

## A Brief Synopsis of the Thesis South African Anglican Clergywomen Merging Ministry And Motherhood: Exploring Presence, Praxis And Power

By Rev'd Dr Eliza Getman

I have recently completed a PhD thesis on ministry and motherhood. The research was based on in-depth interviews with seven South African Anglican clergywomen in positions of authority in three provinces. These interviews were respectful (and hilarious and moving) instructive and inspirational conversations. Nelle Morton speaks of “hearing each other into speech” – this means that sometimes we don't even know our own deep wisdom until people take the time to truly listen and encourage us to articulate it. These interview conversations helped to shift and redirect my professional and my personal direction. The alternative experience and perspective of clergywomen helped me to see the church in a new light and with new eyes. Frustration and pain were voiced. And there was extensive discussion about sacrifice. We were trying to figure out what we had sacrificed by engaging in ministry (and in motherhood). And we were trying to discern what an acceptable sacrifice might look like. We were all clear that our children ought not to be the sacrificial lambs. The presence of children should never be a liability to our ministry or to the church at large.

The journey of my thesis took me to terrifying places of self-doubt and loneliness. At one stage I was convinced that only celibate childless men ought to be priests. For a season I no longer wished to carry the heavy responsibility of priesthood – and I felt overwhelmed by the demands of motherhood. But by the time I submitted my completed thesis I was convinced that my children are my greatest resource and that mothering is a most appropriate metaphor for ministry.

St Augustine of Hippo wrote: “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.” The interview conversations were brimming with both anger and courage. Clergywomen are moving the conversations about power and justice and equity forward. But this activism takes its toll on our bodies and families and lives. It is so important that we begin to talk about the underlying reasons for the frustration with the institution to which we are committed. It is so important that we articulate what sacrifices we are (and what sacrifices we are not) prepared to make. This is how we will hear “new horizons of hopefulness” into speech.

Too often, the myth of the happy family rides on the mother sacrificing herself and her own identity at the altar of the needs and identities of her husband and children. Obviously, this imbalance implicates institutions beyond the nuclear family. The church sometimes takes advantage of the sacrificial status quo. This can impact on hiring and relocating practices. As one of the research participants clearly stated: the church does not know how to deal with singleness (or single-motherhood). Clergy family for the church still means “male priest and

supportive wife and [not more than two] obedient children.” Far too often the real needs of clergywomen and our complex families are ignored.

I am convinced that self-sacrifice contributes to “mother depression” as well as clergy burnout. Mothers and clergy both are expected to bury the secret, angry, discontent aspects of ourselves to present a serene (or holy) exterior. The pressure to take care of others and be selfless and contained can build up to a point of desperation or destructiveness. Clergywomen and men, because of the maternal work that we all practice through ministry, can all benefit from a clear-sighted, truth telling, feminist consciousness. Mothers and clergy (and fathers and laity) all need role models and companions on the journey who help us to discover our strengths and our vulnerabilities - and to hold us accountable. This will prepare us for the time when we are left on our own to pick up the mantle of authority and to (in Gandhi’s words) “be the change we wish to see in the world” - and in the Church.