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EMMA INESON

# Transforming Power : Is there a 'Feminine' Style of Leadership?

**Is there such a thing as a 'feminine' style of leadership? Emma Ineson offers a comprehensive exploration of the images and expectations projected onto women leaders in the church, both by themselves and by others. Traditionally, women have felt uncomfortable with owning power, preferring instead themes of service and self-sacrifice. But the reclamation by women leaders of 'transforming power' is vital for women, for men and for the church. Emma suggests several productive changes needed to enable women to discover and own their full potential as leaders, and for women and men to stand alongside each other in all aspects of ministry.**

'Being equal today seems to mean that women have work in the same way as men, rather than developing their own way of doing things', said Germaine Greer recently.<sup>1</sup> But what is a *woman's* way of doing things? Greer's words assume that the 'traditional' way of doing things must necessarily be dismissed by women as 'the men's way'.

It is now six years since the first ordinations of women to the priesthood. The recognition of women's priestly ministry has had a firm impact on the consciousness of women leaders and on the men who are their colleagues. For some, the change in women's role has been a joyous and easy transition. For others, it has brought pain and questioning. In either case, we must not underestimate the impact of the changes on the developing perception of women in the church – from fulfilling supportive roles to male leadership, to having primary leadership responsibility. Is this shift from helper, servant or supporter to leader one that is hard for women *themselves* to make, and if so, why? How should women lead? Is it the same way men lead? Are there any distinctive patterns of women's ministry? If so, are they valuable to the church and to women leaders themselves or are women once again being pushed into stereotypical moulds that they may find it hard to break out of?

As a woman training for ordained ministry in the Church of England these are issues I have had to explore for myself. My experience, even at college, has been that expectations about how I should act and live and work and minister and relate as a woman (placed upon me by myself as well as by others) are ambiguous. This year I have been elected to the post of Student President. When I was first elected, one of my colleagues congratulated me and said 'It will be nice to have a President

with a gentle touch'. Was she alluding to my own personality or to my qualities 'as a woman'? Should I lead in the same way as my (male) predecessor, or differently? If there is a difference, is it because I am a woman, or just because I am me?

## Stereotypes

Is there a 'feminine' style of leadership? Many in the church today would say that yes, men and women exercise leadership differently. We are created inherently different and our natures lead to our functioning, working, reacting and leading in very different ways. Such 'essentialist' accounts of gender identity claim that gender roles are ordained by God at creation.<sup>2</sup> Whether there are actual, constant, gender differences or not, it seems that often people believe that there are. Whether or not women and men *actually do* minister differently, stereotypical views do exist. And often stereotypes and preconceptions are more powerful than facts in shaping views and influencing actions.

### 'Women are naturally more collaborative'

One of the preconceptions associated with women in ministry is that they are more collaborative and work better as part of a team. It has been said that women priests will model good practice for team work and shared ministry.<sup>3</sup> Penny Martin says that women are less competitive with each other and that 'once a team of ministers begins to relax enough to enjoy one another, the *feminine* element of sharing resources, personal and professional, becomes a rewarding contribution to the way women and men live and reflect the gospel'.<sup>4</sup> Something about the 'relational' experience of women might imply that they are better at team work than men.

### 'Women are more feeling (less rational)'

Some would lay claim to there being such a thing as 'women's intuition' – a vague expression of the fact that women somehow feel things more easily than men. 'Women feel, men think', seems to be the assumption. I have heard it said that one of the things women will bring to ministry is allowing rationality to be better balanced by the recognition of feelings.<sup>5</sup> Is this because of their nature? Are women *really* more feeling than men, or is this a stereotyped assumption about what women are like?

1 In a television interview promoting her book *The Whole Woman*, Doubleday, London 1999.

2 Reuther, amongst other feminist theologians, strongly refutes the 'essentialist' stance: "To put it bluntly, there is no biological connection between male gonads and the capacity to reason. Likewise, there is no biological connection between female sexual organs and the capacity to be intuitive, caring, or nurturing ... There is no necessary biological connection between reproductive complementarity and either

psychological or social role differentiation. These are the work of culture and socialisation, not of nature" *Sexism and God-talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* 2nd ed. SCM Press, London 1992, p 111.

3 Greenwood, R. *Transforming Priesthood: A New Theology of Mission and Ministry* SPCK, London 1994, p 43.

4 Martin, P. 'A Different way of working: What women bring to collaborative ministry' in H. Wakeman (ed.) *Women Priests: The First Years*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1996., p 3, *my italics*.

5 Greenwood *op cit.* 1994, p 43.

### 'Women are naturally more caring'

Women have often been thought of as the 'gentler' sex and women leaders as more caring, compassionate and able to offer pastoral care than male colleagues.<sup>6</sup> A group of women clergy expresses the view that they are 'good at pastoral ministry and have broadened the scope of the church's pastoral care, especially in cases of child abuse, domestic violence, murder etc.'<sup>7</sup> These views would not be incongruous to many people, who believe that 'women are very deeply socialised to care for others and they tend to gravitate naturally towards positions calling for skills in pastoral care'.<sup>8</sup> Women have traditionally been the carers in the family environment. Is saying that women are 'naturally more caring' a compliment or just another form of stereotyping?

All of these stereotypes are based on conjectures that men and women have inherently different personality traits or features of their natural makeup which determine leadership style. We have to ask whether these assumptions are misinformed and have been used to oppress rather than liberate women. If women are indeed better at exercising one form of leadership than another, is this simply a matter of conditioning, emanating from sociocultural and personal background? The key facet of this discussion must be an exploration into the way people generally see women and the way women see themselves. We need to discern whether women's supposed leadership qualities are a function of the way they are viewed, and therefore *expected* to behave, both by themselves and by others.

## Images of women: through others' eyes

### Woman as mother

Traditionally, one of the most important models of womanhood that has been that of woman as 'mother'. This image is particularly important for leaders in the church, where it is likely that women priests will become the focus of maternal transference. The combination of the pastoral and the (perhaps perceived) judicial leads to clergy being seen as the parent. Which particular factors of parenthood come into play when women priests are thought of as mother?

The way people view their mothers has been a subject of extensive investigation and debate. Freud's attachment theory is resolved in different ways by boys and girls.<sup>9</sup> The boy gradually learns that women are not as socially powerful as he once

6 Greenwood says that women priests will further the local church's capability to offer pastoral care to the neighbourhood, 1994, p43.

7 Notes from a study day for women clergy in the Diocese of Bristol on 'Power, Authority and Women Clergy', February 1999.

8 Jamieson, P. *Living at the Edge: Sacrament and Solidarity in Leadership*. Mowbray, London 1997, p56.

9 The attachment theory holds that children (aged three to four) become attracted to the opposite parent. The girl identifies with her home-bound mother, in the hope that she

can attract someone like her father. The boy resolves his complex by identifying with his strong, but probably distant, father. He is led to identify with a position, rather than a person. He then learns from society around him that being male is a privilege, leading to 'a dread of women'. The fact that the mother is the main carer leads to a 'reproduction of mothering' in girls and a 'reproduction of misogyny' in boys. See Van Leeuwen, M. S. (ed.) *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1993, p 396.

thought. But his earliest, 'critical period' associations are still of a mother who seemed all-powerful. When combined with his early deprivation of a male role model the results may be a deeply held, yet powerful conviction that women can somehow strip him of an essential part of his selfhood, namely, his masculine identity. Boys who have been in their mother's power have needed to break free and may have developed a contempt for women's activities. What happens when the woman priest is seen as mother? Transference may be inevitable, but it carries both negative and positive connotations. Since parents are usually seen as figures of power to a child, any transference of parental images will also carry aspects of power. The person who projects onto the female priest a maternal image sees her in a powerful position but also holds her in a notion of contempt, if Freud's theory is to be believed. There are several reasons why maternal transference onto women leaders may be damaging.

Firstly, idealised mothers invariably fail to live up to the ideal, leading to disappointment and negative feelings. If women leaders identify too closely with the image of 'Mother', they will inevitably fail to live up to this ideal and will be seen as letting people down. Secondly, for people brought up with a strong model of Mother being at home while Father goes out to work, the assumption may be that women leaders simply 'look after' the church where there are no available male leaders.<sup>10</sup> 'Mother' is second best who is only in charge of the home/church while 'Father' is away. This disempowers women leaders and creates a highly misleading impression of female authority. Thirdly, women who care for others can be caught in what Van Leeuwen calls a 'compassion trap' – not caring enough for themselves whilst sacrificing themselves solely to the care of others. There is a danger for women in embracing maternal thinking, if doing so means that they feel the compulsion to take care of everyone except themselves. This is an obvious danger with mothering itself – many mothers find it difficult to find adequate time and energy to devote to their own needs as well as those of their families, and often feel guilty if they do. But the assumption that women in any type of caring role will similarly take on the mantle of 'mother' thereby putting everyone else before their own needs, is an hazard which is attached to various job descriptions. Women's 'emotional labour'<sup>11</sup> is open to abuse because of their potential or actual 'motherly' identity and those involved in caring professions need to maintain a good sense of inner self. This will be particularly important for clergy, in a role where one's care and counsel is sought primarily; where one's job is to offer support different stages of people's life and faith. Fourthly, there are many other ways of describing work done by women. Limiting women's work to the 'motherly' severely restricts other models and metaphors. For the woman priest, always to be thought of as 'mother' might preclude other equally productive images of ministry – shepherd,

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10 Walrond-Skinner in *Double Blessing* (Mowbray, London 1998, p 29), cites the case of women deacons being left in charge only when the (male) vicar is away.

11 A phrase used by Zoë Bennett Moore in 'Women and the Cost of Loving: Towards Transformative Christian Practice' in

*Contact* 127, 11-16 1998:12, taking her lead from Hochschild A. R. *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling* Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press 1983, to refer to any work where emotions are 'bought' as commodities to be dispensed to the 'customer'.

prophet etc. Fifthly, attaching maternal imagery to women leaders may mean that we run the risk of denying the caring, nurturing compassionate elements of leadership to male leaders. Men can be 'maternal' too!

So the model of the woman leader as mother has some possibilities. Maternal thinking can be useful for leaders – both male and female – in constructing what happens in pastoral relationships. Images of care, nurture and growth are positive, as long as the potential for power-abuse and manipulation are recognised and fought clear of. The concern for relationships, nurtured by a woman's early years of unambiguous attachment to her mother, can be highly valuable in both public and personal life, as long as it does not lead to a shrinking away from other possibilities because of a desire to preserve relationships.

### Woman as whore

The second image of womanhood that has been perpetuated by tradition is that of woman as 'incurably treacherous' and liable to lead men astray using her sexual nature. It is the image that associates woman with Eve, the temptress, and as a source of blame for male problems; that sees women as a whole class as sub-standard, prone to fall and afflict men with their sinful and dirty nature. It has strong roots in the historical treatment of women and is sanctioned in the writings of the early church 'fathers'.<sup>12</sup>

Underlying this image is a fear and suspicion of women's sexuality. Since there is a strong link between sexuality and spirituality this has important implications for the way in which women have exercised (or been unable to exercise) their faith. Historically, women's sexuality has been seen as dark, mysterious, threatening and strangely powerful; men have needed to suppress or be overcome by it. Woman is seen as unclean and earthly, reinforced by a misguided perception of menstruation and childbearing. In Greek dualistic thought, whilst woman represented the earthly, man represented the divine. 'Punishing the flesh'<sup>13</sup> was a way to holiness and purity and since women represented the flesh, this meant punishing women.

Male fear of female sexuality has its roots also in its perceived power. Conceiving, gestating and giving birth are immensely powerful acts. Menstruation was seen to be linked to the movements of the moon and forces of nature, giving it a power beyond human control. It is true to say that women themselves have at times exploited this power. In medieval religion, eroticism was a means of reclaiming power for women,<sup>14</sup> and there may be a sense in which this is still true today. In a discussion of the 'Toronto Blessing', Martyn Percy draws out links between the ecstatic manifestations of the 'blessing', and sexual experience. He points, for instance, to the use of metaphors of passion, to the loss of control, to the emphasis on intimacy with God and the references to Jesus as a kind of perfect

12 St Augustine wondered why God had created women at all. The fear that women would contaminate holy men led to the Pope Leo IX (1002-54) enforcing priestly celibacy.

13 A misinterpretation of Paul's theology of 'putting to death the flesh' (sarx). See, for

example Romans 6:19; 7:5; 8:1-17; 2 Pet 2:18; Gal 3:3; 6:8.

14 See Bynum, C. W. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Body in Medieval Religion*, Zone Books, New York 1990, p 120-22.

'lover', to the apparently orgasmic sounds and gestures associated with some manifestations the vocabulary of sexual consummation.<sup>15</sup> Percy claims that women have been particularly susceptible to this kind of experience and that many have found a certain authority in their encounter that is denied to them in any structural sense. A woman who has had such an 'experience of the Spirit' is a woman with some authority: 'The spirituality of contemporary revivalism intentionally offers an apparent bypass around patriarchy... The Toronto Blessing appears to allow women to own publicly an embodied form of spirituality that is beyond the immediate reach of male control'.<sup>16</sup> So women's sexuality has been a source of oppression and injustice, yet also has the potential for use as an means of power and control. What does it mean for a woman leader to recognise and own her sexuality?

Firstly, it is not good enough to pretend that a woman's sexual nature becomes subsumed when she becomes a leader. A first step towards women using sexuality constructively may be recognising that we are indeed sexual! Power can be extremely attractive to others, particularly when combined with a caring, pastoral nature, and priests have often been seen in 'seductive' terms. Powerful women also have often been seen as a source of 'sexual excitement (one has only to think of the 'dominatrix' figure in sexual mythology, or the obsession with Margaret Thatcher's ankles!). But is it valid for women to use their (perhaps subconscious) sexual charm as part of their 'charismatic' gift of leadership? The pitfalls of sexual temptation in pastoral encounters have been well documented, but usually with reference to male clergy.<sup>17</sup> Women leaders, too have the power to use their sexuality for persuasion and are open to the same temptation to abuse and exploit the caring relationship as men have been. Female priests can be seen as objects of erotic fantasy in very much the same way as male clergy have been, but with that extra frisson of excitement that comes with the 'novelty' of seeing women in power. Sexual power is something that can be used to exert influence in less than transparent ways, or it can be recognised and dealt with carefully. Whatever happens, it would not be wise for women clergy to deny totally their sexual nature, since sexuality expresses who we are at a very deep level. But any source of power that is unrecognised and hidden is dangerous and open to abuse.

Also linked to the dichotomy between male and female, between the physical and the spiritual, is the 'nuptial theology'<sup>18</sup> that equates the Church as the 'bride' of Christ. This Biblical metaphor is taken to extremes to imply that the earthly (the Church) is the female while the divine (Christ) is male. Male identity is found in Christ, in giving himself, in being active (even if in sacrifice), whilst female identity

15 Percy, M. 'Sweet Rapture: Subliminal Eroticism in Contemporary Charismatic Worship' in *Theology and Sexuality: The Journal of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality* No 6, 1997, p 83-86.

16 Percy, 1997, p 103.

17 E.g. Tony Campolo and Bruce Larson, 'What is most dangerous about sexual temptation for Church Leaders' in *Innovations* 1 No 4,

(1985) quoted in Robert J. Carlson 'Battling Sexual Indiscretion' in *Ministry* January 1987: 47.

18 This phrase is used by Knodel, N. in 'The Church as a Woman, or Women being Church? Ecclesiology and Theological Anthropology in Feminist Dialogue' in *Theology and Sexuality: The Journal of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality* No 7, 1997, p 103-119.

is found in receiving. The theme underlying the metaphor is that of male and female complementarity – Christ is the bridegroom, the Church is the bride. The 'complementarity' of women and men has been a popular way of speaking about the gender relationship, especially in Evangelical circles. The danger is that notions of 'complementarity' come from an ethos of subordination and inferiority, not from mutuality and equivalence<sup>19</sup>. The difficulty comes when man is seen as the norm (equated with God), and woman provides the difference, as 'other'. Indeed, it is possible to see this sort of gender construction (woman as 'other' or 'differentiator') in society as a whole, in economic structures and in essentially androcentric institutions: 'Women to whom femininity has been attributed have remained a constant "other" to this socio-historical androcentric trajectory'.<sup>20</sup> Complementarity also exists in the psychologies of both Freud and Jung and lies behind much psychoanalyst talk of 'the same but different'.<sup>21</sup>

### Woman as virgin

In Christian mythology the opposite of treacherous Eve is virtuous Mary – the redemption of womanhood. Mary has been held up for women as the ideal to strive for, an ideal which is, of course, impossible. No woman can be both virgin and mother. The idealisation of Mary means that women are never allowed to reach their full potential and the image is used as a source of oppression and restriction. But perhaps even more dangerous is the emphasis placed on Mary's submission as the womanly ideal – 'Be it to me according to thy word'. This emphasis on submission has inevitably led to constraints on women's ministry. Women are not called on to lead, but to be submissive as Mary was. There is the connected assumption that women are somehow *too good* to be priests, if they are like Mary. They are told that they cannot be priest because being so would evoke an overly sexual or protective response in the men to whom they minister. So women's sexuality – seen as both too seductive and too virtuous at the same time has been used consistently to bar them from leadership roles. The problem is that historically there has been no image for sexually active women. A woman is either sexual and sinful, or virgin and virtuous, and both serve to keep her in a non-threatening position.

So for much of history, women have not been allowed to hold power. We have been withheld it for a number of reasons associated with male projections about 'feminine' nature, projections with which women have often (consciously or not) colluded. What compels us to collude?

19 Elaine Graham asserts that '... references to gender complementarity do not take account of the lack of mutuality with which such categories are defined, and do not pause to consider whether the idealised feminine contributions are any more than the recycled projections of patriarchal objectification'. Graham E. *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology*, Mowbray, London 1995, p 47.

20 Field Bibb, J. *Women Towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis*, CUP, Cambridge 1991, p265f.

21 For a fuller discussion of this point, see Jacobs M. 'Is Anatomy Destiny?' in R. Holloway *Who needs Feminism?: Men Respond to Sexism in the Church* London: SPCK 1991, p 154. Lynne Segal includes a helpful discussion of the motivations for, and pitfalls of, sex difference research in Segal, L. *Why Feminism?* Polity Press, Cambridge 1999, p 152.

## Images of women: through our own eyes

The way women see themselves is linked with the way in which they have been seen. We all form opinions of ourselves based heavily on the opinions of others and several key needs, many of which are also pertinent to leaders, have informed the way women see themselves:

### The need to be accepted

Studies consistently speak of women's low self-esteem.<sup>22</sup> What is common to women is also common to clergy. Low self-esteem is a problem for clergy on whom expectations are placed that are at best difficult and at worst impossible to fulfil. People place upon clergy the expectations they have of the Church, requiring them to be a focus for their projections. No clergyperson can ever live up to all the expectations placed upon them and consequent 'failure' leads to a low sense of self-worth and fulfilment. For women clergy, the problem may be doubly real. Many women find it difficult to foster a healthy sense of self-esteem, perhaps due to the expectations placed upon them by stereotypes of care, self sacrifice and self-abnegation. For the clergywoman, (especially perhaps the one who sees herself in a motherly role), the expectations are doubly hard to fulfil. She can never be the perfect mother, and she can never be the perfect priest. Nurturing women's feelings of self worth and value is perhaps one of the fundamental tasks facing the Church and those who care for its leaders.

Many women feel a strong need to be accepted by others, linked perhaps to a concern for relationships and for those around us. A woman may have been encouraged through her life experiences to make herself acceptable to others, especially men. A fear of 'rocking the boat' might account for some of the fiercest opposition to women's ordination which came from other women (perhaps because of a fear of being made to look shameful if the 'traditional' position is given an alternative when the status quo is challenged). Miller's work on the characteristics of subordinate groups shows that this is a natural survival process in instances of oppression. The quest for survival means that any thoughts or actions which are self-oriented, and direct, honest reaction to destructive treatment, are avoided.<sup>23</sup> Women have colluded with the stereotypes of them because it feels safer. So, they find ways of making themselves acceptable to men and to the 'norms' of society. There is a fear of stridency and of ceasing to be appealingly 'feminine'.

Women's need to be accepted has implications for women leaders. It is never possible to be accepted by everyone, and the compulsion to please has a tendency to lead to burnout. Constantly wanting to make oneself acceptable leads to an

22 In one study of 1,300 students at Bible college, 31% of women said they had above average competence compared to 70% of men. 51% of women at mainstream universities and 58% of men said they had above average competence. Cited in Troup, G. 'Women's Work', article in *Idea*, the magazine of the Evangelical Alliance Jan-March, 1999, pp 21-23.

23 Cited in Fageol, S. 'Women in the Church: Claiming our Authority' in *Feminist Theology* No.1, September 1990. Monica Furlong also discusses this theme in *Mirror to the Church* London: SPCK 1985, p 57f.

inability to deal with conflict and a shying away from divisive issues. It might lead to an avoidance of offering vision in leadership, or at least any vision with which one suspects all might not agree. Jamieson argues against a misguided use of the concept of 'acceptance' for women in ministry, because it leads to a blunting of their prophetic and gospel ministry in the world: 'I would not like to see the ministry of women hamstrung by an over-dependence on acceptance at the expense of clarity about the Christ they serve'.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the tendency to seek acceptance is by no means limited to women leaders. I'm sure male leaders want to be accepted too, but since the drive towards acceptance is, it seems, stronger in women (for the reasons we have discussed), the tendency might be duplicated in female clergy.

### The need to serve others

Women presenting themselves for ordination often stress service as a prime motivation. Whilst being a worthy model for ministry, 'service' can also be a cover for women's feelings of worthlessness. When a woman's life is predominantly shaped by caring and she receives affirmation only through this channel, then she will naturally seek affirmation in *whichever* sphere she operates by taking care of others, as she has done as a mother or in similar roles. Of course, the model of service is a fundamental tenet of the call of Christ, and is crucial to the very nature of leadership, stemming from the life of Christ and his sacrifice. However, for women, service has often been the *only* acceptable model, sanctioned at the expense of other important facets of leadership like authority, power and vision.

We need to ask why women so heavily stress service as a model for life and ministry. Women's self-images are based often on how they see themselves in relation to others<sup>25</sup> and their concern for relationships might be linked to their unambiguous attachment to their mothers in early life. Although this concern for relationship is undoubtedly a good and honourable part of women's make-up, it has a negative side. Alongside it, women are often given the subconscious message that self-serving will destroy harmony and that pursuit of self-interest is selfish. The consequence of such relational disruption, they are led to believe, will be separation from those they hold most dear.

So, there are dangers in the exclusive emphasis on self-sacrificial theology for women. The oppression women suffer in being made to believe that service is their prime, or only, function is infrequently challenged, because it resembles 'being a good Christian'. There is a danger in making self-sacrifice a virtue, given women's already present propensity to feelings of low self-esteem. As with all theologies, it can be used to build people up and to find wholeness through Christ, or it can be used to subjugate and oppress, trapping women in 'their real "sin", which is improper self-abnegation and self-denial'.<sup>26</sup> Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross, but he also rose again: 'We need to develop and practise a theology of justice, empowerment of women and solidarity'.<sup>27</sup> Again, the problem of self-sacrifice

24 Jamieson, P. *Living at the Edge: Sacrament and Solidarity in Leadership* London: Mowbray 1997, p 135.

25 See e.g. Gilligan, C. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1982.

26 Bennett Moore, 1998, p 11.

27 Fischer, N. 'A Decade of Discovery' in Kanyoro (ed.) *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology and Church Leadership*. Lutheran World Federation WCC Publications: Geneva 1997, p 161.

becoming oppression is doubly present for women clergy. Clergy are seen as representing the self-sacrificial love of Christ and hence it is crucial that they foster a healthy sense of self-acceptance, self-love and self-respect, believing themselves to be loved by God and valued in their own right. The acceptance or rejection of others does not affect this fundamental belief.

Women's images of themselves have led to a discomfort with concepts of power and authority. We feel far more at home with models of self-sacrifice and service, in order to maintain harmony and make ourselves acceptable to others, sometimes thereby perpetuating the stereotypical myths. Many of the issues of self-esteem and identity which particularly affect women, also affect clergy of both sexes, and so the problems become exaggerated in women clergy. If we recognise that women have felt uncomfortable with power, what can we do about exercising power in leadership? What is the relationship between women, men and power in the Church?

### **The power of the powerless**

The relationship between women and power in society has always been a complex one. Traditionally, women's power has been the power of the powerless. What power women have had has been afforded them by men, to be exercised in a restricted way. Women have often held power in the home, for instance, and have taken responsibility for domestic decisions. In the church, women were usually given responsibility for women's groups and work with children. Women's power has been secondary to, or dependent upon that of men, and where women have held power in the church, it has often been covert, unrecognised and unsanctioned – the power behind the throne.

There is much anecdotal evidence of this kind of 'power through men' being exhibited in some wives of clergy, who have had far more power and influence in the parish than other lay people, simply because of their marriage to the vicar. Some ordained women have had to face hostility from clergy wives, because of the perceived threat to the traditional role of the clergy wife posed by the recognition and sanctioning of women at ordination. Ordained women are, in the wife's eyes, doing what she has done all her life without pay or recognition, and being paid and recognised for it. The feeling is one of betrayal.<sup>28</sup> It is difficult for women to let go of images of weakness, helplessness or covert power, because this is where they have often felt more comfortable. When women are in a position of weakness or unrecognised power the status quo is preserved intact and life is harmonious: 'Women fear not being weak, we fear our own strength'.<sup>29</sup> The problem is that some women are not interested in apparent harmony if women's freedom and potential is the price to pay. But even a woman who has claimed some sort of recognition for her ministry might at times revert to the gender stereotype in order to reaffirm her sense of gender to herself and others. Studies of couples with a dual career show that the wife will more readily revert to being 'homemaker', in order to make herself acceptable to those around her.<sup>30</sup> As an ordinand, the wife of an ordinand

28 See Walrond-Skinner, 1998, p187.

29 Fageol *op cit* 1992, p 18.

30 Walrond-Skinner, 1998, p 56 cites the work of Silberstein, L. R. *Dual Career Marriage: A System in Transition* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 1992.

and a mother, I often find myself consciously talking about housework, children and my home-life to other women, in order to make myself feel more acceptable 'as a woman' to myself and to others.

There are dangers in covert power, not least because it undermines democratic process. When some women continually refuse to own power, but make use of it indirectly, those who seek to own and recognise power are ostracised as trouble makers. Why can't they be like the 'normal' women who accept their lot? I was once asked 'Why do you feel the *need* to be ordained?' The assumption behind the question was why could I not accept the 'normal' lot of women and be a curate's wife? I explained (gently, I think!) about my own sense of calling, that it was not a 'need' but that I was being obedient to what I believed God to be calling me to. Women have been socialised to accept power for men and powerlessness for themselves and find power hard to handle. Covert power, without responsibility, is easier. But 'transforming power' is so dearly needed by women, by men and by the Church as a whole.<sup>31</sup>

### Women and power

Perhaps women's fear of exercising power-over arises from the fact that we have few productive models and may not be clear what the positive exercise of power looks like. For many, power has negative connotations. Historically it is what has been used to oppress women, to keep them *powerless*. It is something with which one dominates, rather than enables. The new generation of feminists, epitomised by Natasha Walter, sees power as something positive, to be claimed and celebrated. 'The new feminism embraces power' says Walter.<sup>32</sup> She criticises the feminist movement in the past for continually associating women with the downtrodden. She derides the attachment of the feminist movement to 'politically correct idealism' and criticises the fear and rejection of hierarchy in favour of consensus, saying that many independent women (and many men) were put off the feminist cause. Younger women today expect much greater equality than their mothers did and whilst it is by no means true that patriarchy is dead or that equality is complete, much ground has been won. Young women can claim power much more easily than previously and do not see it as something to be shied away from. This new self-assurance is epitomised in the concept of 'Girl Power', (the ethos promoted by acts such as The Spice Girls and Billy), which claims that girls can have it all if they want it.<sup>33</sup> It is an assertive and confident world view in which there are no limits. Whilst we may not want to applaud the often accompanying selfishness and arrogance of 'Girl Power' ideologies, it is true that women today rejoice in a greater confidence and self assurance than their predecessors.

31 The phrase 'transforming power' is used by Rebera, R. 'Power in a Discipleship of Equals' in Kanyoro (ed.) *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology and Church Leadership* Lutheran World Federation, WCC Publications: Geneva 1997. See also Martin, B *Coming to Terms with Power*, Grove books 1999 for a discussion of the transforming benefits of power.

32 Walter, N. *The New Feminism*. London: Little Brown and Co. 1998, p 167.

33 The Spice Girls' first release was called 'Wannabe'. Billy's first hit single was called 'Because I Want To'.

Jamieson (coming from a slightly different position to that of Walter or The Spice Girls!) also encourages women in leadership to embrace power and authority, without which the community is unable to function: 'The challenge to women in Christian leadership is not to eschew strength, but to reinvent and redefine it, authentically and appropriately with a firm foundation in Christian tradition and spirituality'.<sup>34</sup> Women leaders must be able to reclaim and transform power in a way which enlightens rather than oppresses, empowers rather than abuses. We must be under no illusion that if women are to fully embrace power and strength they will be any less likely to abuse it than the men who have held it before them. Women might even use their power to oppress men, a capability which we have to confront. And so power is something that, whilst not denied to women leaders, must be handled carefully and considerately if we are not to fall into the same traps as men before us. If women are to reclaim and transform power, how should we do it in a way that is true to our sex? Should women own power in exactly the same way as men? And so we return again to question, 'Is there a distinctly 'feminine' style of leadership'?

### What is 'feminine' about power?

The stereotypical view of powerful women is that they are acting 'like men'.<sup>35</sup> But what do men act like? What is a male preserve? What is a female preserve? People often say that Margaret Thatcher's style of leadership was 'masculine', implying that she wasn't *really* a woman. But Walter vigorously refutes this, and I think she has a good point. The important thing is that Margaret Thatcher *was* a woman. But she was a woman behaving in a non-stereotypically 'feminine' way. Whatever one thinks of Thatcher's politics or even her leadership style, this is something that has the potential to give great freedom to women. We do not have to be what other people want us to be. We do not have to be 'like women'. So if nothing is out of bounds for women, no forms of behaviour, no expression of power, is it possible to talk of 'feminine' leadership? In defining *any* leadership style as 'feminine' are we perpetuating a theory of difference and limiting women and men in the process?

I would challenge the perception that women are more suited to any particular ministry (pastoral care is an oft-cited example) than men as another form of oppression. Women need to learn to be comfortable with power as well as service, and men must rediscover characteristics that have been denied to them through their continual association with the 'feminine', such as vulnerability and weakness. Men and women are prone to exercise authority differently based on customary gender roles in society – men can be dominating; women can be diffident – and there is a need for both to reclaim those attributes traditionally ascribed to the 'other'. Reclamation will be liberating, for both women and men.

34 Jamieson, 1997, p 27.

35 Freud held the view that competent women were 'like men'. See a discussion of this topic in Jacobs, 1991, p 150. Furlong also talks about what she calls the 'Indian Rope Trick' whereby one of the devices women use to escape from the 'shame' of being

women is to try to be 'an honorary man' denying their identity as a women (1991, p 63) and J. B. Miller (in *Towards a New Psychology of Women* 2nd ed. London: Pelican Books 1998) says that women survive in power by acting 'like men'.

## What *can* women bring to leadership that is distinctive?

In the light of the assumption that no way of being or leading is out of bounds to women, we need to ask whether there is anything women can bring to leadership that *is* distinctive. I argue that women do have a distinctive leadership contribution, but one which lies outside any stereotyped role or function. I suggest there are two main distinctive contributions:

### Identification with the marginalised

Because women have been oppressed in the past, they *are* a living critique of institutional power. Because they do not carry the historical association with dominance, they are more able to identify with the outsider and those who feel insignificant. Now, soon after the decision to admit women to priesthood, women priests bring to the church 'the experience of the women who have struggled together'.<sup>36</sup> Experiences of powerlessness make women less bound to the institutionalised faults of their predecessors and more able to be innovative, looking beyond the way things have always been done, especially in collaboration between clergy and laity. This is not because women are 'naturally' more collaborative. We refuted this suggestion earlier. It is rather because women clergy know what it's like to be the laity. Their recent admission into ordained priesthood means that they have had a long time as lay people and are more likely to be open to collaboration.<sup>37</sup>

### 'Wholeness' and 'normality' in ministry

Women are bringing a sense of wholeness to ministry, by their very presence alongside men in all areas of church life. This is very different to notions of 'complementarity' we talked about earlier. It is not about inherent difference but it is about the fact that men and women *are* to be found together in most aspects of life, and so women joining men in ministry can only heighten the relevance of church leadership to everyday life. Judith Rose speaks of the more 'natural' gathering of male and female at the altar in terms of God's words at creation, 'It is not good for man to be alone'.<sup>38</sup> One group of women clergy expresses the difference they see themselves making to the whole ministry of the church as 'we have brought a degree of normality to ministry'.<sup>39</sup>

36 Baisley B. 'Being realistic about feminism' in H. Wakeman (ed.) *Women Priests: The First Years*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1996, p 109.

37 See Gill, S. *Women and the Church of England: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, SPCK, London 1994, p265.

38 Rose, J. 'What difference in women's priesthood making to the Church of England?' in H. Wakeman (ed.) *Women Priests: The First Years*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1996, p 143.

39 Notes from a study day in the Diocese of Bristol on 'Power, Authority and Women clergy', February 1999. In a recent meeting of WATCH (Women and the Church), a speaker said that she thought that the ordination of women to the priesthood had not brought anything different in terms of gifting or expertise, but that the priesthood was now more 'whole' and 'normal'. Notes from WATCH Conference at Trinity College on 20th March 1999.

## What is the way forward for women and men together in leadership?

Certain key things need to happen for women to discover and own our full potential as leaders, for us to be able stand alongside men in all aspects of work and ministry. The productive way forward is to enable both men and women to minister effectively Christ's gospel – the Gospel that brings life to all.

### Changing attitudes towards women in the work place

For men and women to work together in an institution in which men have held most of the power for the past two thousand years, with a history of abuse and oppression, will not be easy. Traditional attitudes in the church run deep and strong. Much research has been carried out into the nature of gendered relations in the workplace and some of this is applicable to the experiences of women clergy. Sexuality has been used to display gendered power, for instance through language use, (calling women 'girls', for example) and evidence suggests that women clergy are no less susceptible to this form of abuse. Women have often been judged by harsher standards than men at work and have had to succeed doubly at a task in order to be thought 'as good as' a male colleague. They must try extra hard in order to compensate for their 'handicap' of being female. Women have a fine line to tread at work. They must be as good as their male counterparts and be up to the task, whilst remaining 'feminine', whatever that might be.<sup>40</sup>

Six years after the first ordinations, women clergy are under a lot of pressure to 'get it right'. Many people are still undecided about women's ordained ministry, and some have not had any experience of ordained women. So each clergy woman carries the burden of being an advertisement for her type. Women clergy feel they have to be exceptionally good at their job to be accepted not only as themselves in their task, but also as women clergy in general. Women leaders might be displayed as tokens by men, in order to excuse them from allowing other women their full place in leadership structures.<sup>41</sup> Jamieson is concerned that her role as Bishop might disadvantage other women, who are not taken on their own merits – 'You've got a woman Bishop. What more do you want?'. Women have not yet entered into a full and equal position of leadership, as people in their own right, alongside male colleagues in the church.

### Women and Men learning to work well together

Whilst many men rejoice at the recognition of women's priesthood and enjoy working alongside women as equals, there are still some who do not feel so positive, and some women feel as though they are working against a 'brotherhood'. For some male clergy, being part of an all-male club held a great deal of appeal and feel the

40 The message given to women at work is: 'Take risks, but be consistently outstanding; be tough, but don't be macho; be ambitious, but don't expect equal treatment, take responsibility, but follow others' advice'. Van Leeuwen, M. S. *Gender and Grace: Women and Men in a Changing World*, IVP, Leicester 1990, p 204.

41 A friend of mine was recently told that she couldn't take a public role in a service, 'because we already have two women involved and only one man'. Had it been the other way around, I wonder whether there would have been an issue.

loss of the 'old boys' network' that inevitably comes with the inclusion of women in the priesthood as something to be mourned. Walrond-Skinner speaks of the sense of invasion felt by some male clergy who have had a monopoly on the 'feminine' gifts of intuition, compassion etc.<sup>42</sup> Now that there are 'real' women ministering alongside men, what will happen to the pastoral ministry of men? The change the ordination of women will bring to male clergy identity at emotional and psychological levels must not be underestimated. Whilst feeling at one level completely happy with women's ministry, there might be more deeply perceived threats, not least because of current confusions and contradictions about what it means to be a man in today's society. But we have shown already that it is erroneous to think of any gifts as being inherently 'masculine' or 'feminine' or for either sex to have a monopoly on pastoring or caring or leading or taking authority. The only thing male clergy have to fear is stereotyping. Women and men must be sensitive to each other's needs and fears, especially while both are coming to terms with the changes women's ordination brings. Women might be accepted into increasingly more responsible positions in the Church, but old attitudes are difficult to change, and take time to do so.

### **Discovering a greater sense of self-esteem**

For women to discover a greater sense of self worth is difficult when many of the images of womanhood for the last two millennia have been negative and restraining. But the time has come for women to claim new-found freedoms, and to believe ourselves worthy of them. As women we need to learn to include ourselves as *part* of any solution, alongside others. In leadership, this might mean taking more time to care for our own needs, rather than constantly considering only the needs of those we serve. Not until a woman has a strong sense of her own worth in God's eyes is she able to truly communicate a sense of worth to others. The Christian philosophy of 'denying oneself' is put forward as the most virtuous way of living, but until we learn to take care of ourselves as well, we are not truly mature and responsible people. For women leaders, the realisation that we cannot please everyone all the time, leads to a greater ability to face conflict constructively and lead communities forward in vision.

### **Developing an authentic spirituality of strength**

Because of the images that have been 'allowable' for women in the past, it is often easier to stick to the familiar theme – that women are weak and vulnerable and need to be cared for. Jamieson calls for women to rediscover and develop 'an authentic spirituality of strength' and calls this rediscovery 'one of the major tasks of women in Christian leadership'.<sup>43</sup> But the images of strength we have inherited have not always been positive ones. So the task for women leaders is to discover what it can mean to be strong *as women*. The particular reappropriation of strength will differ from woman to woman, according to the context of ministry, but it is important that women's strength is seen to be inclusive, empowering and nurturing of others. Strength is something that belongs as much to women as it does to men and there is nothing 'unfeminine' about being a strong Christian leader.

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42 Walrond-Skinner, 1998, p 37.

43 Jamieson, 1997, p26.

## Transforming power and authority

Women's historical suspicion of power has not helped them take their full place in society. Whilst many, like Greer, call today's world a 'men's' world and eschew anything associated with hierarchical (and therefore patriarchal) structure, I believe that it is important that women reclaim and renew structures and institutions. The traditional 'idealist feminist' way of seeing power as purely relational (the image of a 'web' is often used) presents problems when applied in a context, such as the church, where distinction between the leader and the rest of the people is sometimes beneficial. Hierarchy and power are not only essential for the right functioning for an institution, but can also be reclaimed and renewed for the benefit of others.<sup>44</sup> Power need not mean oppression, and women need not fear it: 'Transforming power is the vision that keeps us on the journey towards creating a partnership of equals in the community of faith'.<sup>45</sup> Hierarchy can be empowering, enabling and nurturing when women move towards an owned autonomous authority.

## Aiming for a diminishing of difference

So if men need to become more relational and women more autonomous in leadership, are men and women the same? Is androgyny the goal? I would still want to affirm some sense of gender difference. God made male and female, after all, and both together reflect God's image. But what constitutes the difference is not easy (or perhaps advisable) to pin down.<sup>46</sup> What is needed is a move away from inflexibly attaching any particular *quality* to men or to women uniquely; detaching characteristic from gender; removing gifts or callings from the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine'.<sup>47</sup> In order to do this, it is important that our conceptualisation of God must be 'unhooked from its links with sexuality'.<sup>48</sup> The presence of women

44 Briony Martin sums up the need for, power: '...if power comes from God and is part of the creation which God saw and called good, then our understanding of power and of God is stretched. And it is in this stretching that we are freed to tackle ourselves as we really are and the world as it really is – places where power can be destructive, alienating and oppressive but where it can also be strong safe and good'. Martin, 1999, p 6.

45 Rebera, 1997, p 89

46 Segal says 'One is not born a woman but becomes one. However, quite what one becomes is ambiguous, with only some of the signs of "woman" to the fore, some of the time.... The way to fight the idea of sex and its rigidly conceived ties to gender and sexuality as the *core* of our being, is not to negate or eliminate our own complex psychic investments and social negotiations as sexually desiring beings. It is rather to highlight their complexity, and potential fluidity. It is also to mobilise in support of diverse struggles at the different sites where

gender functions to constrain or suppress us – in both social and symbolic domains'. Segal, 1999, p 72.

47 Shaw advocates seeing 'masculine' and 'feminine' as relational rather than oppositional: 'instead of beginning with our presuppositions about what it means to be a man or a woman, we might bracket those presuppositions initially and begin with the person, the gifts, the vocation, and work towards (rather than from) what it means to be a particular *woman* or *man* to be a priest'. Shaw, J. 'Gender and the Act of Synod' in M. Furlong (ed.) *Act of Synod – Act of Folly?* SCM Press, London 1998, pp 25f.

48 Field Bibb advocates a reappraisal of the dominant image of God as 'Father'. If God is Father 'Man becomes God and woman provides the difference'. Exploring maternal imagery for God, is not a move towards "the gentleness generally associated with a mother *per se*, but towards a detachment of power and masculinity from the representation of subjectivity" Field Bibb, 1991, p 289.

priests at the altar alongside men will not reveal anything more 'feminine' about God's character, but they will help the church move towards a fuller vision of who we are: 'Together, and individually, made in the image of God the Trinity: creator, mother, lover, friend, protector, sacrifice, redeemer, father, holy wisdom, mighty wind, vulnerable one, whispered word and blazing fire of love'.<sup>49</sup>

Women who are Christian leaders are coming into a time of unparalleled opportunity, in service and in leadership and in transforming both. In doing so, women can claim and own all the qualities and characteristics needed to minister effectively, without fearing being seen as 'unfeminine'. Once we take on the mantle of a fully sanctioned and autonomous authority, we can reject the label 'unfeminine'. We are called upon to take our rightful place alongside men at the altar and in every aspect of ministry, taking responsibility seriously, transforming power, enabling others and rediscovering self-esteem in the process. The way forward is for male and female leaders to be what God has called us to be, not bound by restrictive patterns. It is for women to reject false stereotypes that have constrained us in the past; to reserve for ourselves the freedom to be fully human. Most of all it is to be women made in God's image.

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49 Baisley *op cit* 1996:109.