service in June by presenting women deaconesses to the bishops for ordination to the priesthood—recognizing that they would have to refuse to proceed. In the event this proved too threatening and difficult a prospect for the powers that be. So some deaconesses and others who felt called to the priesthood stood or knelt throughout the service and at the administration of the communion went up as a group to receive communion and then walked out of the cathedral to celebrate a Wilderness Liturgy[2] outside. This action was seen as a deliberate act of withdrawal from Ordination services and in fact most of that group did not join in Ordination services until women were ordained as deacons in 1987. The liturgy was seen as symbolic and was deliberately based on the story of the Hebrews leaving Egypt. The Hebrews chose to leave the oppression under the Pharoahs and go out into the wilderness instead, looking for the promised land. The desire to return to Egypt was recognized by the women as a likely possibility; the dangers and loneliness of the wilderness were faced; but also the promise of something to come. Sustenance in the wilderness had been given to the Hebrews and was claimed in the form of milk and honey cake which was shared outside Southwark Cathedral. This liturgy and symbolic action for several women proved to be a turning point. Though some did return, others continued and continue to see themselves as in the wilderness. For several this was the first time symbols other than bread and wine had been claimed and used and the liturgy continued to be used by several groups for some time.

The problem of the Eucharist

But the Synod debate seemed to spark off many other women than Anglican women—Catholic groups, and ecumenical groups of all sorts and sizes sprang up all over the country. There seemed to be a hunger from women for such groups and many other concerns of women began to surface. Attitudes to the question of the ordination of women revealed many other assumptions and concerns. As these groups of Christians have met they have naturally wanted to worship together, and in both small and

large groups and organizations worship has become the centre of considerable interest and sometimes controversy. Some of the groups are women only, all of them have a predominantly female membership, and all have the position of women in one way or another as a focus of their interest. Most are working towards the removal of patriarchal structures both in the Church and in society at large. So how do they worship?

For most Churches the Eucharist, the commemoration of the Last Supper, the Holy Communion is the central act of worship. This is particularly true for Roman Catholics and Anglicans where for the former it is always, and for the latter generally, the main act of worship on a Sunday. For Roman Catholics and Anglicans only ordained priests can preside at the Eucharist and this has presented problems for many feminists.

Within the Movement for the Ordination of Women the question of how members worship together at local or national gatherings has been increasingly a real bone of contention. In the early years of the Movement it was a concern of a comparatively small number but more and more feel it is inappropriate at MOW gatherings to invite male priests to preside at the Eucharist, particularly when there are acually Anglican women priests from overseas present and ordained women from other Churches in England present or available.

At MOW's Annual General Meeting in 1988 a group of us organized an alternative wilderness liturgy outside York Minister when we knew that the Archbishop of York had not only been invited to celebrate but also to preach. More and more of us have experienced liturgies which are non-eucharistic in character and have taken part in so-called irregular Eucharists celebrated by women priests from overseas and feel that at MOW events these should be the pattern until we have our own women priests.

The Oxford Women's Liturgy Group[3]—probably one of the oldest of the regular worshipping groups—was at the beginning centred round the Roman Catholic Mass. So there was a male celebrant, though he was assisted by women, and there was a woman preacher. Over the years the group has moved away from this pattern and now does not have a male celebrant though men do attend sometimes. Instead they have an agape or sometimes visiting ordained women celebrants—Anglican or Free Church.

Roman Catholic groups such as the Catholic Women's Network[4] have in some surprising ways been fortunate in not having had

the issue of the ordination of women so much on the agenda. It has freed them from a whole lot of assumptions about worship. I remember the relief I felt as an Anglican member of MOW at the conference which launched CWN in joining in the liturgy when there was no controversy as to whether we should be having a Eucharist or not, and we simply did our own liturgy using other symbols—seeds and grapes on this occasion. How liberating that was! However, even in Roman Catholic groups there have been heated discussions about whether to hold Eucharists or not with or without male priests.

New liturgies

Both the Catholic Women's Network and Women in Theology,[5] which have members all over the British Isles and further afield, have been very active in recent years providing opportunities and space for a wide variety of liturgical experiments. Small groups affiliated to these national networks have enthusiastically joined in a whole range of liturgies. Individuals and groups have created acts of worship, usually using symbolic acts and signs and symbols—sometimes bread and wine but more commonly something different. Often liturgies have been devised around particular events of importance to an individual or group—marking the departure or resignation of a member of a group, a member moving from one part of the country to another or changes in the executive committee of an organization. Or particular seasons of the Church's year have prompted liturgies—particularly ones linked with women saints or biblical events where the presence of women was particularly significant but has often been neglected by the Churches.

Meetings run by both CWN and WIT are usually planned as a whole with worship playing an important part—in many senses the whole event is liturgical. Often liturgies have been prepared on the spot using whatever is to hand in terms of experience, symbols and mood, and always the liturgies arise out of women's experience. Very often a conscious decision is taken not to make the worship eucharistic with sharing of bread and wine and recalling the Last Supper. Instead a cup of water might be used, bread on its own, a specially baked honey cake, apples, grapes, flowers, oil, foot-washing, hand-washing . . . My own experience has been that non-eucharistic symbols, signs and actions have been more liberating, illuminating and inspiring than those which are eucharistic and they have incidentally and surprisingly shed much light on the Eucharist.

However, on other occasions and in other groups there have been attempts to be much more eucharistically focussed. Some would argue that if we do not appropriate the Mass, the Eucharist, we have not dared 'the whole'. So there are occasions where women only and mixed groups have used bread and wine, sometimes calling it an agape and leaving it to people to decide for themselves whether they think it is a Eucharist or not. Much discussion and heart searching takes place on the appropriateness or otherwise of such activity.

'Irregular' Eucharists

Anglican women priests from other countries visiting or temporarily resident here have also celebrated quietly and not so quietly on many occasions. Church of England women have felt so frustrated at the speed of discussions in the Synod and the refusal of Synod to accept even women lawfully ordained elsewhere in the Anglican Communion acting as priests here in England that they have decided to take the law into their own hands.

The St Hilda Community[6] has become the most well known for this sort of activity, although in the first few months of its existence it used non-eucharistic liturgies. This community arose among women and men who were feeling the need to experiment and meet regularly to worship in a non-sexist, inclusive way. Within the community everyone is expected to take their turn, liturgies fit the occasion, reflect the state of the community. More often than not there are at least eucharistic overtones and very often visiting women priests or Suzanne Fageol, a woman priest who is at present resident in England, will celebrate. Often when there is no woman priest a liturgy devised by the community is used in which each person in turn says a piece. The community worship every Sunday evening in London and are hoping soon to begin a midweek group in West London, also meeting weekly. Some of the women would see St Hilda's as their main and even only worshipping community, others are also involved in their local Churches on a Sunday morning but find membership of St Hilda's helps to make it possible to continue their involvement with mainstream Churches.

The St Hilda's Community is seen and would see itself as a defiant group which refuses to collude with rules and regulations they see as unjust. As a result of their irregular Eucharists, they have been thrown out of the space they used for almost two years.

The Community has found itself strengthened through opposition and is now considerably larger than it was.

Other communities have sprung up in other parts of the country though not managing to worship weekly. They too have taken part in 'irregular' Eucharists. Some take the St Hilda's name, others choose new names—like the CHLOE'S People[7] in Bristol/Swindon (Creative Happenings, Liturgy and Other Events). These groups are exploratory, give people space and are usually ecumenical.

The groups have been a welcome haven for those of us who for a variety of reasons have tended not to receive communion in Churches which do not ordain women, to people who have left the Church totally, and to those who stay in but only because of the support they get from groups like CWN, WIT, St Hilda's, CHLOE'S People etc. The groups meet a great number of differing needs and the liturgies reflect these and give space for them.

Worshipping with patriarchal structures

In all the groups I have come across the pattern of sharing leadership in worship has been an important feature. Members of the groups in turn take responsibility for planning, facilitating and writing liturgies. Several groups like the St Hilda's group, the Oxford group, and the WIT group do have frameworks to be used when people wish, and more and more collections of prayers and acts of worship are being published here and overseas which are used as resources.

Liturgies are designed to fit the occasion, the mood, the state of the community or needs of particular individuals—tailor-made rather than off the peg! Liturgies are very much a part of community building and if there is division or conflict within the community, that is not hidden but expressed liturgically and faced by everyone.

Reflection on scripture is more often than not done by everyone rather than by a preacher, though the Oxford Women's Liturgy Group usually invites women to preach at their monthly meetings. The sort of reflection which takes place is interesting—usually first reactions or feelings are shared, then as discussion continues people share their knowledge of and about the passage or the issues it raises. The shared reflection is often exciting and stimulating and relates to the people present because it arises from them.

Christian women's groups, like secular groups, have been concerned to reclaim pride and delight in their bodies. This too is reflected in liturgies. Sometimes this is by acknowledging, through

liturgy, particular events of importance in women's lives, celebrating and sacramentalizing such moments. Rosemary Radford Ruether's book *Women-Church*[8] contains many such liturgies which US women have devised and many of these have been used here too. At other times it is evident in the way we use our bodies in worship, for example through dance. Circle dancing is often used by several groups. Sometimes this dancing is a way of claiming our space; as on the occasion when for the first time the St Hilda's Community held a Eucharist with a woman priest as celebrant and had to use the common room rather than the chapel—we danced to consecrate our space. Circle dancing reinforces the non-hierarchical way in which these groups function. At a conference in Liverpool in 1988 as part of the European Forum of Ecumenical Christian Women, several hundred women danced in the well at the Anglican Cathedral, as a way of claiming their space but also as an illustration of our unity and sisterhood. We were watched by three male senior Church leaders who appeared then and later to have little understanding of what we were about.

Much of the worship of these groups takes place in the round, in circles, as one of the main concerns of the women and men who are involved in these groups is to move away from the patriarchal, clericalized structures which so much mainstream Christian worship exhibits. The emphasis is on equality and on sharing. Individuals may at different times take leadership roles, but the leadership is shared around, not left to one or two. So it is not just dancing which is done in circles—almost everything is.

Socializing and eating together is often a feature of the life of these groups. The London WIT liturgy group always begins its evening together with a shared meal and it is a very important part of the whole event. People take care in thinking about the food, enjoy sharing it together and the worship arises naturally out of this. For some, the groups they worship in are of particular importance as one of very few places where they find safety to be themselves. So the informal meeting around the worship is not just an added extra.

Creativity is a hallmark of all the groups. One might imagine that it is difficult to keep on dreaming up new symbols and different ways of doing things, and yet it does seem to happen. There are, as has been said, some frameworks emerging in some groups, but they are generally only frameworks, they are not rigid and often are used very differently. Candles, water, oil, grapes, flowers, even

balls of wool are used as expressions of life together and illustrations of our common belief. The symbolic acts and the imaginative sacramental signs are a regular feature of worship in all these 'fringe' groups.

Many of the groups or individuals in the groups have some kind of political involvement. This is perhaps not surprising since many of the groups have sprung up out of the wider women's movement and particularly out of the struggle to ordain women. So often the liturgies make statements. The St Hilda's Community has clearly made statements about what it will or will not do within the Anglican framework and so is not afraid to worship 'irregularly'. Several individuals and groups have been involved in worship at Greenham Common, particularly on Maundy Thursday. Here they have used the framework of the Passover meal and the footwashing. Women have discovered that *where* they worship, *where* they place their bodies in worship is very significant. Language too is important in all these groups and increasingly so. Women have become more and more aware of how exclusive and sexist the language used in authorized liturgies in this country is. The resistance by many to inclusive language has been quite remarkable, especially when this inclusive language is applied to God. But the more many of us have grown used to inclusive language and feminist language, the more frustrated we become with traditional Church language. *Celebrating women* and *All desires known*[9], among other publications, have been hungrily seized upon by women and men and have helped stimulate others to follow the examples of people like Janet Morley in exploring other ways of addressing God and thinking about how our language defines what we think. But it is not just sexist language which has been seen as a difficulty—hierarchical language, military language and racist language also have been recognized, challenged and changed.

Conclusions

There has only been space in this article to touch on a number of issues which might have been dealt with under the title 'Women withdrawing'.[10] The fact is that groups of women are withdrawing in a variety of ways—some totally, some temporarily, some occasionally. They all want and need space, though in varying ways. Some want to be with women-only groups, some want to be in mixed groups, some want both. Many men too are frustrated with much traditional Church worship and they often support and

sometimes join in some of the groups which have withdrawn. If women or men are dissatisfied with the status quo they have a variety of options. They can stay within the structures and change them from within; they can opt out and try and change from without; they can have one foot in and one foot out; they can withdraw periodically in order to return. The groups I have mentioned will usually include people who have chosen each of these options. Probably the majority do still have strong connections with the Church they grew up in or chose at some stage to join. Many like me enjoy wearing a badge produced by the Australian MOW—'In spite of considerable provocation, I will not leave the Church'. But in order to stay within the Church, many feel the need for space, and often that space needs to be woman space.

These groups are already having an effect on the mainstream Churches. Language is changing slowly in scripture translations, in hymns, in prayers, in public worship. Often in the process a great deal of anger is expressed which seems to indicate something about the nature of the problem. It is not easy having one's presuppositions and assumptions challenged!

In the wilderness we are deprived of props and luxuries; we are thrown back on our own resources, we learn to do things differently. Everything looks different, the viewpoint is changed. In the wilderness we meet God in surprising ways, in disturbing ways. In the wilderness God nourishes us, God refreshes us, God inspires us, God gives us strength to go on. And perhaps not surprisingly there seem to be more and more people withdrawing to the wilderness for refreshment, nourishment and inspiration.

NOTES

[1] The Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW), Napier Hall, Hide Place, Vincent St, London SW1P 4NJ, Tel 01 834 2736.

[2] Ed Janet Morley and Hannah Ward: *Celebrating women* (MOW WIT 1986) pp 42–43.

[3] The Oxford Women's Group, Una Brown, 10 Cunliffe Close, Oxford, Tel 0865 52590.

[4] The Catholic Women's Network (CWN), Alexina Murphy, 2 Umbria St, Roehampton, London SW15 5DP, Tel 01 788 3333.

[5] Women in Theology, The Revd Judith Jones, The Rectory, Longden, Shrewsbury SY5 8ET, Tel 0743 860245.

[6] The St Hilda's Community, Bow Road Methodist Church, 1 Merchant St, London E3 4LY.

[7] CHLOE'S People, The Revd Charmian Mann, 28 Matthews Road, Kingsdown, Bristol BS6 5TT, Tel 0272 247316.

[8] Rosemary Radford Ruether: *Women-Church: theology and practice* (Harper & Row 1985).

[9] Ed Janet Morley and Hannah Ward: *Celebrating women* (MOW WIT 1986). Janet Morley: *All desires known* (MOW WIT 1987).

[10] Other issues which have been totally ignored include Orthodox women, goddess worship, Post-Christian feminist groups.