"Extending the Table": Eucharist as a Model for Feminist Food Justice[1]

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Abstract

This article explores the link between the ritual of communion and the practice of feeding real bodies, real food. The relationship between food and theology is implicitly and explicitly central to Christian practice. Drawing on contemporary literature (including agricultural-economic, journalistic and culinary) and through the lenses of feminist theology, the article considers ways in which food justice can be served through church communities. The importance of embodiment and mutual empowerment is emphasised through an exploration of four particular church outreach projects – two in Cape Town and two in Exeter, UK. The author explores the presence, praxis and power dynamics of the investigated church communities that contribute to alternative forms of addressing hunger within their contexts. There is a recognition of a shift from, traditional forms of charity as a gift, towards a practice of food justice as a right. And the kitchen is reclaimed as a sacred space in which to practice theological action.

Introduction: Eucharist, Motherhood and Ministry

As a mother and as an Anglican priest, I have a vested interest in feeding people and in making them feel welcome, safe and secure. The kind of mothering that ensures that a family is fed with wholesome and nutritious meals on a daily basis is not essentially women's work – but the socially constructed role is one within which feminist mothers operate.[2] Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu reminds us:

> Hunger is not a natural phenomenon. It is a man-made tragedy. People do not go hungry because there is not enough food to eat. They go hungry because the system which delivers food from the fields to our plates is broken. And now in this new age of crisis – with increasingly severe and extreme weather and dwindling natural resources feeding the world will get harder still.[3]

[1] The title of this article comes from a cookbook. Joetta Handrich Schlabach, *Extending the Table: A World Community Cookbook*. Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, (1991).

[2] A discussion about motherhood and essentialism is found in my 2014 PhD thesis, South African Anglican Clergywomen Merging Ministry and Motherhood: Exploring Presence, Praxis and Power, 27-30.

[3] Leonie Joubert, *The Hungry Season: Feeding Southern African Cities*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, (2012).

Tutu indicates implicitly that mothering work is undervalued within the broken systems of care within modern western societies. Mother earth has been exploited and the solution to eradicating hunger goes far beyond what mothers alone can provide. As an Anglican priest, Tutu also understands the symbolic provision embodied in the celebration of communion at the altar. This ritualised meal of the Eucharist glorifies mothering work. The irony is that the (glorified) symbolic mothering is still overwhelmingly the prerogative of male priests while practical (undervalued) mothering is left primarily to women.

This article documents exploratory research that I have begun as a study of the relationship between Eucharist and food security. I choose to do feminist narrative research because this approach clearly values women's real lives and work. It roots our practical theology in real lives that occur in real bodies. Our stories matter. My tone is deliberately conversational in order to be widely accessible. This article cannot draw on the full empirical outcome of the research since the process is still underway. But it attempts to introduce the topic of food and faith by presenting a theological argument for the link as well as theorising the link through a feminist lens.

My involvement as a priest of a small gathered Eucharistic community in conjunction with my on-going work of mothering my family led to this research project that is exploring the Eucharist in light of food security and food justice. It was a natural progression stemming from my PhD research ("South African Anglican Clergywomen Merging Ministry and Motherhood: Exploring Presence, Praxis and Power").[4] My thesis argues that ministry is mothering work. Emma Percy also explores these ideas at length in her book *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry* while Nicolas Slee and Stephen Burns recognise in their book *Presiding Like a Woman* that new conceptions and practices of ministry can be learned through women officiating at the altar and beyond.[5]

My current research extends that work by exploring the ways in which mothering care is provided through the provision of real food as well as the symbolic Eucharistic feast. I examine table fellowship and consider the differences between expressions of charity and practices of communion. I have chosen to write in a style that broadens the conversation beyond the strictly academic. Practical theology ought to be as accessible as possible. Christianity is "practice" as much as it is a set

[4] Elizabeth Jane Getman, *South African Anglican Clergywomen Merging Ministry And Motherhood: Exploring Presence, Praxis And Power*. University of KwaZulu Natal, 2014.
[5] Nicola Slee and Stephen Burns, eds. *Presiding Like a Woman*. London: SPCK, (2010); Emma Percy, *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry*. Farnham: Ashgate, (2014).

of beliefs. Eucharist means giving thanks. When we break bread – symbolically and around a kitchen table – we are called to practice gratitude. My training rector, Jennifer Stewart Sistig, once told me that all theology should be pastoral theology. She demonstrated that it was pointless to argue over theoretical understandings without investing loving care in real people. She taught me to practice a theology focused on peoples' real needs. This understanding was foundational to my academic theological training as well. James Cochrane, John de Gruchy and Robin Petersen's book *In Word and Deed: Towards a Practical Theology for Social Transformation* made clear that theology is grounded in the reality of the lives of "individuals and communities."[6] In this article the practice of table fellowship is observed through the overlapping lenses of mothering and the Eucharist. Both lenses provide insight into practical engagement of pastoral theology.

The context of my experience of pastoral care and practical theology is rooted in my other vocation of motherhood. To provide some background, I refer to my previous research that highlights the contribution to ministry provided by the experience and practice of mothering:

> This experience of mothering, as expressed through a nurturing presence and praxis at the altar, is a re-vindication of the necessity and the value of domestic labour. This labour happens both at the altar and in the home. The powerful witness of clergy mothers can transform the traditional institutional practices that have idealised the work of the clergy while undervaluing the same domestic work done by innumerable women (and some liberated men) on the home front. The altars of our homes include our kitchen tables which, cluttered with the mess of children and the management of family life, can be reclaimed as sacred spaces for breaking bread and enacting celebration. This work of "mothering" includes feeding, serving, mediating conflict and forgiving the "natals". Our hope as mothers who do this work conscientiously is that all concerned will deepen their experience and understanding of embodiment in order to give birth to new horizons of possibility and equity.[7]

A fundamental aim in my ministry (and in my mothering) is to continue to work towards the ambitious project of developing a feminist philosophy of religion that Grace Jantzen articulated in her book Becoming Divine. She announced therein a disruptively transformative theory of natality:

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[6] James R. Cochrane, John W. de Gruchy & Robin Petersen, *In Word and Deed: Towards a Practical Theology for Social Transformation*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, (1991), 17.

[7] Getman, *South African Anglican Clergywomen Merging Ministry And Motherhood: Exploring Presence, Praxis And Power* ,49.

> [A] Feminist philosophy of religion based in the aim of becoming divine does a great deal more than challenge traditional aims and methods of the philosophy of religion, although it certainly does that too, especially in its diagnosis of the necrophilia of western philosophical and religious thought. It actually moves us onward from the project of modernity itself, creating a new horizon for human becoming […] in which natality can be explored as the opening of new possibilities.[8]

Inherent in Jantzen's theory of natality is the notion of the host mother who nourishes life. Feeding others is inherently sacramental. Mothers work on a daily basis to provide food and security for our families. Pregnant women shelter new life within our own bodies – feeding another body and providing a sanctuary for growth. The nourishment provided by mothers (either through breast feeding or bottles or healthy snacks or well-balanced family meals) can help bodies grow. Mothering food ought to provide a sense of safety, love and care. The notion of natality (as opposed to mortality) provides a framework for understanding that life is for flourishing, bodies are for loving and food is for sharing. I believe all priests do this mothering work when we prepare the Eucharistic table. We break a loaf of bread and pour out a jug of wine so that all may be fed. Eucharist is the quintessential celebration of love.

There is a certain sensuality and intimacy in the act of the Eucharist that affords a profound awareness of vulnerability each time I celebrate at the altar. It is a privilege to stand in this role. I am well aware it is not because of my holiness, but because of my brokenness I am able to wear this mantle of power. There is a physical porousness in this act that recalls the experience of breastfeeding my babies. There is a profoundly intimate connection to people who come with open hands to receive the body and blood of Christ. My mandate is to welcome all to the feast with the responsibility of helping people to flourish through this experience of communion. Feeding people's bodies as well as their souls and psyches is a natural extension of Eucharist. My interpretation of the Eucharist is inextricably tied to my experience of motherhood. Eucharist is about nurture and empowerment. It is about fostering relationships of divine equality. It is an enactment of food justice.

[8] Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, (1999), 8.

Sharing the Daily Bread

The line from the Lord's Prayer "Give us this day our daily bread" has a particular resonance for those responsible for procuring and preparing and presenting meals for others. It has another resonance for those for whom food is an insecure resource. Timothy Gorringe's book *Harvest: Food, Farming and the Churches* has been written as an accessible study guide for congregations. He unpacks this phrase 'ton arton ton epiousion' - or 'daily bread' that refers back to manna from God. He says, "Prayer for daily bread, and thankfulness for food, makes absolute sense against a background of food insecurity. It makes much less sense in supermarket society."[9] Over-abundance, packaging and wastefulness contribute to a consumerism that takes food for granted. There is a lack of connection to the source of nourishment. And yet we are all hungry for more than food.

In her book *Bread of Tomorrow: Praying with the World's Poor*, Janet Morley makes a direct theological connection between "daily bread" and hungry people. She writes:

> They pray for real food, but they are also hungry for justice; they long for freedom from the intolerable burdens the international debt places on them, and look to that biblical time of jubilee when debts are remitted and justice prevails.[10]

The poor and the hungry are not only found in developing countries. Christians can practice justice locally wherever we live. The biblical imperative to feed the hungry makes the move from Eucharist to food justice a natural step. Metaphor and symbolism help us to imagine and build the kitchen in which justice can begin to be served. In fact, the geographical location of parish churches in the United Kingdom provides an opportunity for addressing food insecurity and practicing food justice. In a 2015 report for "Church Network Responses to Poverty", the editors explain why parish churches can make a significant contribution in their communities:

> Churches are uniquely placed to build networks against poverty. The Church of England's parish structure commits it to neighbourhoods the length and breadth of the country where Christians of other denominations are also faithfully present. Being communities of

[9] Timothy Gorringe, *Harvest: Food, Farming and the Churches.* London: SPCK, (2006), 58.
[10] Janet Morley, ed. *Bread of Tomorrow: Praying with the World's Poor*. London: SPCK & Christian Aid, (1992).

> equals, churches are able to transform top-down service delivery structures into relationships of trust.[11]

While churches may strive to be communities of equals where relationships of trust thrive, this cannot be assumed or taken for granted. In their paper, *Christianity and Food: Recent Scholarly Trends*, Barbara Patterson and Shirley Banks ask the most critical question: "what's being served on and around the table but also to and with whom?"[12] We need to query what we are eating and where it comes from and who is welcome at the table. Who cooks? Who eats? Who cleans up? These are all profoundly theological questions.

Sara Miles presents an inspiring example of food justice in her spiritual memoir *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion.* In it she articulates her faith journey from adult atheist to practicing Christian and the parallel creation of a food pantry at the altar in the Episcopal Church St Gregory of Nyssa where she worships. Miles recounts the significance of her first communion in the following words:

> Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith that I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food – indeed the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people.And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I'd experienced. I started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where I'd first received the body of Christ.[13]

Her unassumingly ambitious project now feeds thousands of people. It is a natural extension of the Eucharist and the gospel message that says, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). This way of understanding and practicing Christianity is not an optional extra. It is central to faithful living. As Miles so aptly states:

> The food pantry was our church and in it we translated the sacraments, and key Christian rites in often unorthodox ways. In doing so, I'd come to see that we were sharing in the ongoing work of all believers, and

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[11] David Grumett and Bethany Eckley, eds. *Creating Conversations: Exploring Community-Based Responses to Poverty*. University of Edinburgh, (2015), 1.

[12] Barbara Patterson and Shirley Banks, "Christianity and Food: Recent Scholarly Trends," *Religion Compass*, 7 no.10 (2013): 433–440.

[13] Sara Miles, *Take This Bread*: *A Radical Conversion*. New York: Ballantine Books, (2007), xiii.

> that we were helping make the larger church new, even as we were ourselves being transformed.[14]

Miles dares to call it Eucharist. And yet this is not so radical a practice. Agape feasts, as evidenced in the New Testament, were shared by early Christian communities (Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7-11).[15] The Last Supper was, after all, a real meal, not simply a symbolic one.

The Sites of Research and the Evolution of the Concept

I have identified four Anglican churches, two cathedrals and two parish churches) that have practiced both Eucharist and community outreach in the form of soup kitchens or similar projects. There are people in these sacred spaces translating the ritual practice of mothering through food (symbolically shared in the Eucharist) in wider ways that extend the table. St Peter's Cathedral in Exeter, Devon, UK and St George's Cathedral in Cape Town have much in common, and could develop links around Eucharistic practice and table fellowship. St George's has a significant social justice history through its resistance to the apartheid government and is known as the "People's Cathedral" in the Mother City.[16] St Peter's Cathedral was selected since I am currently part of the clergy team.[17] Each Wednesday evening there is a *Homeless Café* in the outbuilding chapel called the Chapter House. St David's Parish Church in Exeter has run a soup kitchen on Thursday evenings since 2002.[18] Finally, St Peter's Church in Mowbray, Cape Town has been hosting a *Community Supper* for the past five years that explicitly challenges the traditional donor/recipient power dynamics. On Thursday evenings, up to eighty homeless people come to the church hall to be served as dinner guests.[19] These four communities provide points of entry towards a larger experience of communion and community.

My family moved to Exeter from South Africa in 2016. I started attending the evening services at Exeter Cathedral as a parishioner – but through a series of unexpected events and circumstances, I have become the volunteer de facto priest-in-charge of the evening *Sundays@7 service*. It was a natural progression to get involved with the Wednesday *Homeless Café* as well – where baked potatoes and hot drinks are served instead

[14] Miles, "Take this bread," 227.
[15] Trevor Lloyd, *Agapes and Informal Eucharists*. Grove Booklet on Ministry and Worship no.19. Bramcott, Notts: Grove Books, (1973).
[16] St. Georges Cathedral: The people's cathedral http://sgcathedral.co.za
[17] Exeter Cathedral http://www.exeter-cathedral.org.uk
[18] St David's Church Exeter http://stdavidschurchexeter.org.uk
[19] St Peter's Church, Mowbray https://stpetersmowbray.wordpress.com/mission/

of bread and wine. This led to discussions about extending the table even further.

I initiated conversations with people in leadership at the four designated communities about their different modus operandi. Then residential canon, Anna Norman-Walker, was one of the founding organisers of both the *Sundays@7* service in the Cathedral and the *Homeless Café*. Both of these services take place in the Cathedral Chapter House. Symbolically and theologically, Sundays and Wednesdays were part of the same continuum. Anna and I spoke of the parallels between these services and Sara Miles' food pantry at St Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco. Also, I began corresponding with the poet dean of St George's Cathedral in Cape Town to discuss his community's involvement with food distribution. His reply follows:

> We had to close our soup kitchen. It was outsourced charity in that did not involve the clergy or the congregation other than in the form of donations. But the main reason was that of security: The gangsters heading to and from the courts on Keerom Street would feast at the cathedral and then rob all souls within their pilfering and often life-threatening nearness […] we are planning to start a food kitchen (food for all must be sexy - preferably curry. Soup has such a pervasively sad, impoverishing presence in our lives).[20]

Making plans for food kitchens is a way to work towards building community. People need to eat and people who serve each other tend to eat better and have the added benefit of conversation and recognition and hopefully mutual respect.

Food and Theology

David Grumett and Rachel Muers' *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and the Christian Diet* grapples with historical practice and present identity in an accessible way. They reflect on current unhealthy understandings of food consumption (with a destructive environmental and economic impact) and they promote a more just and sustainable diet. They "offer not so much a dietary prescription for healthy food practices as an annotated book of recipes."[21] These practices and recipes are rooted firmly in practical theology. Other voices in this contemporary theological conversation include Norman Wirzba and Angel Méndez-Montoya who discuss the meaning of food and eating in the context of the Eucharist and beyond. Wirzba's preface in *Food and*

[20] From a private electronic correspondence in July 2017.
[21] David Grumett and Rachel Muers. *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and the Christian Diet*. Oxon: Routledge, (2010), 149.

Faith: A Theology of Eating speaks of a memorable meal and Méndez-Montoya includes a recipe in The *Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist* as an example of alimentary theology.[22] Méndez-Montoya articulates a vision of "alimentary theology as a practice of power that is non-coercive, but communal, rooted in nurturing, loving care for one another, and imitating God's own radical gesture of love."[23] Wirzba has coined and explained the term "Eucharistic eating". He clearly understands that Eucharist can extend through eating into the wholeness of life:

> […] Eucharistic eating alters the relationships that make up our lives, gives them a self-offering character, and in doing so changes the practice of life itself. Though physiological eating continues as a biological necessity, the look and feel of life changes because the relationships that make life possible have been transformed.[24]

Wirzba and Méndez-Montoya both incorporate the preference for practice over belief in order to foster a sense of belonging. Both recognise the power of the Eucharist to change how we live from day to day. In contrast to transformative Eucharistic eating, Ernst Conradie in his article "What Do We Do When We Eat?" raises the possibility that in some contexts (non-Eucharistic) eating can demonstrate and even reinforce white male supremacy. He notes the South African traditions of "hunting, braaing and eating". He also recalls the forced feeding of abducted Africans on slave ships. In both examples, food is about domination.[25]

All of these authors address important issues around food and theology. This is engaged practical theology. It leads to further practical questions. What happens when we eat *together*. And what are people really hungry for? And who is feeding whom? Who gets to eat and who is left out? Who is sacrificed? How do we break bread and share beyond the Eucharist? Can we find examples of Eucharistic eating that help to overcome the isolation and loneliness of our modern era? These and other questions can only be addressed in the context of Eucharistic practice and table fellowship.

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[22] Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*. New York: Cambridge University Press, (2011), xi.And Angel F. Méndez-Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist*. 12-13

[23] Méndez-Montoya, "Food and Faith," 43.

[24] Wirzba, "Food and Faith," 155.

[25] Ernst M Conradie, "What Do We Do When We Eat? Part I: An Inconclusive Inquiry," *Scriptura,* 115 (2016): 1-17.

A Kitchen in the Sanctuary and a Sanctuary in the Kitchen

With an understanding of Eucharist as food justice, it seems most appropriate that Exeter Cathedral's *Homeless Café* gathers in the same sacred space that is used for evening Eucharistic services. On Wednesdays there are around fifty people who sleep rough and/or experience hunger who come for a baked potato with toppings, a hot drink and a warm welcome. While it is true that the volunteers who serve tend to be well fed, the organisers are conscious of the power dynamics around charitable giving and try to foster a sense of community that is not patronising.

Sacred spaces can lend themselves to being portals to the divine. The Sunday altar is replaced with Wednesday dinner tables that are in turn replaced with the altar. 'A kitchen in the sanctuary' resonates with Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in the World*. She writes about embodied practices that can lead us deeper into the mystery of faith in the context of our own particular lives:

> To make bread or love, to dig in the earth, to feed an animal or cook for a stranger—these activities require no extensive commentary, no lucid theology. All they require is someone willing to bend, reach, chop, stir. Most of these tasks are so full of pleasure that there is no need to complicate things by calling them holy. And yet these are the same activities that change lives, sometimes all at once and sometimes more slowly, the way dripping water changes stone. In a world where faith is often construed as a way of thinking, bodily practices remind the willing that faith is a way of life.[26]

To think about food security and Eucharist is to think (and act) in a theologically embodied way – as opposed to a theologically abstract way. This kind of practical application and engagement is a cornerstone of feminist theology. Letty Russell's *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* emphasises the equal partnership and sharing of all members of the community. Likewise in *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology,* Rosemary Radford Ruether transforms systematic feminist theology by closely examining biblical teaching. She contrasts patriarchal with embodied understanding and, in so doing, helps women to make informed choices about our engagement within family, church and wider community. Denise Ackermann also insists on embodied theology and deliberately wrote *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* for her loved ones and "for the general

[26] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009, xviii.

reader, for people in the churches, as well as for anyone else who might be interested in the theological reflections of a white woman on the life of faith."[27] Ruether rightly described Ackermann's book "theology with its feet on the ground."[28] Likewise, practicing food security is Eucharist with its feet on the ground.

Cooking has long been a practice of embodied prayer for me. I love to cook and to feed people. Making food to share with those who want to sit at the table and be in conversation and community is one of the greatest pleasures in my life. I have a culinary library that competes for space with my theological library. Recently I have started to see that the collections have much in common. Food justice brings them closer together. Eucharist erases the artificial divisions.

For this particular research project, I even bought cookbooks as theological resources. Gill Meller's book *Gather* promotes "a philosophy for a more mindful way to cook and to eat."[29] Meller's cooking is linked with his local landscape (and seascape) and his recipe choices celebrate the abundance of British wild and farmed seasonal produce.

This multilayered word, 'gather', with all its significance and implications, has helped me to find a way to make the most of the food that I eat with my family and friends. It has given me a path to tread that makes sense to me as a cook, and it has given me a genuine appreciation for the happiness that sharing food with other people can bring.[30]

One of my old reliable cookbooks, *Extending the Table: A World Community Cookbook*, was commissioned by the Mennonite Central Committee and is compiled of contributions from missionaries. In the foreword, Paul Longacre writes:

> The stories and recipes help us to enter into the lives and situations of these people and be changed by them in significant ways. Food is a medium of communication, but it is more; in a mysterious way, it is part of the message, as Jesus so vividly portrayed in the breaking of the bread and distribution of the cup.[31]

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[27] Denise M. Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith*. Cambridge: Eerdmans & David Philip Publishers, (2003), xii.
[28] Ackermann, "After the Locusts," back cover.
[29] Gill Meller, *Gather: Everyday Seasonal Recipes from a Year in Our Landscapes*. London: Quadrille, (2016), 9.
[30] Meller, "Gather," 7.
[31] Schlabach, "Extending the Table: A World Community Cookbook," 7.

The respect and tenderness that are conveyed in the stories point to a shift away from the dualistic 'us and them' mentality that so often occurs between the 'privileged' and the 'needy'. Hunger is intrinsically part of what it means to be human. We all live in bodies that need to eat. We can connect with each other through feeding each other and eating together. This is precisely why I take issue with Dean Michael Weeder's assessment that soup has sad connotations. Soup for me is rich and welcoming. I fed myself (and so many others) with vats of soup through my university years in cold Montreal. Even now in my home kitchen, I have a habit of cooking big pots of soup and inviting people to come and eat at my table. Some of my most significant experiences of pastoral care have taken place in the sanctuary of the kitchen.

The current renovation of the St David's church brings us back to the notion of a kitchen in the sanctuary. Many of the old pews have been removed and a kitchen is being installed within the worship space. An example of a successful café housed in an active church is the *Café@All* Saints in Hereford.[32] One of St David's churchwardens had the vision for outreach and income generation and it is easy to imagine the existing weekly soup kitchen flourishing in the sanctuary. A newly installed kitchen could become the location in which to practice alimentary theology. If the altar where the bread is broken is a sacred space, why not also the oven in which that same bread is baked?

Practicing Food Justice Instead of Charity

The Hungry Season: Feeding Southern Africa's Cities by Leonie Joubert is an important contemporary secular glimpse into the social problem of hunger. It offers a stark contrast to the idyllic reality that Meller's cookbook presents. Joubert's book "visits eight families in eight cities across the region and tells the story of food security through their own stomachs."[33] It "concludes with a discussion of possible solutions to the many challenges to the modern food system and how we might work to improve food and national security, particularly for the urban poor."[34] In a geographical region where the inequality gap looms large, obscene abundance is juxtaposed with acute malnutrition.

People across the economic spectrum can practice food justice. Craig Stewart is the director of The Warehouse in Cape Town. He believes that social development should not be charity – it must be mutually beneficial

[32] http://www.cafeatallsaints.co.uk
[33] Joubert, "The Hungry Season: Feeding Southern Africa's Cities," 14.
[34] Joubert, "The Hungry Season: Feeding Southern Africa's Cities," 17.

and sustainable. The organisation's motto is "serving the church in its response to poverty, injustice and division."[35] Their mission is to work broadly with local churches towards practical action and transformed attitudes. Craig wrote an article on his blog called *Good Food God Food* reflecting on the theology of food and a food co-op founded by his wife Liesl.[36]

Liesl Stewart is a founding member and organiser of a good food co-op in the Cape Town southern suburbs. This group has managed to reorganise successfully the bulk of their food shopping by going directly to the producers and cutting out unethical food retailers. She explains the rationale and the way it works:

> We're trying to close the gap and buy food from as close to the source as possible. I don't believe good, ethically-produced food has to be a budget-breaker. But I do believe it's mainly possible through sharing information, and banding together to get more bang for our buck.[37]

Liesl introduced me to the critically important work of Tracy Ledger. Her book *An Empty Plate: Why we are losing the battle for our food system, why it matters, and how we can win it back* is an analysis of the agri-food system and industry and government policy in South Africa. Ledger explains the meaning of her title that goes beyond food: "It is about the absence of care, the absence of dignity and the absence of kindness. These are the real moral evils of our food system."[38] She challenges us all to use food justice to work towards a genuinely equitable society. Ledger emphasises morality and mutual respect. She emphasises that charity can do more harm than good because it overlooks the fact that food is a right not a gift and that the poor and hungry are not less worthy (or less intelligent) than the wealthy and well-fed.

Craig and Liesl Stewart with others have brought the fundamental values of social justice and mutual respect (as well as a critical re-examination of power dynamics) to the *Community Supper* on Thursday evenings at St Peter's Church in Mowbray, Cape Town. They helped to found this service in February 2011 and it has been identified as a "fresh

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[35] Stewart, Craig. "Good Food God Food," http://www.warehouse.org.za

[36] Stewart, Craig. "Good Food God Food," http://www.warehouse.org.za/index.php/site/article/good-food-god-food1

[37] Stewart, Craig. "Good Food God Food," http://www.warehouse.org.za/index.php/site/article/good-food-god-food1

[38] Tracy Ledger, *An Empty Plate: Why we are losing the battle for our food system, why it matters, and how we can win it back*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media, (2016), 196.

expression" of church.[39] While the *Community Supper* obviously serves a charitable purpose for the local homeless population, the Stewart family participate because this is their faith community. Liesl says that she is far more at home here than in the slick Sunday morning performance. The *Community Supper* is not an exercise in proselytisation. It is an experience of nurture and hospitality and commonality. It is a celebration of human dignity. As Craig says, it is about "eating a meal together with the intention of forming an ecclesial community."[40] I experienced this chaotic and unlikely community (with a fair number of intoxicated and unwashed bodies) as an extension of the Eucharist. It challenges social divisions and it pushes the boundaries of comfort zones. It is a stark reminder of our common human vulnerability and abundant need.

Mutual Vulnerability and Reciprocal Need

I started this project with a good dose of high-minded altruistic Christian optimism and patronising idealism. I have been reminded that churches alone cannot resolve the deeper political issues surrounding food justice. Ledger highlights the systemic problem of food inaccessibility that is compounded by charity.[41] Soup kitchens can undermine the dignity of those who must ask for food - because food should not be used as a charitable gift. Access to healthy food is a human right. However, in the Eucharist and at the *Community Supper* and at the *Homeless Café* – with curry and lasagne and baked potatoes and bowls of soup shared – we can recognise each other's humanity and our mutual vulnerability. We can advocate and model something different through Eucharistic practice and table fellowship. I am profoundly aware that not only poor people are hungry. Janet Morley recognises the neediness of those who want to be the benefactors:

> *God of the poor,*
> *we long to meet you*
> *yet almost miss you;*
> *we strive to help you*
> *yet only discover our need.*
> *Interrupt our comfort*

[39] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3C7IH-khwjk see also
Aldous, Ben. "Reflections of the Community Supper at St Peter's Mowbray: A Juncture of Ecclesial Liminality," https://jazzgoat10.wordpress.com/2015/10/20/reflections-on-the-community-supper-at-st-peters-mowbray-a-juncture-of-ecclesial-liminality/

[40] Interview by Ben Aldous with Craig Stewart, Rosebank, Cape Town, 19 September 2017

[41] Ledger, "An Empty plate," 104-123.

with your nakedness,
touch our possessiveness
with your poverty,
and surprise our guilt
with the grace of your welcome
In Jesus Christ, Amen.[42]

Food justice makes good Christian sense. As Wirzba explains, "Where life is broken, degraded or hungry, Jesus repairs life, showing it to us as reconciled, protected, and fed."[43] He continues:

> The ministries of Christ demonstrate that the path to full or abundant life is not a magical path. It is a practical journey that begins with eating. The gospels frequently show Jesus eating with people because table fellowship is among the most powerful ways we know to extend and share in each other's lives. Jesus eats with strangers and outcasts, demonstrating that table fellowship is for the nurture of others and not simply for self-enhancement (Luke 14:12-14). Jesus rejects the social systems of rejection and exclusion by welcoming everyone into communion with him. Table fellowship makes possible genuine encounters with others.[44]

Ancient Hebrew ritual purity laws around food were designed for exclusion. Jesus positively transgressed the divisions that kept people apart and he welcomed all people to eat freely in his company. Likewise, Eucharist breaks down all barriers and can open our hearts and our minds to new possibilities. As a mother and as a priest I am captivated by the metaphor and practice of feeding people – both, around the kitchen table, and at the altar. I want to promote a culture and practice of inclusive church and open table. I seek to learn from others who share this ethos. Like so many Christian high holy days, this holy conversation is a moveable feast. We are not only what we eat – we belong to those with whom we eat. We are required to trust each other and take some kind of mutual responsibility for each other. The following invitation to communion articulates the transformative power of the Eucharist: "Draw near. Behold who we are. May we become what we receive."[45]

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[42] Janet Morley, *Bread of Tomorrow: Praying with the World's Poor*. London: SPCK and Christian Aid, (1992), 38.
[43] Wirzba, "Food and faith," 147.
[44] Wirzba, "Food and faith," 147-148.
[45] This was used at the Eucharist celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the Ordination of women priests in Southern Africa, at the Kopanong Conference Centre, Johannesburg on 27 September 2017.

Conclusion

Food justice can be practiced in the sanctuary, in the church hall and in the kitchen. Mutual vulnerability and reciprocal need can be recognised and addressed at church and at home. It is not only the poor and the homeless who have abundant needs. The Eucharistic commission is to build relationships of trust in communities of equals. The *Homeless Café* in Exeter and the *Community Supper* in Mowbray are both examples of table fellowship that break down barriers and promote alternative engagement between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Whether we are hosts or guests or members of the family, we all come hungry to the table. All parties have much to gain through the exchange. Those who gather for the Eucharist admit our need and vulnerability when we open our hands to receive the bread. Those who come for a plate of food do likewise.

The context (location, personnel, circumstances, power dynamics, etc.) of each particular church can lead to a wide spectrum of appropriate possibilities. My research began with a naïve (and perhaps arrogant) intention of encouraging best practice, but I have realised that there are no easy or pat answers. Theology cannot be imposed. I learned from the curate at St David's Church in Exeter that their soup kitchen organisers want nothing to do with theological underpinnings. They see their project as entirely secular and do not want the clergy involved. They certainly do not want this to be understood to be a church service. Although they use the church undercroft space, this is a separate initiative. Quite the opposite is true at St Peter's *Community Supper* in Mowbray, Cape Town. The clergy and lay ministers actually enter the number of guests (often in the region of eighty homeless people) into the weekly service logbook. Sometimes a little communion service takes place at the end of the supper. However, whether or not, formal Eucharist occurs, the *Community Supper* is practiced as an Agape.

How can my work as a mother and as a priest make any difference to empowering the hungry? Perhaps the first step has been in recognising my own hunger. Egyptian-American journalist Mona Eltahawy says, "The most subversive thing a woman can do is talk about her life as if it really matters."[46] My aim is to teach my family of boys how to take care of themselves and others. My husband understands that mothering needs to be a joint responsibility – and he has become a reasonably good and willing cook. In fact, when I am busy with church and para-church

[46] Mona Eltahawy, *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution.* London: Hachette, (2015).

activities, he is in charge of our kitchen. This is important modelling for our four sons.

This article serves as a brief introduction to my on-going research in Exeter and Cape Town. I will continue exploring presence, praxis and power dynamics at St Peter's Cathedral and St David's Parish Church in Exeter – and at St George's Cathedral in Cape Town and St Peter's Parish Church in Mowbray. But I am letting go of my agendas and my preconceived ideas. I have no idea where this conversation with co-conspirators may lead. The unknowing is the heart of this project. As we eat and speak and dream together, the research participants are helping to shape the emerging outcomes. In the process we give thanks for the ways in which we nourish, challenge and change each other's lives.

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