

2-2021

Calm and Quiet My Soul: A Holistic Approach to Spiritual Care for the Mothering Pastor

Alyssa Bell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

CALM AND QUIET MY SOUL:

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SPIRITUAL CARE FOR THE MOTHERING PASTOR

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

ALYSSA BELL

PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2021

Portland Seminary
George Fox University
Portland, Oregon

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

Alyssa Bell

has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 12, 2021
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership & Spiritual Formation

Dissertation Committee:

Primary Advisor: Carole Spencer, PhD

Secondary Advisor: Rebecca Jeong, PhD

Lead Mentor: MaryKate Morse, PhD

Copyright © 2021 by Alyssa Bell

All rights reserved.

All Bible references, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

DEDICATION

To Theresa and Susie, my joys.

To Matthew, my encourager.

To Irene and Bede, my heavenly babes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With deep gratitude I acknowledge the many people who have supported me on this DMin and dissertation journey. In addition to the abundant encouragement and academic engagement from my beloved husband Matthew, as well as the sweet motivation that comes from mothering my two precious daughters, Theresa and Susanna, there is a village of people without whom this project could not have happened. My parents, Tom and Kathy Hansen, and my sister, Mary Hansen, cheered me on with their prayers as well as their practical and dedicated care for our daughters during retreat weeks and throughout the months of coursework and writing. For these dear ones, I give thanks.

I want to acknowledge my church community at Shadle Park Presbyterian Church, with special thanks for the encouragement of Steve Lympus and the staff with whom I am privileged to serve in this remarkable pocket of the Body of Christ in the world. I am also indebted to the women who shared their stories of motherhood and ministry with me through interviews. Thank you for inviting me into the holy space of your experiences. Kathy Finley, my Spiritual Director, has held space for me to walk closer with Jesus and her gift of motherhood imagery for God inspired much of the work in this dissertation. I am grateful to my Presbytery (Inland Northwest Presbytery) and to Sheryl Kinder-Pyle our Executive Presbyter who years ago gathered a group of us together into a small group. This group modeled for me holy space and spiritual refreshment.

Dr. Carole Spencer, my outstanding advisor, heard my wanderings early on and gave me room to discover my voice as an academic. Her prayers, wise questions, and encouragement have given me confidence and energized my writing. Thank you, Carole.

For Dr. MaryKate Morse and my LSF4 Cohort I give thanks. This is a community I did not know I needed and now cannot imagine doing without. MaryKate, your Spirit-led leadership has changed my life. I want to especially acknowledge the strong women of this group. I thank Dawn Kilian, my dear Journey Partner, for her prayers, friendship and spiritual companionship, as well as Hesus Lee, whose art in the Appendix of this dissertation is a divinely inspired gift from the heart. These two women along with Jodi Gatlin, who draws us together in virtual table fellowship, have formed my small group, sacred space to be sure. Susan and Joyce, your friendship carries me time and time again. Kathi and Sue, you have heard my stories and given me the needed gift of listening. Thank you.

It is my desire that this dissertation be an offering to the Lord, whose mothering love has held and guided me more times than I can count. Thank you, Lord, for your relentless pursuit of my soul.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	III
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	VI
ABSTRACT.....	IX
CHAPTER ONE: MOTHERING PASTORS AND SPIRITUAL LONGING	1
Introduction.....	1
A Mother’s Longing	3
A Pastor’s Longing	5
Dual Roles and Spiritual Longing.....	6
Bivocational Ministry and the Mothering Pastor.....	8
Shame and Loneliness.....	11
Spiritual Practices and Shame.....	11
Loneliness and Loss.....	14
More Stories from Mothering Pastors: Longing for Integration.....	17
Conclusion: The Need for Spiritual Congruence.....	21
CHAPTER TWO: MOTHERING PASTORS AND SPIRITUAL CARE.....	23
Introduction.....	23
A Word on Mothering and Those Who Mother.....	24
Leadership, Gender and Spiritual Need	26
A Working Definition of Leadership	26
Mother Leaders and Spiritual Need	30
Spiritual Care for Pastor-Mother-Leaders	32
PC (USA): A Snapshot	33
Resource Gaps	35
Women Meeting Spiritual Needs.....	36
Mary: A Case Study.....	39
Organic Solutions for Mothering Pastors: Spiritual Friendship and Community.....	40
Conclusion: Exhaustion from Self-Initiated Spiritual Care	45
CHAPTER THREE: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR GOD’S MOTHERING LOVE.....	48
Introduction.....	48
God as Mother in Scripture.....	49
God as Comforter and Nurturer	51
A Fierce Protector	53
New Testament Feminine Imagery for God	54
God as Father: An Alternative View of Divine Parental Love	58
God Loving Women in the Bible.....	60
Nothing is Impossible with God	60
God Remembers.....	61

Wings of Refuge	62
Image of God	62
Beyond Traditional Views	62
Difficulty with Mother God Imagery	64
Mother God: A Gift to Mothering Pastors	65
Spiritual Formation and Belonging	65
Rest and Love for Mothering Pastors	67
Conclusion	69
Addendum: A Spiritual Exercise	70
CHAPTER FOUR: HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A MOTHERING GOD	72
Introduction	72
Historical Foundations	74
Medieval and Early Modern Mystics	75
The Reformation and Early Modern Period	78
The Late Modern Period to Present	81
A Theological Conversation: Language and Imagery for God	83
Paradox is Permitted	84
Embodied Theology	85
When Father Language is Hard and Other Practical Theological Implications	88
Alternative Views	91
Conclusion	92
Continuing the Paradox as Spiritual Practice	92
Rest in a Maternal God	93
Spiritual Subversion	95
CHAPTER FIVE: REJOICE AND BE SATISFIED: AN EXEGESIS ON MOTHERING IMAGES IN ISAIAH 66:10-14	96
Introduction	96
Context for Isaiah 66:10-14	97
Jerusalem: God’s Tangible Provision	99
The Church as Mother	99
Spiritual Formation and Belonging	102
Dandled on Her Knees: A Place of Peace and Healing	103
A Mother’s Abundant Love	103
Healing Attachments, Building Bonds	105
Attachment Healing for Mothering Pastors	106
See, Rejoice and Flourish: Wholeness in God	108
Our Whole Selves Loved by God	108
Holistic Spiritual Care for Mothering Pastors	110
Conclusion: An Invitation to Trust	111
A Personal Story about Surrender	111
Spiritual Integration for the Mothering Pastor	113
CHAPTER SIX: “ALL SHALL BE WELL”: SPIRITUAL REST IN A MOTHERING GOD	115
Introduction	115

Where We Have Been.....	116
You Need Not Try So Hard	117
Benefits of a Mothering God Framework for a Mothering Pastor.....	118
Surrendered Rest.....	118
Belonging.....	119
Beloved and Whole.....	121
Practical Spiritual Care Steps for the Mothering Pastor	122
Spiritual Formation Definition.....	122
Spiritual Formation Components	123
Practical Spirituality.....	125
Institutional Responsibility	128
Spiritual Seasons of Motherhood and Ministry	130
Waiting.....	130
Celebration	131
Holy Spirit Moments.....	131
Routine Spirituality	132
Guides for the Journey	133
Conclusion	134
Additional Practical Implications	134
Additional Research Possibilities	135
Closing Remarks	136
AFTERWORD: A DREAM	138
A Joyful Calling.....	138
APPENDIX A: MOTHERING GOD ART	140
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	141

ABSTRACT

The church has seen a growing number of women emerging as pastoral leaders, many of whom are mothering children or will mother children in the coming years. In order to thrive as ministers and parents, these women need ongoing care for their souls that addresses the many facets of their being. However, such resources are scarce in the current institutional structures and spiritual patterns suggested for this demographic of clergy. In this dissertation I argue that Pastoring mothers face unique challenges in their desire to draw closer to heart of God in the midst of meeting family and ministry needs. These unique challenges can be met by a unique and creative God who chose to reveal herself as a mother often in scripture. By embracing an understanding of God that emphasizes God's motherhood, these mothering pastors can more readily experience deep and sustaining spiritual nourishment wherein they feel included, seen, and energized for their dual calling.

Chapter One will tease out the spiritual needs that many mothering pastors have as they try to balance ministry and home life, including themes of shame and loneliness. Chapter Two names the enormous lack of spiritual care resources specific to the mothering pastor and acknowledges that it is often these very women who fill the gaps with their own abilities as spiritual leaders. Chapter Three suggests that a mothering God image can meet these spiritual needs in a unique way and establishes the biblical foundation for this image, while Chapter Four completes the mothering God picture with historical and theological precedent. Chapter Five is an exegesis of Isaiah 66:10-14 that further confirms the holistic benefits of a mothering God spirituality. Finally, Chapter Six

uses spiritual formation as a pathway for understanding the practical implications for mothering pastors of resting in God's mothering love.

CHAPTER ONE:
MOTHERING PASTORS¹ AND SPIRITUAL LONGING

Introduction

Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who make the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety—

best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens
to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,
to hold us in the great hands of light—
good morning, good morning, good morning.
Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.

—Mary Oliver, *Why I Wake Early*²

A mother wakes early, eager for a little quiet space before her children rise, eager to be eased and held in hands of light, like the poet Mary Oliver describes. A pastor wakes early, anxious to hear God’s voice before she writes her sermon, longing for the stars in the dark wee hours to preach to her soul and speak God’s Word of rest and hope. This mother and pastor are the same woman, orchestrating a myriad of spheres whilst yearning for a place to receive God’s rest for her.

¹ “Mothering pastor” is my own term, developed during the writing of this dissertation to describe mothers who are also pastors and pastors who do mothering work.

² Mary Oliver, *Why I Wake Early* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

Morning has always been a peaceful and rest-filled space for me. Now that I am a mother and a pastor, morning time holds an even greater value in my day and in my soul. For my all too frantic mind, holding details about childcare, school schedules, pastoral care calls, and sermon topics, early hours provide a respite from the rush. Early hours grant me space to hear God's voice speaking to my often-thirsty heart. But this space is not easily attained. For the mothering pastor finding real spiritual rest is a struggle, one often set aside for another time.

In recent decades, the rise of women taking on pastoral roles in the church has resulted in a depth and richness in the life and ministry of the Body of Christ. In particular, clergy mothers bring a unique spiritual perspective to the call of pastor. Their vocational sphere is multifaceted and beautiful, bringing to the tables of church ministry and home life a plethora of gifts and a wealth of wisdom. However, as with any person called to ministry, a clergy mother also carries with her challenges specific to her identity of mother and pastor. These challenges cause emotional and spiritual exhaustion that often feels unmet, as described by Tish Warren, a mother and Anglican priest: "The rigors of motherhood, ministry, and simply being a grown-up in a broken world had hallowed me out. I was brittle, irritable, undernourished, and overextended."³ Where is the quiet morning welcome for these mothers who pastor?

In this dissertation I argue that Pastoring mothers face unique challenges in their desire to draw closer to the heart of God in the midst of meeting family and ministry needs. This need is widespread amongst women who are serving the church and caring for their families, largely because mothering and ministry can be dis-integrated roles. The

³ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 136.

competing needs within each of these roles are vast and exhausting on their own, let alone when put together as a holistic life calling. Because of this conflict, spiritual formation as a pastoring mother is complicated at best. By looking at the roles of mother and minister, spiritual practices and shame⁴, and the loneliness of vocational call, this opening chapter will seek to demonstrate that mothers in ministry have a deep longing for a closeness to God that is difficult to obtain by simply adopting certain patterns of spiritual practice. Something more is required.

A Mother's Longing

Watch almost any mother and it becomes quickly apparent that she puts her needs last, tending first to her family. Mothers nurture others, over and above their own personal needs. A mother gives sacrificially of her time and emotions for another being to thrive. Additionally, a mother also gives of her own body as she holds a child within her and then often feeds the child from her breast. Even mothers of adopted children give of themselves physically as they rebuild lost attachments with their little one, just as much a part of them as a biological child. The authors of *A General Theory of Love* speak to the importance of these mother-child attachments: “Mothers shape their children in long-lasting and measurable ways, bestowing upon them some of the emotional attributes they will possess and rely on, to their benefit or detriment, for the rest of their lives.”⁵ Pouring

⁴ Curt Thompson says this of shame in *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 13: “Shame... is the emotional weapon that evil uses to (1) corrupt our relationships with God and each other, and (2) disintegrate any and all gifts of vocational vision and creativity.” The theme of disintegration and a longing for wholeness will unfold later in this dissertation. For now, this is a helpful starting place for understanding shame.

⁵ Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 75.

into another human being like this requires an enormous amount of physical, emotional and spiritual energy, even if that human is the joy of their life.

Mothers feel their own spiritual longings starkly, when given the rare space to consider their own identity as daughters of God. Lauren Burdette, a spiritual director in Pittsburgh, PA, says this of her own spiritual need: “I realized that any picture I had for holiness in motherhood did not match my own messy, challenging reality. I missed the deep relationship with God that I had cultivated through prayer and journaling, retreats and service. I feared I would never have that close relationship with the Lord again.”⁶ Burdette’s words hold an underlying story of guilt and a yearning to feel God’s presence. Alongside fear and desperation is a craving to feel cared for and pampered. Kathy Finley, author and spiritual director, describes her longing as a young mother to feel God’s gentleness in a world where God’s justice and power is more commonly upheld.⁷ Innately, Kathy knew that she needed a mothering God just as much as the fathering God her church professed.

When a woman becomes a mother, her world shifts into a new space, a space wherein her children are everything. Her identity is all about the one for whom she sustains life. Spiritually, she seeks God who sustains her life and desires to be near. However, the space to seek such a God is lacking.

7. ⁶ Lauren Burdette. *Motherhood as Spiritual Practice* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2019),

⁷ Interview by author, Spokane, WA, November 21, 2019.

A Pastor's Longing

Pastors are likewise intimately attached to their parishioners. It is the nature of their calling. Emma Percy says this: "I would argue that the practice of priesthood, as set out in the ordinal, assumes that priests will be pivotal in taking responsibility for the care necessary for 'growing up' and 'building up' of communities entrusted to them."⁸ Like motherhood, this kind of responsibility for other human beings is both exhilarating and depleting. Without spiritual support, burnout is inevitable.⁹ Church bodies offer resources to pastors, encouraging them in prayer, small groups and Sabbath keeping. These are helpful tools to be sure, however without the right structures in place, these spiritual practices can feel like Band-Aids that hardly cover the wound.

David Hansen pastored a small church in Montana for many years. His own spiritual journey gave way to a book on prayer that has touched many, lay people and pastors alike. He writes:

Most of us feel deeply frustrated. We have tried long prayer and have come up short. Our mind cannot scratch our soul's itch. It seems a sure bet that more discipline is the solution. But when discipline seems like the solution, our problem-solving skills have thrown the fight for dirty money. The Accuser bets his stake on the power of guilt to discourage us. Guilt crushes our imagination's power to show us new ways. Our aspirations heave, gasp, wheeze and go comatose.¹⁰

⁸ Emma Percy, *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 102.

⁹ Some of my DMin colleagues are skillfully exploring ministerial burnout in their dissertations. I encourage the reader to seek their work for more on the dangers of and solutions for burnout in the pastoral profession. For the sake of this dissertation, I allude to burnout in order to establish the reasons why pastors can be spiritually lonely.

¹⁰ David Hansen, *Long Wandering Prayer: An Invitation to Walk with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 29.

Pastors experience the guilt that Hansen describes, in a looming and often hidden way. They feel shame for not getting more out of their spiritual practices and yet have no way to confess this feeling let alone receive grace for what is in fact a truly human experience.

Diane Chandler says this of pastors and spirituality:

Pastors, one viable group of leaders, encounter leadership and spirituality issues as part of their ongoing personal development and vocational calling. Research has shown that the average pastor works between fifty and sixty hours per week, spends limited time in spiritual formation activity, and lacks a close personal friend or support-accountability network (Jenkins, 2002; Jenkins & Wulff, 2002). While nurturing others spiritually, pastors often neglect their own personal spiritual growth (Hall, 1997).¹¹

Research and experience establish the fact that pastors long for peace, freedom, and space in their personal spiritual lives. In their call they nurture and care for the souls of others, often at the expense of their own spiritual and personal needs.

Dual Roles and Spiritual Longing

Pastors yearn for spiritual space, to be seen and loved by God. Mothers are grasping for a corner of life to feel God's presence and care. The mothering pastor carries these needs and many more, for her worlds are both full of people who require her time, her space, her love. Practically speaking, this dual role is challenging. Pamela Shires Sneddon acknowledges the fragile balance that mothers in ministry maintain: "I've met so many mothers who fully believe that God is using their gifts to bless their families, but who also yearn to do more to bring God's love to the hearts of others. Still, trying to

¹¹ Diane J. Chandler, "The Impact of Pastors' Spiritual Practices on Burnout," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 64 no. 2 (June 2019): 1.

balance the needs of our children with the needs of others can be precarious at best.”¹² Sneddon’s article addresses this need in mothers ministering in non-pastoral roles like children’s ministry and non-profit organizations. While this work is just as important as that of a pastor, the pastors’ needs are indeed unique.

Part of the reason for this unique need arises from the reality that there still exists bias toward male pastors, so a female pastor, let alone one who has children, faces regular pushback regarding her vocation. The Summer 2016 Gender and Leadership Report in The PC (USA) gives this personal account: “I was turned down by a PNC [pastor nominating committee] because ‘we don't think it's possible to be both a pastor and a mother.’ I regularly encounter people who imply that as a woman I am more emotional/less capable of rational thinking. Plus, there are countless ‘micro-aggressions’ within our system. Small ways women are slighted all the time.”¹³ There is no doubt that this kind of prejudice leads to a greater loneliness among mothering pastors, which in turn increases the demand for adequate spiritual care and space for the pastor to receive God’s love in the midst of such a caustic environment.

Rebecca Lindsay observes the following about treatment of the mothering pastor: “There appears to be little difficulty in combining the roles of husband, father, and minister. Indeed, this combination is often encouraged. But something different inhabits the space of motherhood and ministry.”¹⁴ Something different does inhabit this space, and

¹² Pamela Shires Sneddon, “Moms in Ministry: No, That’s Not an Oxymoron, Just a Challenge. Meet Five Mothers Who’ve Made It Work,” *Christian Parenting Today* 15, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 44.

¹³ “Gender and Leadership in The PC(USA),” Presbyterian Church(USA), October 19, 2016, 28, <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/gender-leadership-pcusa/>.

¹⁴ Rebecca Lindsay, “Reverend Mother,” in *Making Sense of Motherhood: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Beth Stovell (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016): 137.

that difference exists especially in the realm of spiritual practice and soul care, for it is in this space that mothering pastors find their center and the strength they need to function well as mothers and pastors.¹⁵ Given this specific and underemphasized need, the question remains “how do mothering pastors find spiritual space and experience spiritual connection?”

Bivocational Ministry and the Mothering Pastor

The ancient practice of bivocational ministry is making a comeback. The Apostle Paul, along with Aquila and Priscilla, modeled this way of doing ministry in the earliest days of the Christian church. We find their story in Acts 18:2b-3: “Paul went see [Aquila and Priscilla], and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together – by trade they were tentmakers.” This dual role of pastor and craftsperson was the norm as the church began to grow. In fact, the church was nowhere near the eventual pattern of male pastor working fulltime hours in a church office with the support of a secretary. One could say that the mothering pastor is a closer replicate of early church ministry, as she often manages both home and church.

Christian vernacular often calls bivocational pastors “tentmakers” after this passage from Acts, referring to those who have another paying job that supports their ability to serve the people of God without undo financial pressure on the church.

Arguably, this is the most common and popular working definition. Hartness M.

Samushonga supports the idea that bivocational ministry means a secular paying job in

¹⁵ This exploration of motherhood and pastoring in no way diminishes the vital role of fathers who pastor. Certainly, any parent who also devotes their life’s work to the church faces many of the same obstacles as the ones mentioned in this dissertation the scope of which is limited to the narrative of the mother who pastors, acknowledging that this is an under-acknowledged story with under-met support.

addition to a paying or unpaid church position. His definition is: “One who has a ministry vocation and another vocation that is not ministry oriented.”¹⁶ While mothers are not officially compensated for their work as caretakers, most would say that theirs is more than a full-time job. Theirs is a job that is both immensely difficult and rewarding at the same time. So, when mothers, who already work countless hours at home, receive a call to ministry and do the work to respond to that call and then put in time serving a congregation, they are by my definition “bivocational.”

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, church bodies were beginning to explore bivocational pastors as the future of ministry in their congregations. My own congregation, where I am a part-time Associate Pastor, has one full-time Head of Staff Pastor, and four bivocational ministry leaders on staff. For our small congregation, this is how we can do and fund ministry faithfully. Truth be told, this is likely the future of ministry in the church. COVID-19 has simply moved things forward more quickly. In an article about the benefits of this kind of ministry, Jessica Young Brown writes this: “Bivocational ministry requires us to be open to the multiplicity of gifts in the body of Christ and the unlimited ways that God can call us to service.”¹⁷ This kind of bivocational ministry sees the tent-making pastor as someone who works in two sacred spheres – one in the church building and one outside of it. Mothering pastors excel in this realm already. They have and can recognize people with many gifts, allowing for ministry models that spill outside of the traditional definitions.

¹⁶ Hartness M. Samushonga, “A Theological Reflection of Bivocational Pastoral Ministry: A Personal Reflective Account of a Decade of Bivocational Ministry Practice Experience,” *Practical Theology* 5, no. 2 (2019): <https://doi-org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/1756073X.2019.1575040>.

¹⁷ Jessica Young Brown, “Don’t Be Afraid of a Future with More Bivocational Ministers,” *Thriving in Ministry*, November 12, 2019, <https://thrivinginministry.org/dont-be-afraid-of-a-future-with-more-bivocational-ministers/>.

The spheres in which mothering pastors move are both sacred. One is not unpaid and secular while the other paid and sacred. For mothering pastors, their world is two parts of a whole, both deeply a part of their calling to serve Jesus Christ. The trend toward holy bivocational ministry where each sphere expresses an aspect of the minister's call is a trend that mothers have been inhabiting for centuries. Mothering pastors have understood this connection for decades, moving between worlds with grace and skill.

However, as bivocational ministry trends increase, so does the research warning pastors of burnout and overcommitment. In fact, this is the main argument against the church embracing bivocational ministry as a model. Churches do not want worn out pastors in their pulpits. If there is this much momentum toward caring for the bivocational pastor and guarding him or her from exhaustion, why isn't there the same volume of research addressing the needs of the bivocational mothering pastor? Mothering pastors are expected to provide excellent spiritual care for their churches while nurturing their children, without much practical or spiritual support along the way, not to mention acknowledgement of their dual roles or the beauty of their dual call.

More could be said regarding the connection between bivocational pastors and mothering pastors, but that is for another work of research and writing. For the purposes of this dissertation, I want to demonstrate that mothering pastors embody two worlds, two vocations, if you will. I want to demonstrate that mothering pastors are already doing what the church is now realizing they need in the pastor of the twenty-first century, a pastor who looks a lot more like Priscilla than Billy Graham. This dual role, or

tentmaking life, makes providing spiritual care for the mothering pastor even more urgent.

Shame and Loneliness

Spiritual Practices and Shame

An obvious answer to the problem of spiritual hunger amongst clergy mothers is the incorporation of regular spiritual practices into their lives. Many experiences of spiritual practice are indeed positive. They provide a structure to the unpredictability of life and the varietal nature of spiritual practices means that there is something for everyone. The women I interviewed in my Field Research reported finding meaning in everything from practicing seeing God in the ordinary tasks of life (like nursing, washing dishes and exercising) to formal Bible Studies with other women and quiet moments in the morning with the Spirit. These practices do bring women clergy pockets of spiritual refreshment and a way to seek God amidst their busy lives.

Additionally, the very act of having a child and raising them each day is spiritually rich and invites a mother into deep communion with God. Betty Talbert observes, “Beginning with birth, a child in a family offers his or her parents a picture of God’s grace and willingness to be involved in his or her life.”¹⁸ Becky Eldridge, a spiritual director, writes:

Pondering our children and watching them grow is a common type of prayer for me these days as a mom to three children. My children have much to teach me about God. As I stop to watch them in wonder and as I marvel at who they are in

¹⁸ Betty W. Talbert, “Partners with Listening Hearts: Some Thoughts on Christian Formation in Families,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 14 no. 1 (Spring 2000): 20-29.

their development and personalities, God often shows me something about myself.¹⁹

I interviewed many women who acknowledged this special spiritual connection with God that flows from the act of having and raising children. In bearing children, in holding them from the first moments after birth and bringing them to our breasts for nourishment, women experience an onset of love never before familiar to them. Fathers will say they feel a similar shift in how they give and receive love. For a woman who is also a pastor, this unique love – this knowing what it feels like to desire to sacrifice everything for your child – this learning new things about God’s love through your child every day – this love informs a woman’s ministry in an enormous way, more so, I would venture to say, than any daily spiritual practice of prayer, scripture reading or study.

Spiritual practices bring structure and life. For the pastor who is also caring for children and juggling schedules while also trying to have meaningful relationships with her spouse and friends, routines can provide a welcome rest from sermons, bulletins, and interacting with broken relationships in the church. And yet, these same routines that bring comfort also have the potential to awaken a cycle of shame and guilt in the heart of the mothering pastor. Sarah (a pseudonym), a young mother who is serving as an associate pastor at a progressive Presbyterian (USA) church in the Seattle, WA area, shared that the biggest internal obstacle to engaging in a robust spiritual life is guilt and shame surrounding how she spends her time. When she is taking time away to be with God, she is neglecting her children or her husband or her congregation. When she cares

¹⁹ Becky Eldridge, *Busy Lives & Restless Souls: How Prayer Can Help You Find the Missing Peace in Your Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2017), 17-18.

for her family and parishioners, she feels guilt for not spending enough time with God.²⁰

This cycle is ongoing for Sarah, and many other women in her similar position.

Take Sabbath practice, for instance. Lynne Baab, a pastor and writer, acknowledges that for clergy in general incorporating Sabbath rest in the busy ministry week is a challenge that doesn't come easily to everyone. She writes,

Some pastors observe Sabbath well. Their day away from work is markedly different from the other six, and there is something special and holy about what they do – and don't do – on that day. For others, the Sabbath feels like another day or handling holy things that – even with the best of intentions – seems to have nothing particularly holy about it. It isn't even set apart. It isn't even restful.²¹

I believe this is often true for women in ministry, especially those who have young children in their care as well. Regarding this very busy and exhausting season of life Baab suggests that a spiritual life needs to look different, remarking that the “two keys to happy Sabbaths with young children are to eliminate multi-tasking and to reduce expectations of a profound spiritual experience with children.”²² Reducing expectations is a healthy and helpful strategy, and there can still be moments of profound spiritual connection for mothering pastors. They may be different and require certain nuance, but a woman who desires to seek God will be found by God with no less depth to that experience than a person seeking God without the responsibilities of church and home.

It is hard to reframe spiritual practices in the way Baab describes without an added feeling of inadequacy, feeding into the cycle of shame and guilt that clergy moms experience because they either have to give into the notion that their spiritual lives will

²⁰ Interview by author, phone call, April 9, 2019.

²¹ Lynne Baab, “A Day Off From the God Stuff: What Is a Sabbath Rest for Pastors, When You Handle Holy Things All Week Long?” *Leadership* 28, no. 2 (2007): 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 4.

simply be “less than” for a season or they try to make their spiritual practices into something rigid that will inevitably fall apart due to the unpredictable demands in their lives. Baab’s point, I believe, is to offer relief to the clergy mother, to give her permission to have space and grace. However, this is easier said than done.

Becky Eldridge beautifully expresses the issue that lies at the core of the shame and loneliness that mothering pastors experience in their longing for God. She says, “What I know from my own experience and my ministry of spiritual direction is that God’s unshakeable love for us is one of the most difficult realities to accept.”²³ In the wonderful darkness that is motherhood and ministry it can be so hard to see the light, to see and fully receive God’s abundant love. As mothers we pour our hearts into our children so that they can know real, unconditional love. As pastors we pour our souls and resources into our congregation, eager for them to feel God’s love for them so that they know life and find hope. Mothering pastors can easily get lost in the constant giving of love, so much so that they either cannot or are unpracticed at receiving the love of God through traditional spiritual practice structures. The small nuggets of spiritual rest along the way only go so far. Spiritual fulfillment in Christ requires something more for the clergy mother.

Loneliness and Loss

Another issue that clergy women face in addition to spiritual longing is a general loneliness in their call. The years with small children especially can be lonely years as the main caretaking parent (usually mothers, but not always) lives in a sleep deprived state,

²³ Eldridge, *Busy Lives & Restless Souls*, 60-61.

planning every activity around feeding and sleeping times. Community with friends, intimacy with spouse, and spiritual nourishment with others are hard to come by. Carolyn Weber, a Christian author and mother describes a season when she was caring for small children and pregnant with a baby who would most likely be born with a defect: “Manna, it would seem then, embodied literally a ‘one day at a time’ provision.”²⁴ Weber refers to this as her “faith in the desert” season. Many women face such difficulties as Weber in their pregnancies. This only adds to the loneliness that already exists. Mothers indeed live those early years, whether they be routine or filled with tragedy, one day at a time.

Elise Erikson Barrett began to miscarry during a church service where she had leading duties as a student pastor. She remembers:

The Sunday I lost the pregnancy started the same as all the other Sundays. The only difference was that I’d had some faint spotting earlier that morning, when I was getting ready...As soon as I politely could after service, I ducked across the churchyard to the small fellowship building where the bathrooms were located and checked again...I knew then that something was terribly, terribly wrong, but I didn’t know exactly what. I vividly remember staring at the black words and musical notation on the thin pages of the hymnal, unable to concentrate enough to understand what they meant.²⁵

Elise lived loss and ministry in tandem. She was physically enduring the loss of her child while attempting to navigate the logistics of a polite exit to find a bathroom away from the congregation so she could confirm her greatest fear. The loneliness of this moment is palpable. Many women have miscarriages, me included. As clergy mothers, we often can feel alone in our grief as we try to keep our head above water in caring for other children or our congregations. When is there the space and privacy to experience pain and care for ourselves, let alone feel God’s love upon us in tenderness?

²⁴ Carolyn Weber, *Holy is the Day* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2013), 160-161.

²⁵ Elise Erikson Barrett, *What Was Lost: A Christian Journey Through Miscarriage* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 12.

Kathleen Finley comments on the unique and lonely challenge for the Christian mother: “Perhaps the most common imbalance for mothers is *caring for others so much that we forget to replenish ourselves*. . . . This is so common among mothers that I consider it *the* biggest challenge for our spirituality.”²⁶ Ruth (a pseudonym), a lay pastor serving in the PC (USA), shared that after the birth of her first child she experienced postpartum depression. As she sought to care for her family as well as her church community, her loneliness deepened and was made even more acute by her depression.²⁷ Even if Ruth did have a chance to replenish herself, as Finley says, the chemical imbalance of her hormones made it almost impossible.

I asked the women I interviewed to share how their denominational and local church bodies supported or neglected them in the area of spiritual formation. One woman who serves as an associate pastor in a large Presbyterian (USA) church observed that her session (board of elders) seemed to assume that she had a rich and healthy spiritual life.²⁸ Because she is a pastor, she must automatically be skilled at maintaining certain religious habits. This assumption only contributes to the loneliness that pastors experience as they give so much of their lives to the church and its needs. Several women in the Field Research Study referenced ministry conferences as opportunities to receive professional and spiritual refreshment. However, finding the time and resources (not to mention childcare!) to take advantage of these opportunities proves difficult.

²⁶ Kathleen Finley. *The Liturgy of Motherhood: Moments of Grace* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2004), 7.

²⁷ Interview by author, Spokane, WA, March 11, 2019.

²⁸ Interview by author, Spokane, WA, February 20, 2019.

Kelly Ladd Bishop, a contributor to The Junia Project, a website devoted to Women and Ministry, addresses this loneliness in clergy mothers. She writes in her blog, “Moms in ministry (and all moms!) face unique challenges. And it’s easy to let those challenges overtake us. It’s easy to believe the voices that tell us we can’t do it. It’s easy to feel inadequate, like we’re not enough. Sometimes we are pulled in too many directions. Sometimes we are so many things to so many people, that we lose sight of who we are to God.”²⁹ Lack of sleep, ministry pressure, and feelings of inadequacy all contribute to the loneliness and shame that mothering pastors experience as they seek to draw near to the heart of God.

The feeling of inadequacy that Bishop lifts up in her blog is a widespread emotion among the clergy mothers that I interviewed. There are always so many tasks to get done and never enough time to accomplish them. Spiritual formation can seem like a second-tier priority, but when we can make time for it we feel pressure to do it well. We inevitably fail and feel less than capable of maintaining balance in our lives. Inadequacy feeds the loneliness that clergy mothers experience in their roles. They are left depleted and uncertain.

More Stories from Mothering Pastors: Longing for Integration

Nurture is intrinsic to both mothering and ministry. A mother, whether by breast or bottle, feeds her child with tenderness. She does this sacrificially, giving of her own body or her own time. She wakes in the night to meet the needs of the child, and she comforts the child with food and physical touch. With the exception of breastfeeding, a

²⁹ Kelly Ladd Bishop, “A Love Letter for Pastor-Moms,” *The Junia Project* (blog), November 4, 2017, <https://juniaproject.com/love-letter-pastor-moms/>.

father certainly does these things as well. However, there is something particular about the way a woman cares for her children.

Scripture acknowledges this unique role in its acknowledgement of God's maternal nature. Speaking of God's care over Israel in the Book of Isaiah: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem."³⁰ God's voice through the prophet Hosea says, "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with chords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."³¹ There is a rich sweetness to this aspect of God's love for God's children. These few verses are but a small sample of the many passages³² that describe God as a mother caring for her children.

Mothering is a special call, one that is sometimes planned, and other times not planned at all. Some come to motherhood with proper preparation, others are thrust into it by surprise with few resources. It's a calling of joys, surprises, sorrow, and exhaustion. The same is true for ministry in the Church. Emma Percy, an Anglican priest, writes this of how motherhood and ministry coincide: "The mother holds her child and the necessary nourishment flows from one to the other. It provides an image of ministry that is nurturing and tender, a ministry that requires time and attachment."³³ She goes on to say, "Where the Church is described as mother it reminds Christians of their dependence on

³⁰ Isaiah 66:13.

³¹ Hosea 11:3-4.

³² Deuteronomy 32:18, Psalm 131, Nehemiah 9:31, Isaiah 49:15, and Numbers 11:12 are but a sample of these texts.

³³ Emma Percy, *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 30.

her for ongoing sustenance, and creates an image of a comforting, holding love in which her members are, in some sense, repeatedly born anew.”³⁴

These are theologically rich reflections on how motherhood and ministry contain similar threads of care and nurture. A woman entering into the dual call of mother and pastor can find encouragement in this connection! And yet, rather than experiencing the integration of mother and pastor, many women feel that their lives are made up of disconnected compartments competing for their time and attention. The majority of the women I interviewed in my Field Research complained that time and distractions were the biggest external obstacles to having a rich spiritual life.

While taking care to not make a broad generalization, most women long for connectedness and integration. When the pieces of their life clash, inner calm is almost impossible to maintain, let alone tend with care. Kathy Finley remarks about this desire: “What women *do* know is that as human persons we are whole, all-of-a-piece, not just a dualistic tension between body and soul, spirit and flesh, as our culture all too often assumed.”³⁵ I believe that mothering pastors yearn for this kind of wholeness in their lives. They desire to draw close to the God who loves them with maternal comfort and nurture, and they desire this closeness to inform and transform their ministries as well as their families, both for whom they care deeply and completely.

Jenna (a pseudonym) started her first pastoral call when she was pregnant with her second child. Her first died in utero at 18 weeks. For her, pastoral ministry and motherhood are connected in a personal and spiritual way. Waiting, loss, and rebirth are

³⁴ Ibid., 44.

³⁵ Finley, *The Liturgy of Motherhood*, 39.

real themes in her personal life as a mother. They are real themes in her life as a pastor as well. She would not be the pastor she is today had she not experienced the joys and challenges of motherhood along the way. Jenna is currently between official pastoral calls, but she continues to pastor her children. She shared with me that she sees her four children as her “congregation of four.” Each evening as she tucks them in, she prays over them this prayer: “Help us to be courageous and strong and full of mercy and kindness.”³⁶ Jenna is integrating her call of pastor with her call to motherhood. These points of integration energize her and feed her spiritual longing. However, there are many areas that don’t feel integrated for her, which is true of all the women I interviewed. For each integrated moment, there are many more dis-integrated spaces in the lives of mothers who pastor. If mothering and pastoring are so interconnected, why is it that so many clergy mothers experience ongoing spiritual hunger?

Anna (a pseudonym), a pastor and mother who has authored several books on the spiritual practices of ministers, has a robust spiritual routine. She has weekly Sabbath rest, scheduled prayer times alone and with her spouse, regular corporate worship experiences, and set aside days for study and theological writing. However, her soul carries places of deep woundedness, and shame related to a traumatic past and her sons’ lack of Christian faith. In an interview with her she described to me this pain that has spanned decades of her ordained ministry. Her greatest spiritual longing is for God’s peace.³⁷ Renowned writer Henri Nouwen speaks to the longing that pastors experience, often magnified because of their unique role. “So we see how loneliness is the minister’s

³⁶ Interview by author, Spokane, WA, February 22, 2019.

³⁷ Interview by author, phone call, October 18, 2019.

wound not only because he shares in the human condition, but also because of the unique predicament of his profession.”³⁸ The spiritual desperation was palpable in my conversation with Anna as a low-grade fever that never quite finds relief. Even when spiritual disciplines are habitual, the soul of the pastor-mother is thirsty for more.

Conclusion: The Need for Spiritual Congruence

In his preface to *Kingfishers Catch Fire*, Eugene Peterson reflects on a lifetime of ministry and the need for congruence:

The Christian life is a lifelong practice of attending to the details of congruence – congruence between ends and means, congruence between what we do and the way we do it, congruence between what is written in Scripture and our living out what is written, congruence between preaching and living, congruence between the sermon and what is lived in both preacher and congregation, the congruence of the Word made flesh in Jesus and what is lived in our flesh.³⁹

Congruence is critical for any pastor, any Christian for that matter. Congruence, or wholeness, contributes to true inner stillness and an authentic grounding in Christ. However, for many people in our modern distracted world, incongruence is the norm. Lives and ministries are broken up and fragmented, scattered and overwhelmed.

Mothers who pastor can tend to experience a greater sense of fragmentation because of their dual roles. In this opening chapter, we peeled back some of the layers of a mothering pastor’s spiritual longing and exposed a few of the fragmented pieces. Exhaustion and shame from unmet spiritual and practical expectations feed into feelings of loneliness and invisibility. Personal accounts provided windows into the unique spiritual need that exists for mothering pastors who are longing to see the disconnected

³⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1979), 87.

³⁹ Eugene Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed by the Words of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2017), xvii.

parts of their being – body, soul, family, ministry, desires – find cohesion in the God who designed them for wholeness.

Chapter Two will expand upon the need established in this chapter by celebrating the important leadership role that women bring to the ministerial table as well as the resulting impact that such influence has on their soul's longings. Chapter Two will also explore some of the spiritual care resources that exist for mothering pastor and name the gaps where spiritual care is lacking for this population of spiritual leaders. Finally, Chapter Two will highlight the way that women step up in organic ways to form communities for one another, making spiritual care happen on a grassroots level time and time again.

CHAPTER TWO:
MOTHERING PASTORS AND SPIRITUAL CARE

Introduction

It is true
I was created in you.
It is also true
That you were created for me.
I owned your voice.
It was shaped and tuned to soothe me.
Your arms were molded
Into a cradle to hold me, to rock me.
The scent of your body was the air
Perfumed for me to breathe.

Mother,
During those early, dearest days
I did not dream that you had
A larger life which included me.
Among your other concerns,
For I had a life
Which was only you.

–Maya Angelou, *Mother, A Cradle to Hold Me*, excerpt.¹

Motherhood is all-encompassing. From the moment of conception, babies begin to derive every single need from their mother’s body.² Thus, begins a lifetime of connection between a mother and her child. The authors of *A General Theory of Love* suggest that those early bonds are critical to the future of the child’s ability to form attachments. They write: “A baby begins life as an open loop. His mother’s milk provides nourishment, and her limbic communication provides synchronization for his delicate

¹ Maya Angelou, *The Complete Poetry* (New York: Random House, 2015), 286.

² Parents who adopt also do important work toward rebuilding broken attachments. For more on this, see Karyn Purvis’ work at the Karyn Purvis Institute of Childhood Development <https://child.tcu.edu/#sthash.4J6e63e3.DE6QzPG1.dpbs>.

neural rhythms. As a child matures, his neurophysiology internalizes some regulatory functions. Balanced from the outside in, his brain learns stability.”³ As Maya Angelou’s poem articulates, from a baby’s perspective, her mother is her entire world, especially in those beginning years. From a mother’s perspective, her baby is both her entire world and the most precious part of a larger one.

Motherhood is the one of the hardest, most rewarding jobs in the world because it requires everything—body, mind, and spirit. Because it requires everything, a mother yearns to grow and have influence in spheres beyond her home and is uniquely qualified to do so given her innate and learned skills as a leader for her children. This chapter will explore how women engage as leaders, their spiritual needs, and the resources available to meet them, and the way women meet spiritual longings organically. This chapter keeps in mind that the mothering pastor is leader to her children and to her church, therefore filling multiple roles and requiring a different kind of spiritual support that is not readily available within institutional structures.

A Word on Mothering and Those Who Mother

There are mothers in our lives who have not given birth to us. Stepmothers, aunts, and guardians can become for children the people who show them how to love and build attachments. These women are doing the costly work of mothering. There are Christian mothers who stay home with their children and see that sphere as their main focus for long seasons of life. These mothers are just as much leaders and ministers as the mothering pastors addressed in this dissertation. There are mothers who work as CEOs,

³ Lewis, Amini, and Lannon, *A General Theory of Love*, 157.

teachers, nurses, librarians, and missionaries. These mothers are faithful to their children and to their outside work.

This dissertation does not discriminate against mothers of any type, nor does it make a judgment on whether a mother should work outside the home. Just as a pastor receives a calling upon her life to serve the church in a sacramental way, so do other women receive callings to their spheres and passions.

“Your arms were molded into a cradle to hold me, to rock me.”⁴ Once again, Maya’s words ring true and paint a picture of motherhood that tells the story of intimacy between mother and child. A mother of any type knows this bond. A mother creates with her very being a place of safety and comfort, a place of rest and nourishment. The church is this for its people, as well as the place that challenges God’s servants to go out and preach the Gospel with their actions and hearts. A pastor leads this space that is so fragile and yet so vital. With her body she preaches, she prepares Communion, she soothes the dying and the scared. A mother who pastors embodies a kind of spiritual leadership that requires almost everything, body, and soul. The church has a responsibility to return care for these women that meets their needs.

⁴ Angelou, *The Complete Poetry*, 286.

Leadership, Gender and Spiritual Need

A Working Definition of Leadership

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “leadership” as: “the office or position of a leader; the capacity to lead; the act or instance of leading.”⁵ This definition leaves a lot to the imagination. In practice, leadership can have many different qualities and definitions, depending on the culture and values of a community and of the individual leader. During the coursework portion of this DMin in Leadership and Spiritual Formation, I formed a personal definition of leadership, which is: Leadership is authentic and adaptive, able to build connections while holding tension and maintaining a big picture perspective. Although it is not universal, it does provide a helpful foundation for looking at how mothering pastors lead and what unique needs arise because of this leadership style.⁶

Leadership Components and Definition. MaryKate Morse observes this about Leadership: “Leadership is . . . more physical than mental, more relational than getting things done, and more in Christ than about Christ.”⁷ As a pastor this makes so much sense to me. Pastoral leadership is engaging in relationship with people and participating together in the work we are called to as a church body for the Kingdom of God. To fulfill

⁵ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Leadership,” accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/leadership>.

⁶ I’m relying heavily on Peter Northouse’s *Leadership: Theory and Practice, Eighth Edition*. Northouse defines Leadership in this way: “Despite the multitude of ways in which leadership has been conceptualized, the following components can be identified as central to the phenomenon: a) Leadership is a process, b) leadership involves influence, c) leadership occurs in groups, and d) leadership involves common goals” (5). Based on Northouse, leadership can involve a variety of models. My definition reflects my individual experience, so I acknowledge that another mothering pastor might have a different definition.

⁷ MaryKate Morse, “Leadership Presentation,” March 4, 2019.

this call, I draw mainly from two Leadership Models: Authentic Leadership and Adaptive Leadership. Together, these models define what leadership means in my context.

Peter G. Northouse writes: “Authentic leadership is a complex process that emphasizes the development of qualities that help leaders to be perceived as trustworthy and believable by their followers. The leader’s job is to learn to develop these qualities and apply them to the common good as he or she serves others.”⁸ Of adaptive leadership Northouse says: “The goal of adaptive leadership is to encourage people to change and to learn new ways of living so that they may effectively meet their challenges and grow in the process.”⁹ As a leader I am called to develop the qualities of trust that position me well to encourage transformation within my congregation amidst complex personal and institutional issues that arise along the way.

In the church setting, this call is at the same time inspiring and daunting because as a leader I cannot promise a relief from suffering in this life. Hopefully, my authentic and adaptive leadership invites creativity and room for everyone as they learn what it means to belong to Jesus and love him and their neighbor more every day.

According to Northouse, the major components to authentic leadership are: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency.¹⁰ Ronald Heifetz identifies five principals of adaptive leadership: Identify the adaptive challenge, keep the level of distress within a tolerable range, focus attention on ripening issues, give the work back to the people, and protect the voice of leadership

⁸ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership Theory and Practice*, 7th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 207.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 203-4.

without authority.¹¹ I see three major themes that draw these components together for me as a leader: connection, tension, and perspective.

Leadership is about connection. Northouse says this of authentic leadership: “Authentic leaders have the capacity to open themselves up and establish a *connection* with others. They are willing to share their own story with others and listen to others’ stories.”¹² Connection and story are all part of having a relational foundation as a leader for me; when these elements are given priority, the need to accomplish and “get things done” becomes less important. What rises to life are personal human relationships and a trust is built. What gets put to death are the to-do lists and the anxiety that tends to accompany them.

Leadership holds tension well. Of adaptive leadership, Heifetz observes: “The pains of change deserve respect. People can only sustain so much loss at one time.... Leadership requires compassion for the distress of adaptive change, both because compassion is its own virtue, and because it can improve one’s sense of timing. Knowing how hard to push and when to let up are central to leadership.”¹³ In my role I often must create a holding environment¹⁴ that allows for this messy process and can hold the tension of conflicting values together while people interact and work through adaptive challenges.

¹¹ Ibid., 128.

¹² Ibid., 200-201.

¹³ Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (United States: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1994), 241.

¹⁴ Ibid., 105.

Leadership requires perspective. Heifetz also speaks of “getting on the balcony.”¹⁵ Lewis and Clark utilized this method in their exploration as well, as they took the lay of the land around them in planning for the next step in the expedition. Paired with the authentic leadership components in Northouse of self-awareness and balanced processing, balcony perspective adds a broader element to leadership that considers the whole picture as it looks within and takes stock of one’s motives and biases. Without this skill, I cannot care well for people pastorally. Working with families and board members who all have their own focused fixations, I must be able to pan out and find a broader view.

As a pastor, every person and situation that I encounter are different, as are the expectations and needs. Relational connection, holding tensions, and bringing perspective are some of the tools that I use frequently as I discern how to enter in as a pastor leader, to hospital rooms, homes, and broken relationships. All these leadership components are only tools without the spiritual perspective that comes from self-examination. As a Christian leader, I must make space for contemplative prayer and reflection. Adaptive leaders must “reflect on daily actions, successes and failures, of ourselves and others.”¹⁶ This kind of leadership examen helps me to receive the new life that Christ has for me in the Spirit, and to relinquish areas of control that only serve me and not the people I am called to love.

Leadership of any kind demands spiritual practices that provide rest, guidance, and nourishment for the road ahead. Finding space for this work is difficult for all

¹⁵ Ibid., 252.

¹⁶ Ibid., 271-2.

leaders, and especially tricky for mothers in the workplace. Adding pastoral work to their plate only increases the urgent need for authentic spiritual care.

Mother Leaders and Spiritual Need

While the leadership model described in the previous section is reflective of my own tendencies and gifts, many of the themes pertain to women in general, and especially women who are mothers and pastors. Connectional leadership that can hold tension and have unique perspective are hallmarks of women leaders. Jean Lipman-Blumen writes: “For many females, connecting to, caring for, and taking responsibility for mediating the conflicting needs of others indicate adult success and provide a sense of safety.”¹⁷ While both men and women lead with others in mind, women do so in a unique way.¹⁸ When asked about their gifts in pastoral roles, two women I interviewed observed similar patterns about their leadership and engagement with congregation and staff. One pastor said of herself that she thinks primarily in terms of relationships and shared spiritual life.¹⁹ Another remarked, “When I sit in a staff meeting, I see things differently. There’s a listening that’s different.”²⁰ Listening and connectional skills as a leader in the spiritual sphere are truly a gift to the church. These skills, often exhibited by women, are invaluable to space where people long to be known and loved by God. Giving of these

¹⁷ Jean Lipman-Blumen, “Connective Leadership: Female Leadership Styles in the 21st-Century Workplace,” *Sociological Perspectives* 35, no. 1 (1992): 184.

¹⁸ I am making claims that women have unique leadership qualities; however, some scholars would argue that this leans too heavily on gender essentialism and they believe that women and men are wired in particular and unmovable ways. To explore more on this topic, see: Leanne M. Dzubinski and Amy B. Diehl, “The Problem of Gender Essentialism and its Implication for Women in Leadership,” *Journal of Leadership Studies* 12, no. 1 (2018): 56-61.

¹⁹ Interview by author, Spokane, WA, February 20, 2019.

²⁰ Interview by author, Spokane, WA, February 22, 2019.

gifts also requires a deeper, more personal energy from the giver. This kind of leadership is taxing as much as it is rewarding.

Thus, the flip side of this leadership model is exhaustion, only made worse by the cultural pushback that women still experience in the workplace, no less in the church setting. Regarding gender and leadership, Peter Northouse reports that “Although men’s participation in domestic labor has increased in recent years (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2008), women continue to do the majority of childcare responsibilities and household chores (Belkin, 2008; Craig, 2006; Pailhe & Solaz, 2006).”²¹ Mothering pastors are often giving of themselves spiritually in the church and then also pouring themselves out at home to their children, spouses, and practical duties like housecleaning and cooking. While this is not the experience of every mothering pastor, the trends suggest that the expectation that they will accomplish these domestic tasks is still lingering in the cultural air. When women are not actively participating in these spheres, they can experience the emotional stress of unfulfilled obligation. Lipman-Blumen writes, “Research data confirm women’s greater propensity for putting the needs of others above their own...They nurture others, basking vicariously and altruistically in the success of those they value and love (Gilligan 1982). Gilligan’s (1982) work suggests that women often experience guilt and depression when their behavior violates these norms.”²² As addressed in Chapter One, guilt is a common experience for mothering pastors, particularly when they do not have room to simply be without demands and

²¹ Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 406.

²² Lipman-Blumen, “Connective Leadership,” 200.

expectations. Real spiritual formation and care can go a long way towards addressing this issue.

The gifts that mother leaders bring to the table come at a cost, to their bodies and spirits. Returning to the Maya Angelou image, the mother leader provides a cradle for her children and for her church, giving of her body and spirit to create a space of safety and attachment. Women serving in this capacity need spiritual refreshment, a place to lay down their whole selves to receive real rest. They need to be reminded of their calling, their worth, and the unconditional love that God has for them.

Spiritual Care for Pastor-Mother-Leaders

Voluminous research exists demonstrating spiritual, relational, and emotional care needs for pastors and for pastors' wives. The Barna Group reports the following about pastors in general:

Not surprisingly, when it comes to both marriage and parenting, pastors who rate higher on Barna's risk metrics report lower satisfaction with their relationships. For example, pastors who are high on burnout risk are more likely to rate their marriage as average or below average, and to say their relationship with their children is merely average. Likewise, pastors at high spiritual risk are more prone to say their marriage is average or below average, and eight times more likely than the norm to say their relationship with their children is average.²³

Pastors' wives also run the risk of burnout and spiritual depletion. Eliza Renae Ashley writes in her dissertation: "Women married to pastors frequently and consistently suffer from isolation, emotional pain, and stress and anxiety that negatively impact their

²³ Barna Group, "How Healthy Are Pastors' Relationships?" Barna, February 15, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/healthy-pastors-relationships/>.

spiritual and quality of life.”²⁴ These are just a few examples of the spiritual needs evident among pastors’ wives, and there are many more online, in libraries, and from personal experiences. And yet, the longings of mothering pastors are hardly acknowledged, let alone the need to address these tender and important desires.

A Google search using the phrase “pastors who are mothers” yields three top results, all pertaining to Mother’s Day.²⁵ Extending the terms to “spiritual care for pastors who are mothers” brings up articles on Christian leadership, pre-natal care, and miscarriage. None of these resources comes close to actual, practical spiritual care for clergy mothers. In fact, as a clergy mother myself, I am left feeling rather frustrated by these results. It is unlikely that I would have the energy to search much further after this initial inquiry. While there are ample books and retreats addressing the general topics of Pastors, Pastors’ Wives, and Mothers, the same does not hold true for mothering pastors. A next obvious step is to find out what calling bodies, or denominations, offer for the mothering pastor. In other words, what is available from our institutions? For the sake of this paper, the Presbyterian Church (USA) will serve as a sample demonstrating what, if any, formation resources exist for the pastor who is also a mother.

PC (USA): A Snapshot

On a national scale, the PC (USA) Board of Pensions offers ordained ministers a broad range of benefits as well as several wellness services that seek to care for the pastor

²⁴ Elisa Renae Ashley, “Thriving Holistically as a Woman Married to a Minister: A Spiritual Formation Model to Support Women in the United States in the Role of Pastor’s Wife,” (DMin Diss, Portland Seminary, 2020), 4, George Fox University Digital Commons.

²⁵ Google search, April 22, 2020.

as a whole person.²⁶ Each year, the Board of Pensions hosts a CREDO conference for pastors aiming to address these holistic needs. This website²⁷ suggests that attending a conference will help meet a pastor's financial, spiritual, health and vocational needs. However, Craig (a pseudonym) attended a CREDO conference last year. During the weeklong retreat, he recalled one breakout session addressing spiritual care for pastors in general, and no sessions at all pertaining to parenting let alone motherhood, or fatherhood in his case.²⁸ On the other hand, many clergy love the CREDO conference and speak highly of its offerings and space to process vocation and wellness. Pastors do appreciate this holistic approach to clergy care, and it is admittedly a unique and helpful pool of resources from which to draw refreshment and aid. From an institutional standpoint, the Board of Pensions is doing a well-rounded job of meeting the needs of their pastors. Personally, my husband and I have received debt-relief grants from this organization and have great medical and pension benefits. This is good! That said, the Board of Pensions does not provide anything specific for pastors who are mothers.

On the regional level, presbyteries have the opportunity to meet more specific needs, but rarely address those of clergy mothers. Edward (a pseudonym), a Presbytery leader in Pittsburgh Presbytery, confessed that they have no formal spiritual care resources available for any pastors, let alone something specific for mothering pastors.²⁹ Leader and pastor Sarah (a pseudonym) in the Presbytery of Eastern Oregon paints an

²⁶ See, for example, www.pensions.org

²⁷ "Credo," The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church, accessed March 23, 2021, <http://www.pensions.org/your-path-to-wholeness/credo>

²⁸ Field Research email inquiry, April 16, 2020.

²⁹ Field Research email inquiry, April 6, 2020.

even bleaker picture. Spiritual care is provided for pastors only in a crisis, she writes, and while she was offered a mentor when she moved to the area the connection never panned out. When relating to older clergy about motherhood and ministry she often feels judged and marginalized. Her most helpful spiritual care comes from a spiritual director outside of her denomination that she located and pays for personally.³⁰ The most encouraging resources I have encountered are offered by Northwest Coast Presbytery in Washington State, where clergy are provided with a monetary stipend to use toward personal spiritual direction and forming clergy small groups. However, these are general resources and again, not specific to clergy mothers.³¹

Resource Gaps

General spiritual care resources do indeed provide a measure of soul nourishment. However, often such resources require energy and effort that may not be possible for mothering pastors. Clergy mothers can look to pamphlets and books for help with spiritual needs, but so often these resources are missing something. Adele Calhoun put together a spiritual practices handbook, where she says at the beginning that “Wanting to work with and watch Jesus is where transformation begins.”³² Certainly, discipleship is hard work. However, I would argue that spiritual care, the kind that offers true soul rest, is an invitation rather than a syllabus or a checklist. MaryKate Morse says this of prayer as a spiritual practice: “Prayer is not a skill leading to better and better results because

³⁰ Field Research email inquiry, April 8, 2020.

³¹ Field Research email inquiry, April 23, 2020.

³² Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 17.

one is praying rightly. Prayer is the simplest and most elegant of spiritual disciplines. Nothing is needed.”³³ Morse’s words get at the heart of the mothering pastors’ longing to receive God’s beckoning voice as a place of pause and respite with no homework required.

Pastors, especially mothering pastors, have enough tasks on their plate. The last thing they need is to struggle for proper and refreshing spiritual care. And yet, that is what most clergy mothers must do in order to find space for their souls to thrive. Because of this, and because of their unique circumstances, mothering pastors find ways to tend to their own souls as well as to the souls within their spheres of church and home.

Women Meeting Spiritual Needs

The story of Mary and Elizabeth in Luke’s Gospel illustrates a beautiful picture of women making their own spiritual community. Though these women were not pastors in the modern sense of the word, they were spiritual leaders and their journey through pregnancy together highlights their desire for connection and ability to walk with one another through a truly unusual and intense time.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’³⁴

³³ MaryKate Morse, *A Guidebook to Prayer: Twenty-four Ways to Walk with God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 17.

³⁴ Luke 1:41-45, NRSV.

Each carrying a special babe in their womb, two mothers find community and spiritual connection in one another's presence. Their children react within them, moving with glee as their mothers embrace one another. Because of these two mothers, the Church will forever be changed, for one of them carries a prophet, and the other - the Son of God. Elizabeth and Mary, though not officially categorized as pastors in their context, were spiritual leaders in a hostile environment. As pregnant women with spiritual clout, they were also alone without much cultural support. In their excitement and longing they sought companionship and spiritual support in one another as they navigated the waters of motherhood and risky spiritual leadership.

Pastoring mothers face similar challenges with a lack of institutional community spiritual support. Regarding her own pastoring story and desire for wholeness, Ruth Haley Barton confesses the following: "How I longed for a community of faith that would help us—by our very participation in it—to live into the rhythms that our hearts were longing for."³⁵ Women who pastor crave connection and community that flow with and not against the grain of their circumstances. And yet, many of the spiritual resources available only meet part of their spiritual longings, either as a mother or a pastor, never both, and they usually must swim upstream to locate them. Pastoring mothers need unique spiritual care and spiritual formation resources, but there is a lack of resources available to them. Because of this, clergy mothers not only provide spiritual care for their flocks, but they also tend to fill their own spiritual needs through organic connections. Like Mary and Elizabeth, mothering pastors find ways to close this gap, but it is also the

³⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018), Kindle Chapter 8.

job of ordaining bodies to acknowledge their needs and produce nourishing spiritual resources.

Randy Woodley, a First Nations author, writes about harmony with the earth. For his people, the cycle of pain, new birth and organic community connections are ways of living out God's call to wholeness. He writes:

Indeed, it was women who were given the power from the Creator to create life, including the life of Jesus, the Christ-child from Mary. Mary, the virgin, brought forth life in the same way the first human is brought forth from the virgin soil. This act is nothing new. In many of our indigenous stories Mother Earth brings forth humans and the Creator breathes life into them. In the Jewish-Christian continuance, mother Mary brings forth the Second Adam with the life-seed of the Creator. The restoration of the dignity of women is a central theme in a shalom trajectory. Jesus drew women around himself in order for them to understand that they too had the privilege and responsibility to become disciples, teachers, prophets, and apostles in God's shalom way. And it was women who would eventually have the honor to be the first to bring the testimony of Jesus' resurrection from the tomb. Without the restoration of the central role of women, there could have been no virgin birth. Without women, there could be no creation.³⁶

God has been using women, mothers, from the very beginning to bring forth new life. By God's design, women are good at gathering people together and creating connections. Clergy mothers have an additional layer of involvement in this process as they serve the church as spiritual leaders. They tend souls with skill gained through shared pain and hope in new life, and they create space for personal and community renewal. In this way they are uniquely qualified to be spiritual directors for their people. These organic connections address the spiritual longings of the mother pastor in an important and authentic way. However, what happens when the mothering pastor is desperate for soul care and has no energy left to seek it out for herself?

³⁶ Randy S. Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 47.

Mary: A Case Study

Setting this question aside for the time being, we turn to a biblical case study for mothering pastors and spiritual care: Mary, Mother of God. Even though Mary is betrothed to and marries Joseph, the Church knows her best as the human mother of Jesus. Ann Clements observes this in Matthew's Gospel: "From the start Mary appears to be in an anomalous position. Joseph is her husband, yet not the begetter of her son. She is defined in terms of her motherhood of Christ."³⁷ As a mother, Mary's womb held and tended a child, the Son of God. This babe, though not of her own flesh, was entrusted to her body and her soul for care and nurture. If not in the classical sense of the word "pastor," Mary is a soul-tender in her own right. She is not only the Mother of God, she is also a mother to the Church, who has received spiritual guidance from her for centuries, namely but not solely through her song in Luke chapter 1. Janice Capel Anderson acknowledges the breadth of Mary's influence when she remarks, "Mary is blessed not only as the mother of the male Messiah but also as a representative of all in Israel, male and female, who rely on God's redemption."³⁸ Mary is a spiritual leader in her sphere, newly pregnant with God Incarnate. Mary's story offers a window into the role of a mothering pastor who mothered God through pain, led God's people with her voice, and found spiritual strength in grassroots community with her cousin Elizabeth.

The Magnificat. Heavy with child, Mary finds friendship and solace in the home of her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. After receiving a blessing, she cries out in song: "My

³⁷ E. Ann Clements, *Mothers on the Margin?: The Significance of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 151.

³⁸ Janice Capel Anderson, "Mary's Difference: Gender and Patriarchy in the Birth Narratives," *The Journal of Religion* 67, no. 2 (April 1987): 198.

soul magnifies the Lord. . . .”³⁹ The song goes on to proclaim God as a savior who sees the lowest and raises them up, who shows mercy and strength, who gives nourishment to the hungry and sends away the proud and the rich. These few sentences capture God’s story and character perfectly. Mary is a mother, and she is also a leader. Ally Kateusz writes:

A woman, after all, can be both a mother and a leader, and vestiges of the strong role that Jesus’ mother played are in the canonical gospels themselves. The author of Luke/Acts, in particular, closely associated Mary with prophecy in Luke 1:46-55, the Magnificat, giving her the longest speech of any woman in the New Testament.⁴⁰

Her song is more than a speech, however. Through her voice, God offers a spiritual welcome to God’s people, a place of rest, like the one Mary received from Elizabeth. Jason Gaboury reflects on Mary’s Song as spiritual nourishment: “This prayer is not simply a devotional experience, however. Praying the Magnificat ought to create new categories of understanding in our mind and heart. In prayer we receive an invitation to come and magnify the Lord with Mary, to enter her story, and through it see the heart of God.”⁴¹ A first century young woman with no credentials to speak of embodies the role of a mothering spiritual leader whose words continue to reveal God to people today.

Organic Solutions for Mothering Pastors: Spiritual Friendship and Community

Without question women tend to create the space they need. Take MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) for instance. This group for women of young children began in

³⁹ Luke 1:46.

⁴⁰ Ally Kateusz. *Mary and the Early Church Women: Hidden Leadership*. (London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 2.

⁴¹ Jason Gaboury, “The Power of Praying the Magnificat Daily,” *Intervarsity* (blog), March 8, 2017 <https://intervarsity.org/blog/power-praying-magnificat-daily>.

1973 when a few mothers decided they needed community.⁴² Mothering pastors are no different. When there is lack, they seek friendship and community to establish spiritual connections that feed their souls. Often these connections are created out of painful places, of shared miscarriage stories, church gossip, and tragedy.

The obvious example of pain that leads to connection is childbirth. This experience alone, different from any male encounter with life and its origin, makes mothers uniquely qualified to speak about suffering and God's love as well as to provide spiritual care to those who are suffering and need God's love. Deborah Loyd has this to say about childbirth pain and the fruit it brings: "But in stark contrast to unproductive pain, productive pain does a good work in the life of the sufferer. Any woman who has ever given birth understands this. At the end of her pain she holds newborn life in her arms. . . . Productive pain is pain with meaning."⁴³ The meaning that comes from this type of pain, as well as the pain and complexities of church work and childrearing, can grow into deep spiritual knowledge and the ability to hold space for suffering souls. David Rohrer writes:

Pastors, like midwives, participate in a work in progress. God is bringing things to birth in the lives of the people among whom we serve. We get the privilege of catching these babies, of handling these holy births. With or without us this new life would happen, but by the mercy of God, we get to be a part of it and experience the joy of being invited by God to join him in this work.⁴⁴

⁴² "About Us," Mothers of Preschoolers, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.mops.org/about/about-us/>.

⁴³ Deborah Koehn Loyd, *Your Vocational Credo: Practical Steps to Discover Your Unique Purpose* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 51.

⁴⁴ David Rohrer, *The Sacred Wilderness of Pastoral Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 80.

Two midwives in Exodus 1 embodied such work. Shiprah and Puah put their own lives on the line to take risks for the sake of the Hebrew line. In the midst of childbearing pain and also great fear, these two women brought life out of certain death. Alice Matthews has this to say: “But Shiprah and Puah were made of sterner stuff. They were *ezer* women, women of strength. Putting their own lives on the line, they refused to comply with the king’s command.”⁴⁵ Mothering pastors are *ezer* people, midwifing space for people to experience God’s love. Because they know firsthand the journey of productive pain, they can walk alongside souls with credibility and powerful insight.

Trudelle Thomas insists that motherhood prepares a woman to care beyond the needs of her children. She says, “I believe that becoming a mother can itself be a form of religious education, one that can have a deep and lasting impact on a woman, and thus, on her family and all those in her faith community.”⁴⁶ Mothering pastors can and do provide soul care to their spheres because they are uniquely gifted to do so, through their nature, their experience of pain and life, and through their commitment to drawing people to rest in God’s arms.

Elizabeth, a Spiritual Companion. Like pastoring mothers today who are finding community in unofficial ways apart from their institutions, Mary seeks a kindred soul with whom to share her story. As soon as Mary heard from the angel that she was carrying the Christ-child in her womb, Luke tells the reader that “. . . Mary set out and went *with haste* (my emphasis) to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered

⁴⁵ Alice Matthews, *Gender Roles and the People of God: Rethinking What We Were Taught About Men and Women in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 51.

⁴⁶ Trudelle Thomas, “Becoming a Mother: Matrescence as Spiritual Formation,” *Religious Education* 96, no. 1 (January 2001): 89.

the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.”⁴⁷ Mary’s need for a partner on her journey was urgent and she wasted no time in making sure she was in the company of another woman in a similar situation.

Elizabeth offers not only a place to stay but also a spiritual space and guiding words. Jeremy Troxler in a book collection about mentoring says of Elizabeth: “Her mentor’s joyful welcome and sensitivity of soul create a safe and sacred space where Mary can sing her own song of praise for who she is and for what God is doing in her life.”⁴⁸ This is remarkable. In an era and culture where male accomplishments were celebrated and documented, Mary and Elizabeth are highlighted as bearers of God’s word and their story beautifully illustrates how women find spiritual nourishment in one another when formal care is nowhere to be found.

Mary and Elizabeth’s story is one of tender spiritual guidance along with deep friendship connections and safe space for experiencing life’s disruptions. Their journey reminds the mothering pastors’ heart of God’s mothering love for her, with that same safe and refreshing pace. Margaret Hebblethwaite eloquently captures this longing: “But perhaps most of all she needs a way of self-understanding that will unite her torn feelings, and form a bridge between the hopes and promises of the past and the disillusion of the present. I believe this way can be found in God our mother.”⁴⁹ Women build bridges between the compartments of life. They do so in their leadership and they long for it spiritually in their inner life. God models this perfectly and offers it freely.

⁴⁷ Luke 1:39b–40, NRSV.

⁴⁸ Craig T. Kocher, Jason Byasse, and James C. Howell, eds., *Mentoring for Ministry: The Grace of Growing Pastors* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 8.

⁴⁹ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 65.

The robust spiritual care that mother-pastors are able to give to their children and parishioners is not easily available to their own longing hearts. Without obvious spiritual care resources at their fingertips, clergy mothers have become adept at creating their own spaces for refreshment. They do this for the sake of one another and for the benefit of their own longings. Trudelle Thomas says this of mothers, which is true also of mothers who are pastors: “A great many women today feel a deep spiritual thirst as well as a desire to be a transformative force (‘leaven’) in a society that is increasingly impersonal, bureaucratic, violent and superficial.”⁵⁰ For the mothering pastor, generic spiritual resources can feel impersonal and out of reach, barely scratching the itch of a thirst heart for God. Furthermore, they desire to provide more for their “tribes,” to find ways for others in their situation to experience rest and space.

Longing for Community: A Personal Note. When I was newly pregnant with our first daughter, my husband and I were looking for ministry calls. He found some part-time work, but I was freshly out of seminary and feeling so lost as a theologically trained to-be pastor with a child on the way. The Executive Presbyter in our Presbytery, a mother herself to grown children, contacted me with an invitation. She had noticed that there was a small group of women like me—ordained (or about to be) with children. Would I like to join this gathering? I said yes, with trepidation, having no idea how valuable and life-giving this twice monthly meeting would be for my soul and my vocation. To this day, some of these women are my closest friends, for they share my experience of pastoring while mothering. We have walked with one another through difficult church situations, miscarriages, aging parents, and loss of close loved ones. While we no longer meet

⁵⁰ Trudelle Thomas, *Spirituality in the Mother Zone: Staying Centered, Finding God* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 203.

formally, our connection continues. This is an example of the way women see a need and come together. My spiritual health is stronger because of a mothering pastor (my Executive Presbyter) noticing other mothering pastors.

Conclusion: Exhaustion from Self-Initiated Spiritual Care

Women nurture and provide, for their flocks and children and for their own souls. The stories in this chapter demonstrate their strong ability to create their own space for spiritual care. That said, too often the institutions that call these mothers to the pastorate are lacking when it comes to providing spiritual care resources. During interviews with mothering pastors in 2019, lack of institutional support regarding spiritual care emerged as a common theme. One woman shared that while she initially received good spiritual formation support from her CPM (Committee on Preparation for Ministry, PCUSA) and seminary, there was little to no follow up after she began pastoral ministry.⁵¹ After describing the exhaustion she experiences from juggling household chores, sick children, and church tasks, another woman remarked: “This is something we must do in some way on our own, in community.”⁵² While women are absolutely capable of creating community “on their own,” as this pastor said, there remains a void where authentic spiritual care could exist without self-initiated effort on the part of the mothering pastor.

St. Gregory the Great, regarding the attention required in pastoral care, writes: “For clearly, the mind cannot focus well on one matter when it is divided by many

⁵¹ Interview by author, Spokane, WA, February 20, 2019.

⁵² Interview by author, Spokane, WA, February 22, 2019.

concerns.”⁵³ While this may have been true for male pastors in the sixth century, it is quite the opposite of truth for most women, let alone mothering pastors in the twenty-first century. In fact, their ability to multitask and hold space for a variety of needs is one of reasons they excel in the pastoral role. Additionally, because of the complex and interconnected nature of their gifts and circumstances, mothering pastors can see big picture needs and seek creative and organic ways of meeting those needs.

No pastor, male or female, is simply a pastor. Each one carries a story and unique gifts to offer the church. David Rohrer insists that “We cannot do the work of pastoral ministry living under the mistaken assumption that we are simply a class of persons known as ‘the clergy.’” We are no longer simply theologians and providers of traditional pastoral services within a relatively stable institution. We are now also called on to come to the aid of this struggling institution and to help reshape it.”⁵⁴ I believe that mothering pastors embody a particular call in the pastoral effort to reshape our ecclesial institutions. In fact, clergy mothers meet the very needs that they themselves have regarding spiritual care. However, just because they can and do meet those needs does not mean the gap in resources is acceptable or sustainable. Mothering pastors need a place of rest that they themselves have not supplied.

This chapter has demonstrated that women leaders, especially those who are pastoring and mothering at the same time, bring a set of gifts to the table that enhances ministry spaces as well as the spiritual sphere of the home. Such leaders need soul care that is all too often not supplied through official channels. Women in these roles tend to

⁵³ St. Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, trans. George E. Demacopoulos (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 34.

⁵⁴ Rohrer, *The Sacred Wilderness*, 13.

create spiritual rest spaces for one another as needs arise, filling the resource gap with their own skills. Chapter Three will suggest a way forward that invites mothering pastors into God-created spiritual space by highlighting the ways that God mothers God's children, including the clergy mother.

CHAPTER THREE:
BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR GOD’S MOTHERING LOVE

Introduction

Do not press me to leave you
or turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die –
there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and even more as well,
if even death parts me from you!¹

When women gather for mutual support, often in grassroots groups, their communities meet tangible needs. Alongside, and as a part of the spiritual fortitude that draw women together, are the basic creature comfort staples. We can imagine the implications of Ruth’s promise to Naomi. She will lodge with her—shelter and a home! She will worship with her—church companionship and prayer! She will join her community—shared potlucks! Lest we think that God loves God’s people in spirit-only ways, the story of Ruth and Naomi demonstrates how utterly concrete is God’s care and provision. God shows embodied, practical love to God’s people.

Through God’s loving provision, Ruth shows Naomi companionship that surpasses culture and common sense. Her commitment to care for Naomi and the bond forged between these two women reflects God’s compassionate and relentless love. God’s creative partnering of Ruth and Naomi is reminiscent of a mother encouraging her

¹ Ruth 1:16b-17.

child in a friendship or a pastor placing two lost souls in the same small group. Women – mothers—make connections and show love in a particular way. Created in the image of God, just as much as man, women know how to nurture, connect, and protect because God first taught them how.²

God’s maternal love, prevalent throughout Scripture, is a companioning, familial love. This chapter will dive deep into the biblical precedent for God’s mothering nature. It will look at specific ways that God mothers women in the Bible, and how these patterns challenge traditional images of God. A consideration of God’s love as shown through God’s maternal actions can provide a special place of comfort and rest for mothering pastors. The chapter will end with a suggested spiritual exercise, which draws from the Mothering God themes in the Bible that we will now explore.

God as Mother in Scripture

Feminine imagery for God is not a modern or progressive concept.³ In fact, scriptural expressions of God as a mother are historical representations of how the ancient Hebrew people saw God. Carolyn Blevins writes: “God as a female image was not a new concept to the Jews. The Hebrew Scriptures contained various images of God

² The Book of Ruth gives an account of women pushing boundaries of gender and culture. Stories like this abound in scripture, including the stories of Mary (Luke 2), Lydia (Acts 16) and Rahab (Joshua 2 and Hebrews 11). However, there are also countless records of women oppressed by the surrounding culture. Hagar in Genesis 16-21, and the the woman caught in adultery in John 8, are both instances of class oppression perpetuated by the surrounding societal norms. God’s story, of course, redeems these situations, but the pain and exclusion must be named.

³ I am indebted to Sue Stratton, LSF4 Cohort colleague and Old Testament Instructor at Johnson University. Sue compiled a detailed list of scriptures for me depicting God as mother. This resource has been enormously helpful for me in my work on this chapter.

as a mother figure. Early Hebrew understanding of God included the feminine image.”⁴ Examples of this show up throughout the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy we read: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth,”⁵ and further on in the Psalms: “But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is within me.”⁶ These are few of the many scriptural references that demonstrate how God the Creator gathers and cares for God’s people with a maternal touch. God is portrayed in these texts as a woman giving birth to God’s people, soothing them with motherly care. To think on this seems scandalous, but it is in fact biblical and a way the Hebrew people experienced their God.

Not only did the Old Testament writers feature feminine imagery throughout the Scriptural narrative, they also frequently used language typically applied to women to depict God and God’s actions. For example, the Hebrew words “compassion”, “mercy”, and “womb” all derive from the same root word, רַחֵם (*rec-hem*). Genesis 29:31 says, “When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.”⁷ In Nehemiah, the same root is used to tell of God’s compassion: “Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a

⁴ Carolyn Blevins. “Under My Wings: Jesus’ Motherly Love: Matthew 23:37-39,” *Review & Expositor*, 104 no. 2 (May 2007): 374.

⁵ Deuteronomy 32:18.

⁶ Psalm 131:2.

⁷ Genesis 29:31.

gracious and merciful God.”⁸ Thus, God’s compassion is likened to that of a woman’s womb; it comes from deep within God, holding and giving life.⁹

It bears mention that Jesus, God Incarnate, came to earth as a babe in his mother’s womb. That God would use a virgin mother as the instrument for God’s presence among us is radical, and the ultimate act of tender, motherly love. Mary’s words in the Gospel of Luke articulate her place of both power and meekness as she carries the Christ in her womb: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”¹⁰ Is this not the call of the mothering pastor, to steward both the holy and the human? Is it not also the invitation to the mothering pastor to receive, like Mary, the strength of the Lord who comforts her human, stewarding self?

God as Comforter and Nurturer

Most commonly, mothers are known for their abilities to gather, comfort, and nurture, although not all mothers do this for their children.¹¹ Scripture regularly highlights this beautiful part of God’s character. Isaiah says it most plainly: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I [God] comfort you; and you will be comforted over

⁸ Nehemiah 9:31.

⁹ There are many other Old Testament verses that depict God as a woman in labor, nursing, and nurturing her people. Look at Isaiah 49:15, Numbers 11:12, and Isaiah 42:14 to find even more evidence of God as Mother in the Bible.

¹⁰ Luke 1:46-49.

¹¹ Motherhood is not universally experienced as positive, for mothers and for children. This dissertation acknowledges that some mother/child relationships are very painful, even estranged.

Jerusalem.”¹² When a child feels scared, or tired, or overwhelmed, they routinely run to their mother’s arms, longing for her warm bosom and soothing voice. God is this for her children, the ultimately place of assurance and rest. Many theologians perpetuate the false claim that the God of the Old Testament is angry, and the God of the New Testament is calm and gracious. Scripture proves otherwise, Robert L. Foster argues. He writes, “The God of the Old Testament is our God, a God of motherly compassion who confronts egregious sin and promises a future beyond failures.”¹³ We note also, that God’s fatherly love is not simply one of anger, where men are seen as tempered and women as demure. God is complex, whole, and able to love her people abundantly and creatively.

A mother raising her children, God works to mold us carefully, with kindness and discipline. In Hosea, the prophet writes: “Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I who took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.”¹⁴ God perfectly tends and provides for her children. It is no wonder that women, made in the image of God just like men, have learned from their Creator to love their children with such detail and practicality. The writers of scripture recognized this and approach God as their mother, like the Psalmist who says, “But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother;

¹² Isaiah 66:13.

¹³ Robert L. Foster, “The Mothering Love of God: Our Perceptions of an Angry, Old Testament Deity Are Distorted,” *Christianity Today* 64, no. 2 (March 2020): 63.

¹⁴ Hosea 11:3-4.

my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.”¹⁵ Time and time again, God’s people run to her for safety and guidance.

St. Francis De Sales, a sixteenth and seventeenth century Catholic Bishop, understood God’s love as one expressed both in masculine fatherly terms and in a feminine motherly one. Daniel Stramera, in an article on St. Francis De Sales observes this of his theology of God:

Francis understands relationship to the will of God as having two aspects: one of obedience as to a father, and another as trusting in a mother. . . . Thus, the maternal compassion of God guides us along the path of life so that we might grow into the fullness of life in God. A mother’s care and guidance best exemplifies the formative love of God.¹⁶

God loves us formatively, meaning that God is present for our growing and our mistakes, our triumphs, and our longings. In this way, God mothers us, for this is what mothers do. Mothers hold their hands out for tippy toddlers, they prepare food for growing children, they listen carefully as their young adult offspring process new directions, and they never stop loving their babies even into adulthood. With gratitude, we acknowledge that God is a mother as well as a father, that safe space wherein we find room to grow, rest, and be encouraged.

A Fierce Protector

God’s mothering characteristics are not limited to that of comforter and maternal nurturer. Just like earthly mothers, God mothers with a watchfulness and protection of God’s children, keenly aware of predators and threats. Randy Woodley, First Nations

¹⁵ Psalm 131:2.

¹⁶ Daniel Stramara, “St. Frances De Sales and the Maternal Love of God,” *Magistra Publications* 21, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 5, 12.

author, insists that God guards God's children fiercely, and that this kind of protection is not at all meek or mild.¹⁷ The Good News Translation of Isaiah 31:5 reads this way: "Just as a bird hovers over its nest to protect its young, so I, the LORD Almighty, will protect Jerusalem and defend it."¹⁸ God is a mothering animal, shielding her babes from the elements. This is the bold mothering God who will stop at nothing to keep her children from harm.

Not only does our mothering God use her strength to protect, she is also willing to pounce on our behalf. Schiao Chong cautions,

Before we claim the Bible only reinforces stereotypes of motherly warmth and care with these images of God, check out Hosea 13:8 – 'Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open,' says the Lord. Here, we see that the maternal instinct to protect the children can produce wrath as much as warmth. Beware the fury of a mother! No sentimental mother-image here.¹⁹

Scripture is gritty, showing unapologetically an unyielding God who pursues us even when it gets messy. God relentlessly watches over us and pursues God's children, leaving no stone unturned when we run out of bounds. Mothers have learned the same ruthlessness from God, bearing God's image each time they give everything to keep their children safe.

New Testament Feminine Imagery for God

Most direct references to God as Mother are found in the Old Testament, however the New Testament is not lacking in feminine imagery for God. Two themes stand out as

¹⁷ Randy Woodley, LSF4 Zoom Presentation, April 14, 2020.

¹⁸ Isaiah 31:5, GNT.

¹⁹ Shiao Chong, "Biblical Maternal Images for God," *Junia Project* (Blog), May 7, 2016. <https://juniaproject.com/biblical-maternal-images-for-god/>

ways in which God reveals herself in a feminine and motherly way, to the disciples in the Upper Room and beyond as Jesus offers his very body for nourishment and life, and to the Early Church through her Spirit.

Body and Blood as a Mother Metaphor. Jesus was a man. There is no arguing this fact. Christians believe that Jesus is God, fully human and fully divine and that Jesus' actions represent the will of the Father. Paul R. Smith says that "Calling God Father was central to Jesus' relationship with God, and we cannot understand Jesus without comprehending his unique naming of God as Father."²⁰ This Father-Son relationship is the way God chose to reveal God's self to God's people in real history. Jesus' maleness means that he took on an actual human body, relating to us in the most intimate way possible. For this we can give thanks. That said, just because Jesus was a man and called God "Father", does not mean that God is confined to a male identity. Jesus himself, acting for the Trinity, exemplified God's mothering care at the Last Supper.

"While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins.'²¹ Valerie Greer comments on this event eloquently: "The imagery of being sustained and nourished by someone's flesh and blood is a uniquely motherly metaphor that pregnant and nursing mothers experience. There is no time in human life when a person actually is

²⁰ Paul R. Smith, *Is It Ok To Call God "Mother": Considering the Feminine Face of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 81.

²¹ Matthew 26:26-28.

nourished by the flesh and blood of another person, except in pregnancy and nursing.”²²

The Divine provision in the Last Supper Event, symbolized every time a Christian partakes of the Communion Meal, mimics the bodily sacrifice that many mothers²³ engage in when they feed their infants. Through the person of Jesus, God mothered the disciples at the table, and God mothers all disciples in history through this embodied act.

When a mothering pastor presides at the Supper, she does so as a priest and as a woman. She understands what it means to give of her body to feed her children, and thus understands in a special way what it meant for Jesus to give of his body for her and for the people in her congregation. Perhaps acknowledging this mothering act of God in the Gospels might encourage a mothering pastors’ spirit and allow her to feel more connected to and loved by God.

The Holy Spirit as Mother. In the New Testament, God sends God’s Spirit to be an advocate and guide for her people. God remains present after Jesus ascends to heaven. God’s Spirit is not new to the Trinity team beginning in the book of Acts, however. God’s Spirit has been working throughout history and was active in the Old Testament as well. The Hebrew word for Spirit is רוח (*ruah*), which is feminine, meaning spirit, wind, or breath. This same Spirit, active in the New Testament is described with the Greek word πνεῦμα (*pneuma*), which is neuter. Going a bit further, Johannes van Oort observes: “An essential background to the occurrence of the Holy Spirit as Mother is, of course, the fact that the Hebrew word for Spirit, ruach, is in nearly all cases feminine. The first

²² Valerie Greer, “Jesus’ Feminine Self-Representation in the New Testament,” CBE International, December 4, 2016, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/jesus-feminine-self-presentation-new-testament>.

²³ Some mothers choose not to, or unable to, nurse. This dissertation casts no judgment on these situations and acknowledges that mothers who bottle feed also give of their bodies sacrificially, as they use them to hold, comfort, and dispense of food.

Christians, all of whom were Jews, took this over. Also in Aramaic the word for Spirit, *rucha*, is feminine.”²⁴ In terms of language use, it seems that both the Hebrews and early Christians commonly referred to God’s Spirit in a feminine way.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) includes the following section in its confession “Brief Statement of Faith” written in 1991:

We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
 everywhere the giver and renewer of life.
 The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,
 sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,
 and binds us together with all believers
 in the one body of Christ, the Church.
 The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles
 rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
 engages us through the Word proclaimed,
 claims us in the waters of baptism,
 feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
 and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.
 In a broken and fearful world
 the Spirit gives us courage
 to pray without ceasing,
 to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
 to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
 to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
 and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.²⁵

In this confession, born out of scripture, the Holy Spirit is named as one who brings new life, feeds God’s people, and works for justice. This sounds just like the comforting, protector Mother God of the Old Testament.

The Holy Spirit is an advocate and a guide, an illuminator and companion. Mothers often take on the role of advocate for their children, knowing what they need before a word is uttered. They discerningly guide their young along the way, making

²⁴ Johannes van Oort. “The Holy Spirit as Feminine,” *Hervormde theologiese studies* 72, no. 1 (August 2016): 1.

²⁵ “Holy Spirit,” Presbyterian Church (U.S.), accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/holy-spirit/>

space for them to walk their own path when it is time. A pastor steps into the role of scripture guide, seeking the Spirit's inspiration as she leads God's people. In many ways, the Holy Spirit is a mother to her children. Noticing God's Spirit in a motherly way is illuminating and refreshing.

The ways in which God reveals God's self throughout scripture is astonishing, showing a God who is not only father, but also mother, loving human beings with a physical and feminine nurturing love. Clearly, God's pursuit of humankind includes pursuit of women, for God reveals God's self in feminine ways regularly, and likens God's character to that of a mother. This intentionality can speak volumes of love to mothering pastors, who are longing for someone to pursue and care for them just as much as they pursue and care for their children and congregations.

God as Father: An Alternative View of Divine Parental Love

Oswald Chambers writes: "Love is not an attribute of God, it is God; whatever God is, love is."²⁶ God is love, no matter how God reveals God's self to God's people, whether as a mother or as a father. When God mothers, her love is not somehow more pure than when God fathers. Just as when God reveals God's self throughout creation, this love is just as true as the love God speaks through a human sermon or pastoral care meeting. This section recognizes that limitlessness of God's love and the unique way God's fatherhood speaks love into peoples' lives.

Without question, the Bible depicts God's fatherhood beautifully as well. Paul's letter to the Galatians passionately expresses the intimacy and compassionate love that

²⁶ Oswald Chambers, *The Love of God: An Intimate Look at the Father-Heart of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1988), 12.

Father God offers his children unconditionally. “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”²⁷ Scripture describes God often in this way, as a Father who cares for his children perfectly. There is an intimacy in this Father-child relationship that surpasses any love that an earthly father could possibly provide. To illustrate further, Henri Nouwen tells the story of Father God in his book

Return of the Prodigal Son:

Here is the God I want to believe in: A Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders. His only desire is to bless.²⁸

All too often, popular illustrations of Father God are ones of harsh judgment and discipline. Juanita R. Ryan reflects on how people tend to view God: “Other people see God as abusive, as a bully. This is the God who carries a big stick and enjoys using it to control, threaten and punish people.”²⁹ Nouwen’s portrayal of God is welcoming, sacrificial, and humble, the opposite of a power-hungry deity who is out to trick its subjects, and actually represents the wider and more frequent ways in which God the Father appears in Scripture.

While one of the goals of this dissertation is to normalize the use of God as mother, particularly as this image pertains to and is a comfort to mothering pastors, I do not aim to demonize the sublime image of God the Father. Certainly, there are many

²⁷ Galatians 4:6-7.

²⁸ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 95-96.

²⁹ Juanita R. Ryan, “Seeing God More Clearly: Healing Distorted Images of God,” *Journal of Christian Nursing: a quarterly publication of Nurses Christian Fellowship* 13, no. 2 (1996): 25.

reasons why some struggle with father images, and mother images for that matter (which we will address later in this chapter), but God as Father and Mother is a start to understanding the beautiful complexities of God. Jennifer M. Buck writes this in a blogpost: “The metaphors for God are graces poured into our lives, allowing us to more intimately know a deeply relational God. Within God’s nature there is room enough for both a Mother and Father. And with both of these metaphors of God we are found, secured, and supported as children of the most loving Parent.³⁰ In the end, God’s pursuit of us means that God will meet us in the metaphors that draw us nearer to God’s self. We can give thanks that God is the perfect parent. With that said, we continue to look at the very biblical, yet less highlighted image of God as mother.

God Loving Women in the Bible

This section takes a slight detour down a path acknowledging how God uniquely loves women in the Bible. The way that God pours out tenderness on women, culturally beneath men at the time, sheds light on how much God values women in the story of redemption and how God’s mothering nature particularly reaches women in the midst of loss, uncertainty and longing.

Nothing is Impossible with God

“And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible

³⁰ Jennifer M. Buck, “Can God Be Father and Mother?: Reflections on Language and Metaphor in Scripture,” *Blog Bible* (blog), May 1, 2017, <https://blog.bible/bible-engagers-blog/entry/can-god-be-a-father-and-mother>.

with God.”³¹ When God’s angel appears to Mary, she is understandably terrified and yet so very brave. The angel reminds her of God’s ability to do anything. How often have children looked to their mothers for answers, believing that she can take care of any problem? How often do parishioners seek their pastor for seemingly impossible questions and complaints? An earthly mother is not able to do anything, despite the fervent beliefs of her young, but God the Mother can. God meets Mary in her fear and redirects her insecurity to a focus on God’s power. By way of a tangible reminder of this power, God gifts Mary with Elizabeth, as we saw in Chapter Two. Elizabeth, barren and elderly, is carrying John and will be a close companion for Mary during her journey of pregnancy. God shows love in practical ways, connecting person with person to demonstrate God’s commitment to making the impossible happen.

God Remembers

Like Elizabeth, barren until the miracle of John began within her, many Biblical women suffered barrenness, longing for their own baby to hold. Sarai, Rachel, and Hannah all cried out to God for answers to their empty wombs. When Hannah finally gave birth to Samuel, she returned him to the LORD out of gratitude. 1 Samuel’s author writes: “Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked him of the LORD.’”³² The LORD *remembered* Hannah. God loves women in the Bible by keeping track of their longings. God does not forget or set aside for more important matters. God knows these women and is mindful of what is nearest to their hearts. When

³¹ Luke 1:37.

³² 1 Samuel 1:20.

a mother remembers her child's desire for a particular book, or a pastor remembers the anniversary of when her parishioner's spouse passed, she is showing a personal love. Remembering requires knowing someone deeply. God knows us deeply and remembers each detail of our hearts.

Wings of Refuge

God's wings of strength and shelter loved Ruth as she showed sacrificial love to her Mother-in-law, Naomi. Boaz blesses Ruth with these words: "May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!"³³ Time and time again, God provides safe space for all God's people, including women. We can imagine enormous eagles' wings, resistant to all the elements, covering women with a tent of protection. A mother prepares a corner for her scared child, with a blanket and a warm drink, her arms ready to hold the child until the storm passes by. A pastor welcomes a hurting congregant into her office, ready with a cup of tea and time to listen. Safe spaces are few and far between in the world. God mothers us with the very safest of places, under her wings for as long as we need.

Image of God

Beyond Traditional Views

This God who loves like a mother throughout scripture can be called "Mother" by her children and has been historically, which the next chapter will explore at length.

³³ Ruth 2:12.

However, the use of “Mother” when referring to God causes some people pause, and others major resistance. The reasons for this range from cultural exposure to negative personal experience and everything in between. Thus, the subtext behind our language usage when we talk about God is complex.

Language use for God matters because it reflects the way human beings perceive God in their minds and in their hearts. Common cultural images of God include that of the old man with a beard looking down on earth and the ever-popular mid-century blonde Jesus by Warner Sallman, painted in 1940. Cameron J. Anderson writes:

In Protestant America, Sallman’s *Head of Christ*—a blue-eyed and Nordic-looking Jesus—occupied a place of honor in countless churches and Christian homes. Some calculate that this painting has been reproduced more than 500 million times. Moreover, having completely penetrated the nation’s postwar mentality, for many the painting functioned as nothing less than an authorized portrait of the Savior.³⁴

Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, is the most physical representation that human beings have of God, and so it makes sense that people would latch on to the artistic depictions of Christ that have permeated our culture. These cultural images become reality for many, and so it is likely that most people would see God in the image of a man. However, Scripture tugs at us to consider a more expansion option when it comes to God’s image. Genesis 1 says this: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”³⁵ Men and women were created in God’s image, therefore God includes but is not limited to male and female characteristics. In other words, God cannot be defined solely by one gender or one picture of divinity.

³⁴ Cameron J. Anderson, *The Faithful Artist: A Vision for Evangelicalism and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 138.

³⁵ Genesis 1:27.

Mother God imagery colors outside the lines of traditional (or at least common) understandings of who God is. However, it is established as scriptural and carried through history as theologians have wrestled with how to speak about God.³⁶ Seeing God in this way both expands our understanding of God and helps us understand ourselves better. This can be true for mothering pastors who have not yet related to God as a reflection of their femininity before.

Difficulty with Mother God Imagery

As inclusive and lovely as the mothering image of God is, not all mothering pastors, in fact not all people, are able to receive this picture of God as they seek a sustaining love in their life. Anna (a pseudonym) struggles to speak about God as mother or father. Having not received any redeeming love from her own parents, Anna prefers to refer to God in nature terms like “Creator,” “Sustainer,” or “Giver of Life.”³⁷ This is the reality of our broken humanity that people carry with them spaces that for one reason or another cannot yet receive healing. Keeping this in mind, and keeping in mind that God’s pursuit is universal, other language for God is welcome as one considers how a mothering pastor might receive God’s love in a fresh and restorative way. Perhaps the simple permission creatively to rest in God’s presence provides a helpful start for the mothering pastor who feels that desperate need for space and joy in her spiritual life, carrying with her wounds that keep her from enjoying certain God language that other Christians find so comforting. Anna’s experience demonstrates that each person has

³⁶ Chapter 4 will address this further.

³⁷ Interview with author, phone call, October 18, 2019.

unique experiences as they relate to God. Mothering pastors as a group are made up of women with a variety of stories and spiritual preferences.

Catherine Skurja beautifully describes God’s image in this way: “There is one God, yet God is so immeasurably loving and creative that his creation constantly changes as he reveals himself in new ways.”³⁸ Creation reflects God, and God is so relentless in God’s love for creation that God is eager to show new sides of her character so that one more human will know that they are treasured and loved. Receiving love as a mothering pastor is certainly not limited to Mother God imagery. God will and does use a variety of holy images to draw people to God’s self.

Mother God: A Gift to Mothering Pastors

Spiritual Formation and Belonging

Considering new and less used images of God creates valuable space for spiritual formation, space where people can experience God in refreshing ways, where they can be reminded that they are loved and that God can do something new in their lives.

Mothering pastors crave this space, and with only the image of God the Father to turn to, that space when rarely offered is missing something. Paul R. Smith makes this stunning statement: “I believe there is a certain point in a woman’s spiritual journey in this day and in culture beyond which she cannot go without coming to embrace God as Mother too. If God is only likened to male, and not female, then women will reach a barrier in the image

³⁸ Catherine Skurja with Jen Johnson, *Paradox Lost: Uncovering Your True Identity in Christ* (North Plains, OR: Imago Dei Ministries, 2012), Kindle Chapter 2.

of the God they worship that prevents further spiritual development.”³⁹ Narrow views of God result in spiritual obstacles. Thus, without a robust Mothering God image, the spiritual lives of women and of course mothering pastors will be left wanting. Mother God as a biblical precedent gives mothering pastors the rest that they yearn for in their lives.

Referring to Psalm 131:1-2, Anne Grizzle writes this: “A nursing baby seeks milk from its mother, but a weaned child just loves sitting on her lap, feeling loved. So often we come to God with requests, seeking something. When we practice solitude, we are like a weaned child with its mother, just *being* with God, feeling his love and his holy gaze of grace.”⁴⁰ This is a remarkable picture of rest, given by Mother God. This scene, as described by Grizzle, portrays absolute contentment, a joy in the presence of God the Mother who sustains and leaves us satisfied. Imagine a woman, active pastor, and mom to small children, entering a space where she can envision God caring for her in this way like a mother. It is a space of refreshment and belonging, a rare treat.

Images, language, and understanding of God’s love in scripture all influence how a child of God experiences belonging and worth. For a mothering pastor, shifting to language and imagery that celebrates God’s Motherhood can be life-changing. Susan Harrison reflects on her own experience of discovering this side of God’s personhood:

Language has made all the difference for my feeling of inclusion in the family of God. So what would it mean for me and all Christian women if God could be Mother sometimes, too? If God could even be a She? My hypothesis was that

³⁹ Smith, *Is It Ok to Call God “Mother,”* 155-56.

⁴⁰ Anne Grizzle, “Solitude,” in *Lifelong Leadership* by MaryKate Morse (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2020), 74.

praying to God as Mother would raise the self-esteem of Christian women who did it.⁴¹

How can Christians not explore images of God that lead to a persons' deepened belonging in the Lord? If making use of God as Mother language and imagery draws mothering pastors into places of belonging and spiritual renewal, then by all means let us make this shift. For without belonging and spiritual renewal, mothering pastors will spin into exhaustion, relying on their own strength to power through at home and in their churches. The need here is an urgent one.

Rest and Love for Mothering Pastors

“For thus says the LORD: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”⁴² These words from Isaiah capture both the enormity and tenderness of the Lord’s love for Israel. Here in this ancient text we find a description of God our Mother, powerful and feminine at the same time, planning fulfillment for her children and raising them in divine love that knows no bounds.⁴³

Pastors preach this text to their congregations, reminding them of God’s mighty arm and intimate embrace. They long for their people to know this kind of mothering love, even if they do not name it as such. Steve Simon, pastor and author, describes the

⁴¹ Susan Harrison, “What Is the Mother God Experiment?” *The Mother God Experiment: Embracing the Feminine Image of God in the Bible and in Women*. (Blog), accessed March 18, 2021, <https://www.mothergodexperiment.com/what-is-the-mother-god-experiment/>.

⁴² Isaiah 66:13.

⁴³ Chapter 5 will provide an in-depth exegesis of this text from Isaiah.

experience of hearing God's voice in this soft, surprising way: "So, rather than expecting God's voice to be some kind of booming, heavenly declaration, we need to learn to listen for those gentle whispers."⁴⁴ Just like the people they serve, ministers need to hear God's gentle whispers to their souls as they work overtime to show compassion to their flocks. Mothers, likewise, read this text and it strikes their hearts, for this is the world in which they exist. They long for their children to prosper and they will do what is necessary to keep them safe. In strength they protect and in gentle caresses they nurture and tend. They whisper to their young words of hope and comfort.

Those who inhabit the shared role of mother and pastor experience this text even more poignantly. Their longing to be the child on the Lord's lap, the holy Mother God feeding them and keeping them secure is palpable as they strive to provide this same care for church and home. The traditional structures that exist to care for pastors and the resources available to mothers only go so far in meeting the unique spiritual needs of the mothering pastor. By engaging with the biblical and historical pattern of emphasizing God's maternal image alongside God's paternal side, we begin to see a picture of the Divine that can speak a special comfort to pastors who mother.

Given the overwhelming need for mothering pastors to receive mothering love as a balm to their spiritual longings, the biblical imagery of God as a mother proves enormously beneficial. Mother God imagery in the Bible is widespread, although in recent centuries the Father God image has received much more attention, and while God as Father is a powerful way to consider the Creator, God as a maternal being provides for

⁴⁴ Steve C. Simon, *Holy Walks: Learning and Praying the Psalms* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 49.

the mothering pastor who craves a gentle voice speaking over her words of peace and rest.

Conclusion

That God has chosen to reveal God's self in a variety of ways and through the human experience of gender is stunning and creative, a limitless outpouring of love upon humanity. God's revelation through motherhood demonstrates an embodied love, characteristic of God's patterns throughout scripture. Through the person of Christ, God showed love in the form of a human male body, relating perfectly to humanity while remaining divine. Embodied love is God's mode of operation. As such, God also chooses to show up as a mothering being to her children, also in a remarkably human manner.

Phyllis Tribble writes:

God conceives in the womb; God fashions in the womb; God judges in the womb; God destines in the womb; God brings forth from the womb; God receives out of the womb; and God carries from the womb to gray hairs. From this uterine perspective, then Yahweh molds life for individuals and for the nation Israel. Accordingly, in biblical traditions an organ unique to the female becomes a vehicle pointing to the compassion of God.⁴⁵

God shows compassion, womb-love, to humankind in an embodied way through the life-giving organ of a woman. One could hardly imagine a more intimate way for God to bring about redemption in the world. The womb is beautiful, messy, and miraculous, and it belongs to women, historically treated as second best in scripture and tradition. And within this second-best, human part, God facilitates first-rate, life-altering love to God's people.

⁴⁵ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 38.

Mothering pastors are yearning for embodied love, for spiritual encouragement that comes from a place of understanding and compassion. This chapter has laid the biblical groundwork for establishing that God has acted and continues to act as a Mother to her children, providing what I hope is deep encouragement for clergy mothers, as they recognize that the love God has for them comes from God's very depths, from God's womb and mothering arms. The next chapter will continue this theme into historical and theological support for God as Mother in the Christian tradition, strengthening further the argument that God mothers as well as fathers God's children.

Addendum: A Spiritual Exercise

God Mothering Me

Find a comfortable place to sit or lay down.⁴⁶ Remove distractions and turn out the lights. Read the following Scripture from Psalm 145:8-9:

“The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he [she] has made.”

Take a few minutes of silence and begin to imagine crawling into God's mothering arms like a child. Enjoy resting there. Maybe put a blanket over your shoulders as a physical reminder of God's sheltering wings. It is completely comfortable. God is stroking your hair and you can finally relax.

After some time, when you are ready, give your burdens to God. Like a mother, God is asking you to trust her with everything going on in your heart. One by one, tell

⁴⁶ This practice is inspired by a spiritual invitation suggested to me by my Spiritual Director, Kathy Finley. A few years ago, she invited me to consider God's mothering arms when I went to pray, a new way to experience God's love. I have now adapted the image she gave me into this practice, which I do personally with frequency now.

God what worries you and say: “God, I give you _____ and trust you to take care of this situation and me as I wait upon you.”

Continue to rest after you talk with God. This space is for you, to be mothered by God.

After a while, open your eyes, thank God for this space and remember that you can return to this any time.

CHAPTER FOUR:

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A MOTHERING GOD

Introduction

My mother, my daughter, Life-giving Eve,
 Do not be ashamed, do not grieve,
 The former things have passed away,
 Our God has brought us to a New Day.
 See, I am with Child.
 Through whom all will be reconciled.
 O Eve, My sister, my friend,
 We will rejoice together
 Forever
 Life without end.

—O Eve! - *Sister of Mississippi Abbey 2004*¹

A woman comforted by another woman, great with child—*the* Child! Thus, goes the female story, over and over again making connections and offering healing through their very bodies. These are the women through whom God chooses to reveal God's self mysteriously and beautifully. God's redemptive creativity never ceases to surprise and comfort. And yet, the human tendency is to reduce God to the expected, resisting imagination in order to keep the categories that give us security. The common cultural telling of the Christian salvation story goes something like this: God the big *man* in the sky was upset with humankind (especially women because Eve ate the apple) so *he* sent *his* son to save the world. This narrative, while based in much truth, misses the mark when it comes to expressing, albeit in human terms, God's creativity and the possibilities that exist for a God beyond our human categories of gender. The opening poem retells the

¹ Companion to a *Crayon & pencil drawing by Sr. Grace Remington, OCSO.*
 Copyright 2005, *Sisters of the Mississippi Abbey*

salvation story from a female perspective, giving voice to the women whose place in history made a way for Jesus through his Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension. The connectional bond between Eve and Mary is like no other human bond in Scripture, for they are tied together by human sin and Divine provision.

This biblical story exists in tandem with the theological themes and historical experiences of the church. They are intertwined and cannot be separated. Our Christian journey throughout the ages is influenced by Scripture and Scripture in turn is read through the eyes of our theological and historical lenses. What follows in this chapter is an in-depth look at how historical figures and theologians, rooted in Scripture, have helped the church envision God as a mother, as well as some of the perspectives that reject this practice.

The conversation is a controversial one, despite the overwhelming scriptural evidence presented in Chapter Three. It is controversial in part because so much of our culture relies on a male lens through which to view everything, from human experience to God's nature. Mothering pastors, among many other groups of people, suffer spiritually from this practice because their understanding of God is reinforced by society to be small and particularly male. The following theological and historical journey will further support use of a mothering God in personal spirituality as well as institutional liturgical settings, allowing space for the mothering pastor to feel a greater depth of God's love for her.

Ruth Haley Barton reminds us of our shared humanity as we start down this path. "There is something deeply spiritual about honoring the limitations of our existence as

human beings – physical and spiritual creatures in a world of time and space.”² And so our posture is one of humility and wonder. Let us proceed.

Historical Foundations

When my husband teaches a course on Church History, he is fond of describing it as a “flying leap over 2,000 years.” Authors have devoted entire books to the topic of women in Church history and thousands of pages to the way gender language for God has evolved through the stories of God’s people.³ This section is a flying leap, taking examples from history where notable Christians have used feminine and mothering language to speak of God. These examples are not exhaustive; however, this broad sample gives strong evidence for the use of such language throughout history and not simply as a postmodern detour from traditional church descriptions of God. In fact, God as a mother *is* a traditional (if one means by this “handed down from age to age”⁴) way of referring to God and God’s character as I will show in the following sections.

Ancient

Speaking of tradition, use of Mother God language dates to the earliest writings in the Christian church. A mere century after Paul’s Letters, feminine metaphors for God started showing up in the writings of church fathers like Clement of Alexandria, John

² Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 133.

³ See the sources in these footnotes for broader treatments of these topics.

⁴ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Traditional,” accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/traditional>.

Chrysostom, and Augustine, to name a few.⁵ For these early theologians and church servants, it made perfect sense to describe God in mothering terms. God's vastness included, among other things, feminine imagery that so aptly described intimacy between God and humankind. Additionally, their worldview held that God surpassed gender. We cannot say that God is man or God is woman. God is God and takes on characteristics to reach God's people. Rosemary Ruether writes: "The Syriac and Greek fathers are clear, however, that gender images for God in no way makes God either male or female. Gender images, like all other images (such as bird, water, fire) are taken from our bodily experience and applied metaphorically to God."⁶ Clement of Alexandria's (150 A.D. to around 211 A.D.) work has many examples of this perspective, including: "The Word is everything to his little ones, both father and mother, educator and nurse."⁷ The Scriptural pattern of God our mother continued heartily in the early church as Christians sought ways to speak and write about their God who addressed them purposefully and personally.

Medieval and Early Modern Mystics

During the middle centuries of the last two millennium, mystics took the lead in mothering and feminine imagery for God, as they put their visions to paper and gifted the Church with remarkable experiences of God's love. Julian of Norwich and Teresa of

⁵ Mimi Haddad, "Evidence for and Significance of Feminine God-Language from the Church Fathers to the Modern Era," CBE International, July 30, 2004, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/evidence-and-significance-feminine-god-language>.

⁶ Rosemary Ruether, *Goddesses and The Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, ebook: 2005), 124-125.

⁷ *Clement of Alexandria Christ the Educator*, trans. Simon P. Wood, in *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 40.

Avila are notable examples of mystics who leaned into imagery that highlighted God as a mother.

Julian of Norwich, a mystic nun living in the fourteenth century, experienced God through unique and vibrant visions. God spoke intimately to her, revealing her maternal image and nature to this woman devoted to God and God's church. Julian shares her vision of God in *Showing of Love*: "And the second Person of the Trinity is our Mother in nature in our substantial making, in whom we are grounded and rooted. . . . Thus in our Father God Almighty we have our being. And in our Mother of mercy we have our reforming and restoring in whom our parts are oned, and all made perfect man."⁸ Here we see an echo of the word "mercy" which comes from the word that also means womb, and Julian attaches that word to the mothering character of God. According to Julian of Norwich, God's mothering mercy heals us and makes us whole, centers us and unifies us. She goes on to say, "We know that all our mothers bear us is to pain and to dying. And what is that? But our true Mother Jesus, he all love, bears us to joy and to endless living, blessed must he be."⁹ Julian even adds the descriptor "mother" to Jesus¹⁰, who came as a human male to dwell with us on earth. Certainly, she knows Jesus was a man, and she sees in Jesus a mothering quality, a sacrificial and watchful component of God with us, Immanuel. A mother knows suffering, and a mother knows joy, and our God is a God of tensions, holding both pain and celebration as she nurtures and guides her children.

⁸ Julian of Norwich, *Showing of Love*, trans. Julia Bolton Holloway (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 87-88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰ For a more robust treatment of Jesus as Mother, see Carolyn Walker Bynum. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

Lucy Reid comments further on the reason for Julian's frequent use of God as mother: "For Julian, it is absolutely necessary to use the image of motherhood if she is to convey what was revealed to her about the nature of God and God's love."¹¹ Julian's experience of God was completely wrapped up in an experience of being mothered. Through God's mothering love, Julian felt real love from God. Her use of mother language was not a theological plan, it was her only option.

Teresa of Avila¹² in the sixteenth century likewise wrote about how God initiated love and belonging in her life. For her, she did not understand herself to have manifested this love, rather she was a recipient and to experience God's love in this way required total surrender. Megan Lovmagne comments: "To seek for spiritual pleasure through one's own initiative instead of accepting whatever God provides is a manifestation of pride and an inability to release control, according to Teresa."¹³ The mystics teach us that when humans take this posture of humility and allow God to speak, God reveals God's self in the most imaginative ways, including as a mother. So often our modern postures are ones of rigidity and self-reliance. Experiencing God's love begins with rest and open hands.

The mystics gave the church a wide and beautifully creative vision of God's love, but this vision was not at all limited to comfort and security. As Virginia Mollenkott observes in *The Divine Feminine*: "Male writers have almost always associated female

¹¹ Lucy Reid, *She Changes Everything: Seeking the Divine on a Feminist Path* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), ebook Chapter 1.

¹² While there is very little if no reference to God as Mother explicitly in Teresa of Avila's work, her language for God is intimate and tender, expressing a closeness that is like that of a mother and child.

¹³ Megan Lovmagne, "Theresa of Avila on Theology and Shame," *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1081 (2018): 400.

God-images with stereotypically feminine nurturance and supportiveness. It is in female mystics, especially Gertrude of Helfta, that we find female God-images associated with discipline and authority as well as with tenderness.”¹⁴ This pattern echoes the scriptural account of God as mother, where we see God mothering in fierce and protective ways. God mothers in a layered and complex way, often bending, and even breaking, human gender stereotypes.

The Reformation and Early Modern Period

Unfortunately, the spiritual trends of the Middle Ages did not transfer seamlessly to the Reformation years. Within the Catholic Church, women had a vocational role and were often given a theological voice, although not perfectly so. As the Reformation took shape and the budding Protestant Church formed its structures, women were most valued in the role of wife and mother and in that space, they did not have much official spiritual influence. Thus, the ample use of Mother God language in the Middle Ages waned as men took a more central role in church leadership. Karin Stetina makes several observations about this time of transition:

Scholars have been tempted to either celebrate or lament these changes, seeing them as either a radical movement towards liberating women or as a reinforcement of gender inequality. Historical and theological evidence, however, provides a much more complicated picture of the impact of the Reformation on women's roles—one that should be both celebrated and at times lamented. We should celebrate the recovery of the biblical understanding of the ontological equality of men and women, the priesthood of all believers, and the value of

¹⁴ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 52.

marriage. We should lament the loss of opportunities for women to commit their lives to the formal study of Scripture and service of the church.¹⁵

The gap that Stetina mentions is evident as history unfolds, but the voices that used feminine language for God were not extinguished completely.

In the sixteenth century, as the church shifted after the Reformation, new Protestant ministers were beginning to get married. Men and women who previously took vows of chastity within the Catholic Church found themselves reimagining their callings as they entered into marriage relationships. Katharina Schütz and Matthew Zell were two such people. As her husband took on the role of minister, Katharina began writing letters of encouragement and instruction for other new Protestant women who were forging new paths. She became a spiritual director of sorts in a time when women in the protestant church had lost their official vocational role in the church. Elsie McKee says this of Katharina Zell's letters: "...she balances [masculine language for God] with feminine imagery for God and likens the God who loves and has chosen the women of Kentzington to a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15)."¹⁶ Zell was effectively a mother minister in her time, lifting up God's motherhood as a way of speaking life and encouragement into the lives of other women.

Even well-known male reformers made use of Mother God language, especially in their commentaries on Scripture. John Calvin says this of Isaiah 42: ". . . for God loves very differently than men, that is, more fully and perfectly, and, although he surpasses all human affections, yet nothing that is disorderly belongs to him . . . far then as relates to

¹⁵ Karin Stetina, "What the Reformation Did and Didn't Do For Women," The Good Book Blog (blog), October 31, 2017, <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2017/what-the-reformation-did-and-didn-t-do-for-women>.

¹⁶ Katherine Schutz Zell and Elise McKee, *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006 ebook), 49.

love, he says that God resembles a mother; so far as relates to power, he says that he resembles a lion or a giant.”¹⁷ Calvin understood that God’s love was wide and beyond human categories, and yet human categories are all we possess and so we use them with discernment. It seems that the love of God, for Calvin, was best understand as a mothering love.

The Moravians in the 1750s specifically used Mother God language when they spoke of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. One of their leaders, Count Zinzendorf modeled this for their community. Craig Atwood comments on his theology: “According to Zinzendorf, the name that best communicated the reality of the Spirit’s relationship to Christians is simply ‘Mother.’”¹⁸ Atwood goes on to say that their theology of the Holy Spirit stemmed from the Nicodemus story and new birth, where the Holy Spirit labors to bring about new life, like a mother. Additionally, the Holy Spirit midwifed the Church into existence in the same motherly manner.¹⁹ The Spirit mothering the Church into transformation. This is a powerful picture of God’s maternal love, and certainly not a passive one. God’s mothering love is active, creative, and bold.

A Vignette: Susanna Wesley and Eva Hansen. During this period in history, women were serving in creative spiritual ways, not unlike any other era. While Susanna Wesley is not known for writing about feminine God imagery, her life does model that of a mothering minister, and so it is worth a few comments in this dissertation to highlight her story within the larger church narrative.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah* (N.p.: Ravenio Books, 2012), Kindle, Chapter title: “Isaiah 42”

¹⁸ Craig Atwood, “The Mother of God’s People: The Adoration of the Holy Spirit in the Eighteenth-Century Brüdergemeine,” *Church History* 68 no. 4 (December 1999): 890.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Charles Wallace, editor of Susanna's writings, points out that Susanna Wesley, married to Samuel and mother of nineteen children (several of whom died in infancy), not only provided spiritual care for her own household, she also stepped in at church when her husband was away travelling. Samuel was suspect of this behavior and criticized Susanna. Here is her response in a letter to Samuel sometime around 1711:

As I am a woman, so I am also mistress of a large family. And though the superior charge of the souls contained in it lies upon you, as head of the family, and as their minister, yet in your absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care as a talent committed to me under a trust by the great Lord of all the families of heaven and earth.²⁰

Susanna felt compelled to care for the souls in her community, to love them as a mother and to look after their spiritual lives.

In the early years of the twentieth Century, my own great-grandmother, Eva Staab Hansen, lived with her family in the small town of Mullen, Idaho. The town had a little Episcopal chapel that would be visited by an itinerant priest from time to time. During the priest's absence, Eva assumed the role of church "reader," leading prayers, and a short service for the people of the town. Like Susanna Wesley, Eva filled in the gap with her own spiritual leadership. These stories of mothers supplying ministerial support for local flocks illustrate how women uniquely provide as shepherds in the church, watching out for the souls around them.

The Late Modern Period to Present

In the 1800s, Hannah Whitall Smith of the Holiness tradition shared her understanding of God's nature in *The God of All Comfort*. Once again, we observe a bold

²⁰ Original Letter, Charles Wallace, Jr. ed., *Complete Works of Susanna Wesley*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

female compelled to share her experience of God. She writes: “But God is not only a father, He is a mother as well, and we have all of us known mothers whose love and tenderness have been without bound or limit.”²¹ Smith acknowledges the completeness of God, not only man and not only woman. God is whole and holds all our humanity within his being. This picture of God’s love which surpasses all barriers powerfully portrays the mothering side of the Creator. Without diminishing the vast love of a father, Smith is touching on that intimate connection between the doting mother and her adored child, a mysterious and holy bond that ties mother to babe from the very moment of conception.

Smith’s personal experiences influenced her theology and understanding of God.

Debra Campbell writes:

Smith’s discovery of the mother-hearted God was a gradual, intensely personal process, begun in the pain engendered by the deaths of her children and the dissolution of her marriage, and nurtured by her experience of solidarity with an expanding network of women reformers who shared her belief that suffering and injustice could not possibly be the will of a mother-hearted God.²²

The next section will look at the theological basis for God as mother, but for now we acknowledge that like Hannah Smith, personal experience goes a long way toward framing our view of God. Smith embraced a mothering God as a way of viewing and finding healing from her own suffering. Over a century later, Pope John Paul I would say this about suffering and God as our parent: “We know: he has always his eyes open on us, even when it seems to be dark. He is our father; even more he is our mother. He does

²¹ Hannah Whitall Smith, *The God of All Comfort* (N.p.: CreateSpace, 2017), Chapter 5.

²² Debra Campbell, “Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911): ‘Theology of the Mother-Hearted God,’” *The University of Chicago Press Journals* 15 no. 1 (Autumn 1989): 100.

not want to hurt us, he wants only to do good to us.”²³ God mothers us in our darkest places, meeting us where we are at and providing for us in astounding ways.

The women in this church history account, and the thousands more whose stories permeate our Christian ancestry, are subversive, time and time again. Women like Julian of Norwich, Katharina Zell, and Susanna Wesley pushed against boundaries, from how they experienced God to how they served the church even in unofficial capacities and in secretive ways. The mothering pastor type is a continuation of this subversion, for she comes from a long line of women who had to break rules to love God’s people. People who must live subversively are thirsty for a special kind of spiritual care and renewal, something they cannot receive from conventional structures. Their spiritual care must be a kind of subversion as well. Theology can help lay the groundwork for more imaginative, subversive ways of understanding God that will lead to more meaningful spiritual formation.

A Theological Conversation: Language and Imagery for God

While theological language and systems have informed the historical trends discussed in this chapter, this next section seeks to highlight theology in its own right, reflecting on the following questions: How do Christians think of and find words for God, and how does female and mothering language for God give voice to women in general and mothering pastors specifically? Answering these questions requires a comfort with tension as well as a willingness to go deep into the mysterious chasm of how God relates to us as humans in an embodied way. Let us adopt this posture as we further

²³ Pope John Paul I, “Angelus, Sunday September 10, 1978,” http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-i/en/angelus/documents/hf_jp-i_ang_10091978.html.

explore maternal language for God and the implications of it for spiritual health among mothering pastors.

Paradox is Permitted

Embracing paradox as the norm provides an important starting place for a sound theological conversation about language for God. Jesuit Max Odiva encourages an openness to multiple ways of understanding and speaking about and to God. He writes: “. . . we need not feel limited in how we relate to God and God’s love. Sometimes I pray to God as Father. . . . Sometimes I experience the gentle love of God, as coming from a mother. . . .”²⁴ Margaret Hebblethwaite also suggests that less rigidity around God-language is not only helpful but also necessary. She operates with the following assumptions:

Two important principles from the art of theological conversation have determined the methodology of this book. Firstly, theologians are aware that when we talk about God we use analogy. This means that we can use many different images or models for understanding God without worrying too much about how they all fit together. I can call God ‘she’ all the way through this book, and yet say ‘he’ when I next go to church, without any sense of discordance. I can call God ‘mother’ and yet pray the ‘Our Father’, without any sense of inconsistency. It is only an analogy. It is to help us.”²⁵

So instead of insisting on use of either father language or mother language for God, the most faithful practice is to use both. For some people, father language will help draw them nearer to God’s love, and for others, introducing less-used mothering language is transformative in how they experience God’s care for their lives. I believe this is often true for women when they begin to hear God spoken of in terms of their own gender.

²⁴ Max Odiva, *The God of Many Loves* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2001), 35.

²⁵ Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 128.

Embodied Theology

God's existence is not limited to words and concepts, because God entered the world as a human, and we should trust that God's embodiment extends beyond that of Jesus Christ as a man on earth. To conceive of God as a woman, and even further as a mother, implies that God has gender. Many theologians agree that though God transcends gender, God also can take on gendered characteristics (here is the paradox that we need to embrace). Aida Besancon aptly writes: "God is the source of everything, including gender. Therefore, males and females are both needed to reflect God's image. Consequently, God is identified with a variety of characteristics and culturally gendered roles of both females *and* males, identifying with both genders."²⁶

That said, the importance of gender and God's relationship to humanity cannot be ignored. Gender is a large part of how humans experience themselves and other human beings in their communities. So, when we consider the embodiment of God, gender must be a part of the conversation. Sarah Coakley speaks to why this is important: "Here gender 'matters' primarily because it is about *differentiated, embodied relationship*—first and foremost to God, but also to others; and its meaning is therefore fundamentally given in relation to the human's role as made in the 'image of God' (Genesis 1.26-27)."²⁷ In other words, God is more than a concept or words on a page. God is real and can be authentically experienced by humans.

²⁶ Aida Besancon Spencer, "Does God Have Gender?" *Priscilla Papers, the Academic Journal of CBE International* (Spring 2010), <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/does-god-have-gender>.

²⁷ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 53. Note: This is an excellent resource for further exploration into the ontology of God.

One way that God shows up to humans, and in a special way to women and mothers, is through the bodily events of pregnancy and birth. Episcopalian priest, Paula Cooper-White, whose theological understanding of the sacraments highlights the feminine in God's redemption of the world writes, "Images of birth have long held power and meaning in Christian theology. Indeed, the sacrament of baptism has birth as its central metaphor. What more powerful image of the flowering of human sexuality into birth than the ritual in the Great Vigil of Easter, plunging the Pascal candle into the baptismal font, from which the catechumens will then arise newly born of water and spirit."²⁸ These liturgical rituals are packed with feminine imagery, as the newly converted experience a rebirth, a coming out from God as a babe would emerge from a mother's womb. Thus, we cannot understand God's love without considering the powerful and life-giving role of a mother. Harkening back to Jesus forming in and bursting forth from Mary's womb, Cooper-White reminds us that our very life comes from waters of rebirth.

A Spiritual Pause: Rest as Embodied Love. Birth imagery is a powerful tool in spiritual practice because it is painfully raw and joyously peaceful at the same time. Virginia Mollenkott speaks to this experience: "The idea in natural childbirth is to learn to relax, to breathe rhythmically, to cooperate with the body. Similarly, the process of becoming more Christ-like is eased by learning to be patient with ourselves, working in harmony with our bodies rather than punishing them for the sake of what we imagine to

²⁸ Pamela Cooper-White, "Becoming a Clergy Mother: A Study of How Motherhood Changes Ministry," *Alban at Duke Divinity School* (blog), July 7, 2004, <http://alban.org/archive/becoming-a-clergy-mother-a-study-of-how-motherhood-changes-ministry/>.

be spiritual progress.”²⁹ In a world that values tireless productivity, the natural ebb and flow of labor models a way of being as people who are resting in God’s goodness as they encounter spiritual roadblocks. Here is a short spiritual exercise designed to invite mothering pastors into a pattern of giving energy and resting:

- Begin each day with a few moments of mindfulness, asking your body what it needs for this day. Is this a day to rest or is this a day to, with God’s help, give extra energy to your family and church? Give thanks to God for the answer that you receive.
- If this is a day for work, continue in silence and remember . . .
 - Pushing yourself too hard will not serve your family or your church.
 - God is mothering you with her strength throughout this day. Turn to her for joy, creativity, and courage.
- If this is a day for rest, pause for a moment longer and consider the following. . .
 - Rest is included in God’s design for humanity. Just as a woman rests even in hard labor, so you can rest in this day as a break from your busy and demanding week.
 - Rest will nourish you to give more faithfully tomorrow.
- You may repeat this exercise throughout the day, for some days are for work and rest.

Theology must flow from embodied reality, and the theology that supports a mothering God certainly does. It takes heady concepts and transforms them into a tangible person who desires deeply to relate to her children, to give them shelter, rest, and

²⁹ Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine*, 17.

courage. Theologically, there is every reason to embark on the practice of praying to God as a mother and to imagining God in a feminine way that invites a mothering pastor's own feminine experience into meaningful relationship and spiritual renewal.

When Father Language is Hard and Other Practical Theological Implications

More Than One Way to Talk about God. I shared a story in Chapter Three of a woman for whom father and mother language was difficult. For many people, men, and women alike, father language in particular can be uncomfortable and even traumatic.

Roberta Bondi comments on how this plays out in language use:

For so many of us the language of God the Father, and our own painful experiences of ourselves and our human fathers, are tangled together. So many of us think we have no choice at all but to cut off great chunks of ourselves as we handle the pain, by either refusing to call God father at all, or by using father language without allowing ourselves (or others) to question what this language means to us.³⁰

She goes on to say:

Pastors especially have a responsibility to make sure that the language of worship does not hurt people, nor make God distant. I believe this means both that we must be extremely cautious in the use of Father language and that we must deliberately seek out and strengthen the use of other names and images of God for people who are suffering over Father language.³¹

One of the results of considering a theological understanding of God as Mother is an openness to alternative names for God, like Bondi suggests. The implications for ministry in the church is enormous, because it means that leaders have options for their people when one name for God sets off a trigger. This practice of showing people new language

³⁰ Roberta C. Bondi, "Be Not Afraid: Praying to God the Father," *Modern Theology* 9 no. 3 (July 1993): 238.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

for God can lead to greater spiritual belonging, which is a particular need among mothering pastors.

Changing Culture and Creating Space. Something happens culturally when people are invited to use mother language for God. There is a shift in perspective and imagination, because suddenly God has traits that she did not have before. Lee Ann Pomrenke makes this observation:

If we called God mother, we would have to acknowledge more often the incredible balancing acts mothers do all the time, and seek out those skilled multi-taskers for leadership. Instead of looking sideways at clergy mothers, assessing their split attention or empathy as liabilities, the church could recognize *this* is exactly the bold leadership we need.³²

By now, we have established that Mother God language is present throughout Scripture, history and theological practice, however it seems to still be considered an alternative to the norm, Father. Speaking of God in a maternal ways pushes boundaries. It is subversive and risky, and again, this is what the church needs if it is to provide spiritual care for women and mothering pastors.

Mystics in the Middle Ages were already practicing this shift, as noted in the above historical section. Carolyn Walker Bynam goes so far as to say:

Medieval images of the maternal also stressed mother-love as instinctive and fundamental: the mother is tender and loving, sometimes dying to give the child life; she tempts or disciplines only with the welfare of the child in mind. . . . It was peculiarly appropriate to a theological emphasis on an accessible and tender God, a God who bleeds and suffers less as a sacrifice or restoration of cosmic order than as a stimulus to human love.³³

³² Lee Ann Pomrenke, “3 Ways That Calling God ‘Mother’ Transforms Us,” *Sojourners*, August 3, 2019, <https://sojo.net/articles/3-ways-calling-god-mother-transforms-us>

³³ Carolyn Walker Bynam, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 133.

A maternal God longing to show her people deep, authentic love is a theological shift from a God of judgment who had to make things right in order to save his people from death. While the second sentence conveys some truth, it also carries with it a harsh way of experiencing God. It lacks intimacy and tenderness, whereas a theology that emphasizes God's mothering love beckoning her children into joy and new life is a theology that is creative and leaves much more room for people experiencing God in new ways.

The use of feminine language for God can impact women personally in a profound way. Lucy Reid writes this: "But when God is she, there is more than a shift in vocabulary; the very air that we breathe is changed. I recognize something of myself in God, and see something of God in me."³⁴ When God is only a man, it is hard for women to picture how they were made in his image, but when we speak of God as a she there is a new belonging, a personal welcome of sorts that whispers to the woman, "You are important to God. God loves you." Imagine the implications of this for spiritual formation and care for mothering pastors. Not only is God a mother, she is also a creator of community and inclusion, space for being and experiencing one's humanity with God and not in opposition to God. Christian scripture, history, and theology are rich with feminine imagery of God. This often-untapped picture of God has much to offer the mothering pastor, especially as she receives and responds to God's offering of love.

³⁴ Reid, *She Changes Everything*, 21.

Alternative Views

Not all Christians and theologians are comfortable with feminine language for God. They argue that such language is unbiblical and idolatrous. The biblical images sited in this dissertation would be considered only metaphors for God and not part of God's identity. Simon Chan differentiates between metaphors for God and actual names for God. He writes: "Feminine images are used throughout Scripture to describe God's compassionate and loving nature. . . . But it's important to note that God is never addressed as Mother."³⁵ For Chan, likening God to a mother hen is acceptable, but to say that God actually is a mother is heretical. This belief likely stems from the way Jesus addresses his Father in the New Testament. Bruce J. Malina dives into the cultural context of Jesus' use of Father language, writing: "If Jesus called God 'Father,' then what he did was apply kinship terminology to the God of Israel, the central and focal symbol of Israel's traditional and practical religion."³⁶ It is understandable that Jesus would choose to speak within this deeply rooted and established cultural pattern.³⁷

Others want to push against feminist trends, making claims that Mother God language comes from feminist theology that has no basis in scripture or tradition. Elizabeth Achtemeier argues: "There is, however, a great difference between feminism as fairness and feminism as ideology. . . . By attempting to change the biblical language used

³⁵ Simon Chan, "Why We Call God Father," *Christianity Today* 57 no. 6 (August 13, 2013): 48.

³⁶ Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (Milton Park, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 1996), ebook.

³⁷ That said, Jesus' use of "Abba" for the Father is intimate. Tina Ostrander writes in *Our Father Who Art in Heaven*: "None of Jesus' contemporaries have dared to use the term 'Abba' (daddy) to speak to Almighty God. Yet Jesus himself invites Christians to share in his relationship of close personal intimacy with the Father" (Our Father Who Art in Heaven | CBE (cbeinternational.org, January 1999). To call God "mother" would have seemed to the surrounding culture to be worship of a female deity. "Abba" is far more tender and familial than the traditional "father" language of the time.

of the deity, then feminists have in reality exchanged the true God for those deities which are ‘no gods,’ as Jeremiah puts it (2.11).”³⁸ While Achtemeier seems to support equality for women in the Christian tradition, she is concerned that calling God a mother is making God an idol.

People who hold the above views are concerned with faithfulness to God’s Word and the tradition of the Church. However, one can easily argue that so are the many people cited in this chapter. Another approach to language for God is possible here, for people who are not used to such language but might be open to what it could mean for their spirituality. By beginning with frequent use of the metaphors for God in Scripture, a person could start to experience God in a fresh and yet biblically rooted way. Christians do not need to change the traditional language for the Trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit) in order to speak about God as a mother. Once again, the mystery of God is paradoxical. We can remain true to the Trinitarian relationship *and* we can pray to a mothering God.

Conclusion

Continuing the Paradox as Spiritual Practice

Mothers are no strangers to paradox and tension. Like the poetic image in this chapter’s introduction depicting the mysterious tension of Eve, newly separated from God, hand in hand with Mary, the one who would bear the Savior who would heal the wound that Eve so deeply feels in her heart, mothers hold space for pain and joy. Pastors are called to do the same, for our story as people of God is riddled with varied emotions

³⁸ Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Institute Essay: Why God is Not Mother,” *Christianity Today* 37 no. 9 (August 16, 1992): 16.

and experiences. We can grieve a death and feel grateful for new possibilities at the same time. In this, our humanity, we are made in the image of God who is herself mysterious and paradoxical.

Margaret Hebblethwaite says this of mothers, and it rings true for mothering pastors as well: “But perhaps most of all she needs a way of self-understanding that will unite her torn feelings, and form a bridge between the hopes and promises of the past and the disillusion of the present. I believe this way can be found in God our mother.”³⁹ The maternal God creates room for the mothering pastor that Father God often cannot. Perhaps it is in a space of paradox that mothering pastors might find permission to rest in a way they could not before.

Rest in a Maternal God

Historical and theological evidence shows a God who is desperate to meet her people where they are, and this God will be a mother to her children so that they can be awash her in love. Hannah Whitall Smith suggests that “God’s part is always to run after us.”⁴⁰ God pursues God’s children. A scene comes to mind of a mother running after and collecting her children, gathering them in for rest, food, and sleep. This theme permeates not only the biblical story, from the wanderings of Israel to the attention Jesus gives the lost in the Gospels, but also the historical narrative and theological revelations from God. The key to receiving God’s love is to first recognize that God desires deeply to be with God’s children. God chases after longing souls, including the longing soul of the mothering pastor. Mothers in the throes of ministry and childrearing easily and

³⁹ Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood*, 65.

⁴⁰ Hannah Whitall Smith, *The God of All Comfort*, 5.

understandably forget this truth, that they are pursued and desired by God. The image of Mother God touches and actively seeks the hearts of the mothering pastor in an important way that shows her the comfort and nurture she so desires.

Author Kathy Finley imagines herself as a child on God's lap, with God smiling upon her and taking delight in her presence. She finds this picture powerful because it reminds her how much God loves her.⁴¹ It reminds her also that she has freedom to play and let go of responsibilities. This is a gift that a mother gives a child, to release burdens as they are cherished for simply being. The language of this relationship is intimate in nature. The Bible speaks of God nursing God's children at the breast. In this bond comes space to be fed, connection with the Holy One, and unconditional love. Julian of Norwich experienced this love through vivid and personal visions, her descriptions so graphic one almost feels like an intruder as they read her accounts.

Mothering pastors are present in the pulpit and in hospital rooms, they are present at bedtime and during illness. They make their presence available, almost every moment of every day. Could they imagine a Being even more available to them, someone who meets their every need? Julie Donovan Massey writes: "A mother yearns to be present. . . . Does God's heart yearn to be present with us? Often, we imagine God as distant and untouched by the events of our lives. What if God searches daily for ways to make her presence known?"⁴² God pursues the mothering pastor perfectly and constantly, doting on her and making space for rest and play. Through reflection upon these maternal characteristics of God, the mothering pastor can begin to experience spiritual renewal.

⁴¹ Interview with author, Spokane, WA, November 21, 2019.

⁴² Julie Donovan Massey, "God as Mother," *America*, 183 no. 21 (December 2000): 17-18.

Spiritual Subversion

Engaging our spiritual imaginations in a way that includes a mothering God subverts traditional practices, but it does so in a faithful and tested way, as modeled throughout history and in theological discourse. To rest in God's mothering presence goes against every societal expectation that mothers and pastors feel compelled to meet. But women have been subverting the norm for centuries. When Katharina Zell gave spiritual care through her thoughtful letters, women experienced God's mothering love and were given permission to find their vocational purpose as wives and mothers in a new church landscape. Female theologians who do the academic and spiritual work to paint a picture of God's mothering love plant seeds for other women and mothering pastors to find themselves in God's story.

Abiding in spiritual paradox and subversion can only happen under the shelter of God's mothering wings with her maternal voice whispering encouragement in our ears. This intersection of risk and protection is the place where true spiritual formation can happen for mothering pastors.

CHAPTER FIVE:
REJOICE AND BE SATISFIED: AN EXEGESIS ON MOTHERING IMAGES IN
ISAIAH 66:10-14

Introduction

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her –
that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

For thus says the LORD:
I will extend prosperity to her like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees.
As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.
You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice;
your bodies shall flourish like the grass;
and it shall be known that the hand of the LORD is with his servants,
and his indignation against his enemies.¹

“You shall be carried on her arm”, the Lord says. What a promise of comfort and security! A vivid memory remains with me from the day after we brought our first daughter, Theresa, home from the hospital. She and I were alone, just the two of us, sitting by a window with sun streaming over us. She was small enough to hold with her head in my two hands, her tiny body relaxed against my forearms. As I gazed at her tiny sleeping face, I was in that moment so aware of her vulnerability and beauty, and of my enormous responsibility to protect her and love her with everything I had to give. I was at once frightened and utterly honored. Quietly in the background Keith Green’s *O Lord*,

¹ Isaiah 66:10-14.

You're Beautiful played and I pondered the words. . . . “Oh Lord, you’re beautiful / Your face is all I see / For when your eyes are on this child / Your grace abounds to me.”² With God watching over me like a mother, I felt safe, for God held Theresa and God held me. God’s mothering love is this abundant and this welcoming. It is a place of safety.

Like Theresa, we are vulnerable babies in God’s tender and capable arms. We have nothing to offer but ourselves, and we have no control over the world around us. Our mother, God, is our strength and the source of all that we need. In Isaiah 66, the prophet poetically depicts this mother/child relationship that God as our mother has with Israel and has with us. In this intimate connection, God perfectly holds space for us to let our guard down and to receive love that heals, love that sees, and love that protects. Love like this is an oasis for the mothering pastor, and the perfect place to experience meaningful soul care that meets her at that intersection of risk and protection where subversive, meaningful spirituality can take place. In this space, clergy mothers can relinquish control trusting in their Creator for real, whole body rest and restoration.

Context for Isaiah 66:10-14

Rev. Dr. Jerome Creach, Robert C. Holland Professor of Old Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, maintains that Isaiah divides into three sections. Isaiah 66 closes Third Isaiah, which was likely written between 539 and 515 B.C., during the same period as Ezra and Nehemiah’s authorship. Creach observes that the Israelites have now returned from exile in Babylon and there is a physical temple available for worship. Among the many questions at stake is the discussion about how to graft in foreigners and

² Keith Green, “Oh Lord, You’re Beautiful,” 1980.

the ritually un-pure, with the assumption that these formerly excluded populations are now welcome in God's house.³ Isaiah 66 is a section about worship, God's eternal provision for Israel, and shalom-type healing and restoration.

The author uses mother imagery to portray both the city of Jerusalem and the Lord. The Lord cares for the Israelites in an embodied way that involves an actual place, Zion, and the real human features of a mother. Chapters Three and Four have aptly demonstrated that this is how God regularly engages in relationship with God's people, through tangible, relatable ways. This closing chapter of Isaiah is not the first occurrence in the book of mothering imagery for God. In fact, the prophet makes use of this metaphor in both Isaiah 42, where God is likened to a woman in labor, and again in Isaiah 49, where God shows compassion (same word as for "womb") as a nursing mother.

In a culture that still elevates patriarchal images for God and church leadership, despite the scriptural evidence otherwise, Isaiah 66:10-14 offers a refreshing and soul-quenching alternative for mothering pastors that is grounded in God's historical and big-picture redemptive plans. The themes and images in this text speak volumes about spiritual vitality in the church, God's healing purposes for broken people, and God's design for shalom and wholeness, all described through the lens of a mothering God's love. The Lord has something beautiful to say to mothering pastors in the deepest caverns of their longings.

³ Jerome Creach, lectures from 2010 at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

Jerusalem: God's Tangible Provision

The Church as Mother

Isaiah 66 paints a tender picture of the Lord's interaction with Jerusalem, or Zion. The Lord will not forget Jerusalem or leave her hanging without redemption and purpose. The Lord's value for Zion is so great that Zion here is likened to a mother in labor and then a mother nursing her children, the Israelite people. Given that God shows up as a mother throughout Scripture, this portrayal of Mother Zion carries quite a bit of weight. God is telling the people of Israel that they can and should rely on Jerusalem for their deepest needs. In verse 11, the word for nurse (נָצַץ) in the Hebrew can also mean "to suck, or to drain out"⁴ In other words, the people of God are to deplete Jerusalem's breasts of milk so that they can feel truly full and cared for.

The Early Church Fathers, among others, make a connection between Jerusalem and the Church, or Christ's Body. For Clement of Alexandria the Church is a mother to us. She feeds us and cares for us in the same way that God does throughout history. About this passage in Isaiah, Clement writes: "A mother draws her children near her; we seek our mother, the church . . . the Father of all draw(s) near to those who seek his aid, giving them a new birth and making them his own adopted children."⁵ The Church, whether it be a concrete place of worship like Zion for the Israelites or the universal expression of Christ's body in the world, is intimately linked to God and God's work in the world.

⁴ John Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56-66* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), 432.

⁵ Mark W. Elliot and Dr. Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament XI: Isaiah 40-66* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press ebook, 2007), 286.

Regarding the way that Jerusalem cares for the Israelite people in a comforting way, John Goldingay has this to say: “Whereas ‘comfort’ is usually something Zion receives from Yhwh rather than something it gives, here the imagery of motherhood suggests that Zion is the giver of comfort, though theologically one could say that she is able to give comfort only because she has received it.”⁶ Any expression of comfort and grace that the church is able to give comes because it is an extension of God, a tangible place of receiving God’s mothering love. In this way, the Church is an extension of God as God mothers her children throughout time and space.

In the broadest sense, Isaiah 66 is telling the story of redemption that will be fulfilled in Christ himself. Immediately before the passage we are exploring in this chapter, the Lord promises that Zion will not labor forever, that there will be a birth and new life. John Goldingay writes this in his Isaiah commentary: “Yhwh is by nature one who brings to birth and therefore Yhwh will not put a woman through the experience of finding that her baby is unable to leave the womb. Of course women do go through that frightening and death-dealing experience, and in that sense Yhwh does close wombs, but in this case, at least, Yhwh will not do so.”⁷ God will not walk away from the Church or the children who worship there. This powerful mothering image assures us that as a mother, God will never abandon her children, and the Church will be the catalyst for fulfilled promises and eternal life.

We cannot separate God from the Church, of which Christ is the head. Tish Harrison Warren continues the mothering imagery for the Church in the following article:

⁶ Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56-66*, 499.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 497.

“But for most of Christian history, a relationship with God was inseparable from a relationship with the church. Most believers over the last two millennia—Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox alike—would deem spiritual life without the church as incomprehensible and impossible as biological life without a mother.”⁸ We need the Body of Christ as much as we need the nurture and care of a mother. Therefore, spiritual care for the mothering pastor cannot happen apart from the Church, which is an extension of God’s mothering care. This does not mean that mothering pastors must find spiritual nourishment only within the walls of their own congregations (in fact they should not), nor does it mean that all spiritual care has to be institutionally based in a church or denomination. What this deep connection between God’s mothering love and the Church does mean is an ongoing awareness of one’s role as a member of Christ’s body. God designed us to be in relationship with one another and to be rooted in Christ who called us into community, into the Church.

The church can wound, and many people including mothering pastors carry trauma from deep hurts caused by sacred institutions and people in Christian leadership. People can become deeply attached to church communities only to experience rejection and trauma. Leadership councils can exclude and make decisions that ostracize members. Abuse exists in mother-child relationships and it exists in church-member relationships, with disturbing frequency. There are a variety of important resources available for such situations and it is advisable at times for people to receive care away from regular church

⁸ Tish Harrison Warren, “The Church is Your Mom,” *Christianity Today*, May 21, 2015, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/may-web-only/church-is-your-mom.html>.

connections for a season while they lean into healing.⁹ However, even healthy, non-traditional, parachurch spiritual care resources exist because God’s children are loving one another as God’s people. Community and belonging are keys to God’s mothering love.

Spiritual Formation and Belonging

A baby at a mother’s breast is one of the most striking pictures of security and belonging. We find such belonging in our mothering God and in the Christian community God has designed for us to enjoy. This image from Isaiah 66 reminds us that we are reliant on one another and we depend on the Body of Christ, the church community, to strengthen us and give companionship for our spiritual journeys. Ronald Rolheiser boldly states that, “Spirituality, at least Christian spirituality, is never something you do alone. Community is a constitutive part of the very essence of Christianity and thus of spirituality.”¹⁰ We were intended to remain attached to God and attached to our siblings in Christ.

Isaiah 66 is a vision of worship in God’s house, a place where God’s people are reminded of their place and welcome in God’s family. Church musician and theologian Harold Best writes about worship: “The beauty and effectiveness of a well-crafted liturgy will always be in its allegiance to the Word.”¹¹ Just as we were created to belong to God

⁹ One such resource is www.boldlyloved.org. This spiritual formation organization specializes in walking alongside people who need to be seen as children of God, at times away from the institutional church.

¹⁰ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Image, 2014), 96.

¹¹ Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 72.

and to one another, so also our worship should belong to and find purpose in Christ, the Word of God. Spiritual formation for anyone, and for the mothering pastor, happens within a community of believers. These connections, to one another and to Christ, bring about imaginative and deep spiritual refreshment.

Chapter Six will include some tangible ways that the Church and Christian community can care for mothering pastors with mothering God images as a resource. For now, let us consider that worship on a cosmic, eternal level, can be a welcome invitation to the mothering pastor who spends so much energy leading liturgy and writing sermons. To be ushered into a redemptive worshipful space by a mothering God, where she is not responsible for anything, is truly a gift of wonder and rest.

Two more mothering images complete the picture of God's care for God's people in Isaiah 66. God mothers as a healer and God mothers with an eye toward wholeness. Healing and wholeness, given through loving comfort speak a special encouragement to mothering pastors.

Dandled on Her Knees: A Place of Peace and Healing

In verses 12-14 of Isaiah 66, the mother metaphor shifts from Jerusalem and the Church to God herself. The Lord speaks to her children like they are the most valuable beings in the world—and they are, for she created them. This motherly love begins the healing process of broken lives and broken stories.

A Mother's Abundant Love

When the new enthusiasm wears off, the one strong thing that remains in early babyhood is the bond being slowly forged between mother and child through sheer physical intimacy. It is symbolized by the picture that has inspired so many

artists—a baby feeding at the breast, or sleeping on the breast, full, satisfied and loved. This picture, so rich and evocative of maternal love, is a wonderful image of God’s care for us . . . God our mother, we believe, gives us our needed nourishment with an equal love and intimacy.¹²

Once again Margaret Hebblethwaite’s words capture the tenderness of God’s mothering love for her people, as illustrated vividly in Isaiah 66:12-13. Taking in these few verses, one quickly gets the sense that God loves with abundance as well as with perfect comfort. God’s mothering comfort does not just pacify or hold us over until something better comes along. God’s comfort is a healing comfort, re-forming broken bonds like a mother bonding with her child through nursing, skin-on-skin time together, and playful interactions.

Verse 12 uses the imagery of moving water to demonstrate how vast and gracious is God’s love and provision for her people. Goldingay states that the prosperity of the river, or the “well-being” is like an overfull wadi, much like the concept of shalom and wholeness throughout the Old Testament.¹³ So God’s love overflows abundantly, but with a stillness throughout that cares for the souls of her children. So often abundance gets tied to some kind of super-sized picture of indulgence and gluttony. But God’s love is more nuanced than this. As a mother, God can show enormous amounts of unconditional love while also providing deep peace and intimacy. God’s love is not too much. God’s love is exactly what we need.

¹² Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 38-39.

¹³ Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56-66*, 500.

Healing Attachments, Building Bonds

Many theologians and pastors commonly refer to Isaiah as the Fifth Gospel because of its striking parallels with the New Testament message and the fact that it is frequently quoted by Jesus in the Gospel narrative. N.T. Wright is one such scholar with this opinion. He writes: “And when you reflect that the New Testament celebrates the strange victory of God, through his anointed one, over all the dark forces in the world, all with the aim of bringing about the new heavens and new earth, then Isaiah 56-66 are the natural place to look.”¹⁴ The book of Isaiah addresses the cosmic, large-scale need for reconciliation between God and the world, which includes our personal brokenness and need for renewed welcome into God’s family. To explain this redemption process, God chooses to show up as and use the imagery of a mother. This is remarkable! Through motherhood, God forgives sin, heals cracked souls, and orders our deepest longings.

It is easy to race over this Isaiah passage without considering the deep, relational implications of its imagery. Emma Percy’s words about mothers and comfort help unpack the meaning behind the Lord’s claims. She writes: “One of the ways that mothers cherish their children is through comforting them. . . . Comforting involves the art of assuring another that, despite the sense of distress they feel, they will not be overcome.”¹⁵ Again, God’s comfort is not temporary or for show. It is God committing to walking alongside us as a mother, making sure we get through the storm to the new day ahead. Mothering God comfort is to be trusted. We can be secure in her arms.

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, “The Fifth Gospel: Why Isaiah Matters,” *N.T. Wright Online: Renewing Minds Through Biblical Teaching* (blog), accessed March 18, 2021, <https://www.ntwrightonline.org/the-fifth-gospel-why-isaiah-matters/>

¹⁵ Percy, *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry*, 137.

When babies are born, they form attachments to their parents through physical contact like holding, nursing, and establishing smell. These attachments get frayed or severed over time when a parent is abusive, or neglectful. Ponder for a moment how God as a mother repairs these detachments, many of which are necessary. We must break away from unhealthy and painful patterns or places and people that do us harm. But what happens after the break has been made? The human temptation is to simply remove ourselves from the sin or hurtful person/situation without any additional plan for wholeness and healing. Richard Foster provides some insight: “No, detachment is not enough; we must go on to *attachment*. The detachment from the confusion all around us is in order to have a richer attachment to God.”¹⁶ Thankfully, God is eager to rebuild these bonds and does so as a mother getting to know her little baby all over again.

Our Mothering God tends and comforts our wayward souls, drawing us back into relationship with herself and with one another. God’s kindness truly does lead us to repentance and healing.¹⁷

Attachment Healing for Mothering Pastors

In the PC (USA) Pastors must answer several questions upon their ordination, including the following:

- Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?
- Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?¹⁸

¹⁶ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 21.

¹⁷ Romans 2:4.

Even though this is an example of only one denomination's expectations for pastoral ministry, most pastors enter into ministry knowing that a big part of their job has to do with reconciliation and mediating broken relationships. It is a large burden to carry, made larger still if proper spiritual care is lacking. Mothers intuitively mend fences as they raise their children. From mediating disagreements to nursing physical and emotional wounds, mothers operate often in a healing role for their families.

When a woman who mothers and ministers gives so much attention and energy to healing in other peoples' lives, they need a place to go where their own wounds can receive living water. Henri Nouwen has this to say to those who engage in the ministry of compassion: "This means that to be a healing reminder requires a spirituality, a spiritual connectedness, a way of living united with God. . . . Ultimately, it is Christ in us from whom healing comes. Only Christ can break through our human alienation and restore the broken connections with each other and with God."¹⁹ Isaiah relentlessly points to Jesus Christ, paving the way for his arrival as the one who will lift up valleys and lower mountains.²⁰ When the Lord speaks of healing and comforting her people with a mothering love, the implication is that the greatest expression of this maternal love will be Jesus Christ, born to a woman. Christ will bring abundance. Christ will bring reconciliation.

For the mothering pastor, this passage is a spiritual reminder that God will not only heal her wounds but will also heal the wounds of those in her care. She, the

¹⁸ *Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2015-2017). W-4.4003 questions (f) and (g).

¹⁹ Henri Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2009), ebook.

²⁰ Isaiah 40:4.

mothering pastor, while a steward of the church and of her children, is not ultimately responsible for wholeness in their lives. She is but a catalyst, a midwife, pointing the way to Jesus Christ. God mothers her and whispers to her heart that healing is for her, that she can come onto God's knees and enjoy freedom as God rebuilds her broken bonds and abundantly cares for the people in her life who rely on her ministry and her mothering.

See, Rejoice and Flourish: Wholeness in God

Isaiah 66:14 as a single verse out of context lacks a direct reference to God as mother, but as with any part of the Bible, it must be read as a piece of the whole, and this verse comes on the heels of verses 12 and 13, which are filled with vibrant and clear mothering imagery. So we read verse 14 (“You shall see; and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass. . . .”) as a filling out of the previous verses, and when we do so we begin to see how God's mothering love carries intentions beyond comfort and into restoration for our entire selves—mind, body, and spirit.

Our Whole Selves Loved by God

The healing work that God does in rebuilding broken attachments parallels and pours into themes of wholeness and integration. In their book about healing presence, James E. Miller and Susan C. Cutshall write: “‘Heal’ comes from the same root as our word ‘whole’. Healing suggests the idea of wholeness, and specifically any movement toward that wholeness.”²¹ We see this in the Gospels where Jesus' healing always involves transformation of the heart as well as the body. In 2 Corinthians, the Apostle

²¹ James E. Miller with Susan C. Cutshall, *The Art of Being a Healing Presence: A Guide for Those in Caring Relationships* (Fort Wayne, IN: Willowgreen Publishing, 2012), 19-20.

Paul proclaims, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”²² Everything has become new, not just some things. Christians sometimes have a reputation for only focusing on the redemption of one aspect of a person. For instance, if we give our hearts to Jesus then it does not matter what we do with our bodies or our environment. But this is not the whole story. God is interested in redemption of all of us, in bringing wholeness to all of creation. Through Christ’s life, death and resurrection, God is working toward absolute healing and whole person restoration.

Life in Christ will always welcome us away from the old and beckon us into something new that involves every part of us. This is the story of redemption as prophesied in Isaiah, for each person and the larger systems they represent. As God mothers us near to herself for comfort and security, her desire is also for our transformation. John N. Oswalt puts it beautifully: “A baby does nothing to satisfy its own needs; it must simply own its absolute dependence and receive what has been provided. In such a position there is rest, rejoicing, and wholeness, or ‘peace’ (66.12).”²³ When we give ourselves over to God and receive her rest, we are in the perfect place to begin a new journey.

And so, we arrive at this remarkable picture of wholeness in verse 14, where our new journey involves our eyes, our hearts, our bodies, and our minds. Our mothering Lord says to us, that we will see, our hearts will rejoice, our bodies will flourish, and we

²² 2 Corinthians 5:17.

²³ John N. Oswalt, *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 695.

will know that she is with us.²⁴ Transformation involves each of these aspects of our humanity, and what an encouragement this should be for us, as we try to find a center in a largely fragmented and distracted world. Our whole selves matter to God. In God's mothering embrace, we can become integrated beings where our bodily experience matches the journeys of our souls, and our professional vocation can click together in lock step with our personal and family lives.

Holistic Spiritual Care for Mothering Pastors

Mothers, maybe more than most people, have a deep sense of integration between their bodies and their minds, because they use their bodies to care for the bodies of their children, and through it all their heart is bursting with love and their minds are constantly at work thinking through the next step in the day or how to best provide for their families. Pastors are also called to make these connections with regularity, as they organize church logistics in the same space that they discern soul care and liturgies. For the mothering pastors, all these aspects of life are connected, but their culture insists on compartmentalization. Work goes on one shelf and family life goes on another, and never the two shall meet. The lack of spiritual care for this demographic is evidence of this deep disconnect. How can mothering pastors be valued as whole, integrated people and how can they be cared for spiritually in a way that honors this? For God created them, like all other people, to be whole and not broken and dispersed.

²⁴ My paraphrase of Isaiah 66:14.

Diane Chandler wrote a book about spirituality and integration, in which she rightly claims that “God made man and woman as integrated beings.”²⁵ Our longing as human beings is to return to this state, where we experience a gorgeous tapestry of the perfectly woven together threads of our lives. Threads of our prayer life, threads of playing with children, threads of date night, and threads of sermon preparation. These threads go together. They were never intended to make up separate blankets.

Mothering God invites her people, invites mothering pastors, to flourish in Isaiah 66:14. Goldingay’s description here is captivating: “The entire being of the people will rejoice and flourish, its centre (the heart) and its dispersed structure (the limbs, literally the bones).”²⁶ What an image of abundance and satisfaction. This kind of seeing and drinking is the opposite of the anemic spirituality that most of us have been fed. Not only does God as mother desire our whole selves to be transformed, she also desires us to be transformed beyond our fragmented expectations. There is wonder in God’s maternal care and plans for our lives. Mothering pastors need spiritual refreshment like the kind offered in Isaiah. They need the comfort and healing of Mothering God to bring wholeness and delight to their souls and lives.

Conclusion: An Invitation to Trust

A Personal Story about Surrender

After our first daughter was born, we lost two babies to miscarriage and then were unable to conceive again for several years. The years during and right after these losses

²⁵ Diane J. Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 32.

²⁶ Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56-66*, 502.

were some of the darkest in my life, during which I began ordained ministry as a pastor in the PC (USA). Professionally I was thriving, but spiritually my soul was dry and often angry with God. I found companionship and spiritual care through organic connections with other women and stumbled my way through therapy as I cobbled together what I longed to be a “balanced” life. However, it was anything but balanced. I longed for wholeness and integration, to be seen authentically in spiritual space that allowed for my pain and encouraged me to find renewal.

When we finally became pregnant with our daughter Susanna (Susie), who is now almost three years old, my anxiety over potential loss skyrocketed. Carrying Susie taught me more about trust in God than any other experience in my life. Daily, even moment by moment, surrender became all that I could bring before God. I look back at that time and I can see God mothering me through that difficult and longed for pregnancy. God held my hand during that first ultrasound where I was certain we would find no heartbeat, God wrapped her arms around me and created space for me to be afraid in quiet places, and God whispered encouragement to me every time I felt despair.

Spiritual integration in God, like the redemption promised in Isaiah 66, is not something we manifest on our own. I could not make my pregnancy peaceful, nor could I rise above the pain with womanly strength, though God has given me great strength and for that I am grateful. I needed to release control and trust in the God who made me, mothers me, and loves my children even more than I do. David G. Benner and M. Basil Pennington speak of this kind of surrender: “Union with God is not something we achieve. It is not the summit of a spiritual mountain we are trying to ascend. It is a gift of

grace.”²⁷ As a pastor and a mother who has faced loss and disappointment, I am slowly learning to rest in God’s mothering grace, for the purpose of new healing roads ahead.

Spiritual Integration for the Mothering Pastor

The temptation to remain alone in the quest for spiritual wellbeing is strong for the mother and pastor. We have skills and training that can plug the holes in our leaky boat for a little while, seeking outside help comes at a cost, and honestly who has the time? However, Isaiah 66:10-14 insists that humans are built by God for connection, and God has designed all of creation to be in communion with him, Father, Son and Spirit. And so, God breaks the mold and shows up as a mother to nurture us into transformation, community, and rest. For it is through mothering that God reminds us of our root desire to not be alone. David Benner describes it this way: “Because this original Self is at one with all that is, our earliest experience of self and the world is not an experience of ‘I’ verses ‘it’ or ‘them,’ but of ‘we.’ Observing mother and infant, it is often easy to see something of the mutuality, union, and bliss that this involves. Often there appears to be no psychic dividing line between the two parties.”²⁸ We are from our very beginning created to be attached to God, our mother and source of life. We are not alone, and our souls can and should seek spiritual refreshment that is grounded in God’s mothering, community love.

For a mothering pastor to live out her calling in both spheres well, she needs spiritual healing, rest, and space for transformation. Emma Percy speaks to this critical

²⁷ David G. Benner and M. Basil Pennington, *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), ebook.

²⁸ David G. Benner, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: BrazosPress, 2011), 56.

practice, specifically addressing patterns of reciting liturgical prayers: “Central to her ministry is prayer and worship, those experiences in which she is able to refresh her sense of being cared for and dependent on God. The value of saying the offices means points in each day when the burden of care can be given in prayer to God and the priest can know herself to be held in God’s loving arms.”²⁹ Regular, surrendered worship in God’s presence is vital for the health of the mothering pastor’s soul. God mothers us uniquely and perfectly in these spaces so that we can be whole, so that we can be seen.

Towards the end of Isaiah 66, we see a glimpse of what new creation wholeness will look like. It is a picture of reconciliation, rest, and worship. God our mother reminds us of this sure hope and gathers us in for nourishment as we wait for the day when all is made new.

For as the new heaven and the new earth,
 which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD;
 so shall your descendants and your name remain.
 From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath,
 all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD.³⁰

²⁹ Percy, *Motherhood as a Metaphor*, 113.

³⁰ Isaiah 66:22-23.

CHAPTER SIX:

“ALL SHALL BE WELL”: SPIRITUAL REST IN A MOTHERING GOD

Introduction

Fair and sweet is our heavenly Mother in the sight of our soul, precious and lovely are the gracious children in the sight of our heavenly Mother with mildness and meekness, and all the fair virtues that belong to Children in nature.

For naturally the Child despairs not of the Mother’s love, naturally the Child presumes not of the self, naturally the Child loves the Mother, and each one the other. These are the fair virtues, with all others that be like wherewith our heavenly Mother is served and pleased.

And I understand no lower stature in this life than Childhood in feebleness and failing of strength and of intellect, until the time that our gracious Mother has brought us up to our Father’s bliss. And then shall it truly be made known to us his meaning in these sweet words where he says, ‘All shall be well, and you shall see it yourself that all manner of thing shall be well.’¹

—Julian of Norwich

Julian of Norwich poetically describes the intimate gaze of a mother upon her child. In this gaze, the mother sees the longings of the child’s soul and assures this little one that all shall be well. This scene exudes trust, surrender, belonging and love. This is the gaze of God upon her child, a gaze forgotten in recent years by the church, and gone unnoticed as more “traditional” depictions of God have prevailed.² Such depictions, like God as a protective and loving Father, are beautiful and true, and provide great comfort to many, even to mothering pastors. However, it is also true that this more prevalent understanding of God is not the full picture of God’s personhood and character. When women, and more specifically mothering pastors, are exposed regularly to this mothering

¹ Julian of Norwich, *Showing of Love*, trans. Julia Bolton Holloway (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 95.

² Although one can argue from Scripture and history that a mothering God is indeed part of the tradition.

gaze of God upon their soul, they can spiritually relax and receive nurture and transformation in more meaningful ways.

This final chapter will highlight for mothering pastors some of the joys that come from a spirituality that embraces a mothering God, as well as a few practical steps that institutions and individuals can take toward opening this theological door a little further, all while receiving grace for and within the various seasons that life offers. It is my hope that this dissertation invites the mothering pastor into the refreshing space that is God's strong mothering arms.

Where We Have Been

Before proceeding to the practical implications that a mothering God has for the mothering pastor, a look back through the thematic journey of this dissertation thus far will establish and validate the necessary work of such implications.

This dissertation has argued that Pastoring mothers face unique challenges in their desire to draw closer to the heart of God in the midst of meeting family and ministry needs. This stated need has driven the trajectory of this dissertation, beginning with an in-depth account of how this longing plays out in the lives of mothering pastors. Loneliness, guilt and shame, multi-tasking, and a longing for integration all show up as common threads, as illustrated through personal stories. These women in ministry often end up forging organic solutions to their spiritual yearnings when faced with the resource gaps in their own denominations.

After demonstrating the deep spiritual needs among mothering pastors, the dissertation turned toward a possible light at the end of the tunnel: God as Mother. Biblical precedent revealed that God has shown up as a mother since the very beginning

and mothers her children through comfort and fierce protection. Historical and theological evidence supported the biblical accounts and provided examples of women speaking of God as mother and also taking on the unofficial role of mothering pastors at various points in history.

Lastly, Chapter Five, as an exegetical reflection on Isaiah 66:10-14, presented a window into how God loves God's people as a mother, desiring their healing and wholeness and inviting them to surrender to her arms. This ancient depiction of God as a mother carries weight throughout the subsequent centuries and into the present hour for this dissertation's special group of women who mother and pastor at the same time.

You Need Not Try So Hard

“All shall be well.” Julian’s words about God’s mothering promise are like a sigh of relief coupled with unbridled excitement. For the mothering pastor, these words usher her into a space of release, of knowing that God will indeed take care of everything, including her own soul, and the possibilities from there are full of imagination. All shall be well, dear mother. All shall be well, servant of the church. To embrace this promise means letting go and less trying, a lot less trying. David Benner describes this kind of posture before God: “The one whose name is ‘I Am’ and whose experience makes possible our own invites us to a knowing that can be found only in stillness. This stillness is letting go of striving. It is being present to ourselves and to God. It is a state of being, not simply an achievement of doing or not-doing.”³ When we rest in God’s mothering arms, we are no longer asked to achieve anything. Our accomplishments, though

³ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 149.

celebrated, are not requirements for receiving love. This invitation lays the foundation for each of the following spiritual implications that arise out of a renewed understanding of Mothering God.

Benefits of a Mothering God Framework for a Mothering Pastor

Rarely do the spheres of mothering and pastoring beckon the clergy mother to quiet and refreshment. For every peaceful, cuddling moment holding a sleeping babe there are thousands of moments defined by the beautiful and sometimes overwhelming chatter of growing children. For every still pocket of prayer, there are even more meetings, fellowship hours, and crises demanding full attention. When pauses arise, they are like gold for the mothering pastor, an oasis of nurture for their souls. A growing understanding of God as a mother brings explanation for the pauses, for it is a mothering God who takes her hand and surprises her with moments to rest, to belong, to be whole.

Surrendered Rest

Receiving true rest is difficult for mothers and ministers. Finding the time and space to rest often means hours arranging for someone else to care for church and child. It's almost not worth it, until God reminds the mothering pastor that what is required for rest is not more effort. What is required is surrender. Once again David Benner offers an engaging and illustrative definition: "From the perspective of the ego, surrender is the squeal of the pig on its way to slaughter. But from another perspective, we can think of it as a birth scream—the first gasp of breath after a rebirth as surrender ushers us into a new

movement of life and a new stage on the journey.”⁴ A birth is a fitting scene for this discussion on surrender to a maternal God because surrender is hard work up to the actual point of release, and then what follows is deep bodily rest and joy.

Jesus, likened to a mother hen collecting chicks in Matthew 23, reflects this Divine maternal love when he gently calls people to a place of surrender saying: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”⁵ Our mothering God, through the person of Jesus, speaks the above invitation and the relief is palpable. All shall be well. Come to me. Rest. When a mothering pastor experiences God as maternal, she can begin to set down some of the balls she is juggling and relax into God’s welcoming embrace.

Belonging

There are a myriad of resources and organizations available for mothers longing for Christian community. MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International, for example, has gained great popularity as a place where mothers with young children can enjoy fellowship with sisters in Christ while their children are tended by someone else. Their website says: “. . . remarkable things happen when moms come together.”⁶ This is indeed true, for moms and for people of all kinds looking for camaraderie and belonging. A quick search for “devotional books for moms” yields several worthy options, reminding Christian mothers that they are not alone and that God’s love for them is real.

⁴ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 157.

⁵ Carolyn Walker Bynum remarking on Matthew 11:28 in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 125-26.

⁶ “About Us,” Mothers of Preschoolers, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.mops.org/about/about-us/>.

For the pastor, conferences tend to be the way that their institutions care for them spiritually, and for the most part these are done well. The Whitworth Ministry Summit in Spokane, WA, is one such conference, or the CREDO Conference referenced in Chapter Two for pastors in the middle of their careers.⁷ All these resources, for moms and for pastors, are excellent and do provide a measure of care for the mothering pastor. However, a resource designed for the clergy mother is almost impossible to find. Her desire for belonging is deep, and often neglected.

David G. Benner and M. Basil Pennington write these stark words: “The deepest ache of the soul is the spiritual longing for connection and belonging.”⁸ This ache rings true for the mothering pastor, as she wades through spiritual care resources that touch on her motherhood and her ministry, but never both. In a mothering God, however, she truly belongs. She can hear this passage from Isaiah, the prophet who did not shy away from God’s maternal side, and feel that she has a place: “But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”⁹ All shall be well. You are mine. In God as mother, the clergy mother is understood, and she is accepted. For if God is a mother as well as a father, then her identity is found in God’s image and thus her belonging is secure.

⁷ “Whitworth Ministry Summit,” Whitworth, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.whitworth.edu/cms/administration/church-engagement/whitworth-ministry-summit/>

⁸ Benner and Pennington, *Surrender to Love*, 15.

⁹ Isaiah 43:1b.

Beloved and Whole

In Chapter Five, an exploration of Isaiah's closing chapter established that our mothering God desires healing and wholeness for her children. In this way, she shows us that we are cherished. Wholeness is countercultural. As much as the surrounding society attempts to sell wellness and health, something always seems to be missing. Renowned Quaker Thomas Kelley observes that "The secular mind is an abbreviated, fragmentary mind, building only upon a part of man's [*sic*] nature and neglecting a part—the most glorious part—of man's nature, powers, and resources. The religious mind involves the whole of man, embraces his relations with time within their true ground and setting in the Eternal Lover."¹⁰ For the Christian, all of our parts are gathered into God's maternal love and are loved, valued and transformed. In God we are whole beings.

No less is the mothering pastor a whole being in Christ. Fragmentation threatens to become the norm for her, but when she rests in God her mother, she is reminded of this intimate exchange in scripture: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."¹¹ She is reminded that God created her with motherly imagination within her own earthly mother's body. She has been cradled by God from the very beginning. All shall be well, minister of the church and mother to your children. You are not pulled apart in God. God your mother draws you together and makes you whole. Be loved, beloved.

¹⁰ Thomas R. Kelley, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 9.

¹¹ Psalm 139:13-14.

Practical Spiritual Care Steps for the Mothering Pastor

The spiritual fruits of a mothering God paradigm are many, and I suspect stories could be shared about how rest in God as mother shifted the clergy mothers' perspective just enough to relax into God's arms instead of wrestling her way into his graces. However, I hesitate to provide a spiritual task list for mothering pastors to complete, for that would only feed the "try harder" mentality that our culture perpetuates. That said, I do have a few ideas that hopefully serve as a starting place for the soul's imagination. These suggestions are best understood in the context of a spiritual formation definition. The following is my own framework for understanding spiritual formation. From there we will move on to more concrete ways of living out a mothering God spirituality.

Spiritual Formation Definition

Spiritual formation, unlike discipleship, is a less defined journey of the heart. Eugene Peterson writes: "Spiritual formation is primarily what the Spirit does, forming the resurrection life of Christ in us."¹² Spiritual formation is not initiated by us. Rather, spiritual formation is a gift from God, an invitation into the life of the Spirit that has little to do with our success (in fact, nothing at all), and everything to do with the glory of God the Father, Son and Spirit.¹³ As we engage in spiritual formation, we become more alive in Christ.

¹² Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 237.

¹³ I have used traditional "Father, Son, Holy Spirit" Trinitarian language here. Use of this scriptural and historical phrase does not demote use of mothering God language at all.

Just as spiritual formation does not happen by our own power, neither is its purpose solely for our own edification. Jeffrey Greenman says it this way: “Spiritual formation is our continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world.”¹⁴ I think this expansion on Peterson’s definition is important because it recognizes that our own formation doesn’t stop at personal transformation. Christ’s saving power within us is for the glory of God and the redemption of the world.

Spiritual Formation Components

Spiritual formation is a process that includes great suffering along with the elation of experiencing the nearness of God. MaryKate Morse has illustrated this process with two stories from Scripture: Mary’s joy and eventual sorrow, and the Bleeding Woman’s lost-ness and remarkable found-ness. She observed that this is how spiritual formation works, it’s a cycle of longing and fulfillment that continues as it forms a person’s heart to become more and more like Christ.¹⁵ As our spirits are formed, we go through a process of dying and rising to become more like Jesus. In church ministry, much like the liturgical calendar, people move through seasons of hope and longing. What Peterson calls the “resurrection life” is complex and peppered with joys and sorrows.

Spiritual formation is not only about me. Spiritual formation changes me, yes, but the focus is not only on my growth and my experiences. In his book on Benedictine

¹⁴ Jeffrey P. Greenman, “Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective: Classic Issues, Contemporary Challenges,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 24.

¹⁵ MaryKate Morse, “Spiritual Formation Presentation,” February 27, 2019.

spirituality, David Robinson writes, “Our journey with Christ is more about listening than speaking.”¹⁶ Emilie Griffin observes of the mystics: “Genuine mystics are not headline seekers.”¹⁷ Both of these spiritualities have ancient roots in Christianity that have much to teach us about the broad nature of spiritual formation. True spiritual formation has an element of pause and listening to it, as we wait upon the Spirit to care for us and teach us, to quiet our souls. Susan Phillips in her essay on spiritual direction observes: “We crave connection. The relationship of spiritual direction extends a quiet space for listening to one’s soul and reorienting toward God. . . . We live in post-resurrection days, trusting that God is nearby, but not always noticing God.”¹⁸ By embracing a listening posture and acknowledging that we are a part of an enormous and diverse people of God, we can contribute to that craved space and notice God more fully as our spirits are formed in Christ.

Spiritual formation is about surrender. Peterson and Greenman call us to a resurrected life in the Spirit that responds to the reality of God’s grace. What a rich and high calling! We cannot enter into this without surrender. MaryKate Morse leads a spiritual exercise based in Romans 12 wherein she invites participants to lay on the ground in silence, saying simply before the Lord, “God, my body.” This physical act poignantly demonstrated the posture we must take as we become spiritually formed people. Spiritual formation is not the result of control or calculated plans. Christians are

¹⁶ David Robinson, *Ancient Paths: Discover Christian Formation the Benedictine Way* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 95.

¹⁷ Emilie Griffin, *Wonderful and Dark is this Road: Discovering the Mystic Path* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2004), 4.

¹⁸ Susan S. Phillips, “Spiritual Direction as a Navigational Aid in Sanctification,” in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 163.

called to relinquish control, to surrender completely to God who loves us and forms us more perfectly and tenderly than anyone or anything else in this world.

Practical Spirituality

If spiritual formation is what the Spirit does, as Eugene Peterson says, and the Spirit can also take on a feminine and maternal role (as demonstrated in Chapter Four), then God's Spirit can form and guide us as a mother does, making space for transformation that engages not only the soul of the mothering pastor but also the souls of the people in her care. Robust spiritual care for mothering pastors will have a transformative effect on her children and her congregation. Keeping in mind that spiritual formation is not instant, that it requires surrender, and that it cannot stop with the individual, here are a few suggested spiritual practices for the mothering pastor.

Centering Prayer. Dr. MaryKate Morse writes: "One of humanity's greatest temptations is to equate our value with our accomplishments. . . . In rest, we all stop and before God we are all equal. . . . Rest recalibrates us and brings us back to center."¹⁹ Centering prayer is one such way to practice this release of control in the safe presence of a mothering God. The spiritual exercises included in Chapters Three (God Mothering Me) and Four (Spiritual Pause) are examples of this kind of contemplative experience with God that can provide a unique respite for the mothering pastor. Centering prayer can also be much simpler than the suggested exercises. Short breath prayers like "*God, mother me*" or "*I rest in God my mother*" can start the spirit imagining safe space, and

¹⁹ MaryKate Morse, *A Guidebook to Prayer: Twenty-four Ways to Walk with God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 51.

can also be a reminding prayer throughout the day of God's mothering love in the midst of high activity.

In centering prayer, God invites us to let go and to receive the peace that a child knows when they are wrapped securely in their mothers' arms. In doing so, we can pray along with the Psalmist:

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.²⁰

Spiritual Direction. Mothers and pastors hold space for their children and parishioners to express their experiences of life and God. Spiritual direction for the mothering pastor is a space reserved just for her. Maurice J. Nutt remarks on Henri Nouwen's understanding of this practice. He writes: "Spiritual direction for Nouwen was giving ourselves permission to surrender to God's love and grace and letting God heal and restore our lives. This sacred time and space of spiritual direction could be transformative in ways that we could hardly imagine."²¹ God mothers her children by inviting them to surrender and to receive healing. The right spiritual director can tease out the mothering God image for the mothering pastor, thereby expanding her experience of God and God's love.

Richard Foster also comments on the nature of spiritual direction, writing: "Spiritual direction takes up the concrete daily experiences of our lives and gives them

²⁰ Psalm 131: 1-2.

²¹ Maurice J. Nutt, "Soul Care: A Brief Historical Overview and Nature of Spiritual Direction," in *Kaleidoscope: Broadening the Palette in the Art of Spiritual Direction*, ed. Ineda P. Adesayna (New York: Church Publishing, 2019), 13.

sacramental significance.”²² Mothers and pastors constantly deal in concrete events, from diapers to bulletins theirs is a world of down to earth engagement and service. Spiritual direction provides the opportunity for her to remember the holiness of her calling, to be affirmed and grounded in Christ and his Spirit. Whether it be spiritual direction, or some other guided spiritual practice, outside spiritual care is critical for leaders and especially for mothering pastors. We cannot do it all alone. We need another to be our midwife into spiritual wholeness and wellbeing.

Organic Small Groups. This dissertation has established that within community, women can thrive in creativity and soul transformation. Elizabeth walked with Mary, Ruth with Naomi. In partnerships and groups, there is shared experience and spiritual growth. A study by Aurelie Athan and Lisa Miller speaks to why mothers both desire connections and are especially good at making them: “The majority of mothers stated that as a result of the love for their children, they had also come to a newfound sense of interdependence, connection, and general relatedness.”²³ Mothers, and pastors for that matter, deal in matters of integration and fellowship. The very act of not being alone raises women out of longing and into discovery of what might be possible within their own spheres. However, often this kind of community is hard to come by. For the mothering pastor, connections like this can feel forced, or even unavailable in her

²² Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 186.

²³ Aurelie M. Athan and Lisa Miller, “Motherhood as Opportunity to Learn Spiritual Values: Experiences and Insights of New Mothers,” *Journal of Prenatal & Perinatal Psychology & Health*, *Forestville* 27 no. 4 (Summer 2013): 230.

geographical area.²⁴ A life-giving small group is one that offers a mothering God type of safe space, a place to share and a place to listen. When possible, these groups are a lifesaver for the soul-thirsty mothering pastor.

Christine Pohl unpacks the notion of hospitality, saying: “Hospitality is an invitation from God to grow deeper in love.”²⁵ Small groups centered in Christ offer this invitation to mothering pastors as women show hospitality to women and create circles of trust wherein mothering pastors can share vulnerabilities and receive listening and love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer comments on the spiritual work required in true Christian community: “To bear the burden of the other person means involvement with the created reality of the other, to accept and affirm it, and, in bearing with it, to break through to the point where we take joy in it.”²⁶ Mothering pastor small groups have the potential to be a place where burdens are born and the spiritual life is renewed.

Institutional Responsibility

Even though the majority of spiritual care for mothering pastors will happen most authentically outside of their churches, the church as an institution does have a responsibility to make strides in spiritual inclusion, particularly in the area of normalizing God as a mother. Paul R. Smith speaks to this gap and the repercussions of marginalizing mothering God language:

²⁴ With current COVID-19 restrictions, many people are finding ways to connect and lead groups through means of webcam technology. This has been around for a while, but new uses of it remind ministers and those who serve that this is an effective way of reaching people for soul care services.

²⁵ Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 164.

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 101.

The importance of the feminine face of God cannot be fully grasped without understanding the inner woundedness in both men and women. . . .The abortion of the feminine face of God has prevented us from looking into the mothering eyes of God. This is a centuries old wounding which cries out to be touched. Because of this great need it is sometimes difficult to be gracious to those who oppose recognizing the motherlike side of God. It feels like they don't care about our brokenness. At its deepest level, the image of God is not only an issue of truth but also one of deep inner healing.²⁷

Without a common use of language that celebrates God as a mother as well as a father, the church is telling many women, including mothering pastors, that their female personhood is somehow less holy than that of their male counterparts. This is a growing edge for the church and its leadership.

When liturgies include mothering God prayers in their rotations, women and mothering pastors hear affirmation of their created selves. It is spiritually healing. Phyllis Tickle's book *Divine Hours* offers this prayer as an example: "You gather us together in faith, O God, as a loving mother and a gentle father. Help us to remember that your dwelling place is built upon love and peace, and that to bring about your reign on earth we must follow your way of peace. . . ."²⁸ Small language adjustments can go a long way in broadening the human experience of God's love, not only for the mothering pastor but also for men and women alike. When people are reminded of God's mothering love, the way they receive this love shifts. Understanding God as more than a man is critical to spiritual growth, for without a deeper knowledge of God's image, we inadvertently deny large sections of Scripture and the Christian historical tradition.

²⁷ Smith, *Is it Okay to Call God "Mother,"* 192-193.

²⁸ Phyllis Tickle, *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 88.

Spiritual Seasons of Motherhood and Ministry

The church, however, provides a beautiful framework for experiencing closeness with God through the varied seasons of life. The spiritual life of a mothering pastor will not look the same from year to year, for children will grow and her congregations will change. Her soul will yearn in quiet and it will stretch and soar in seasons of joy. The church year, as practiced by many mainline denominations and traditions, exemplifies these changes. Rest in a mothering God is not limited to one spiritual high, rather it ebbs and flows as the Spirit leads. The journey is hard, but the journey is indeed sweet. Once again, Kathleen Finley offers a framework for embracing these seasons with her liturgical metaphor. She writes:

As our family changes, the unique rhythm of our lives changes, so that the challenge of finding the spaces where a bit of prayer and reflection might be ‘tucked in’ changes. But no matter when or where that is, we know our God is there, waiting for us. Mothers’ prayer—no matter when it happens—is often prayer on the run, or at least in the moment.”²⁹

Waiting

God waits for us just as we wait for God. Seasons of waiting populate the lifespan of the mothering pastor, from months in labor waiting to give birth to waiting beside the bedside of a dying parishioner. The waiting comes in waves, repeating throughout the years, until she grows old and she is now waiting to meet her mothering God face to face. In periods of waiting, spiritual practices become opportunities for the mothering pastor to rest from uncertainty and join God in a space of hope, as God her mother reminds her often that Jesus’ arrival is near, and that he will rise and conquer death once and for all.

²⁹ Finley, *Liturgy of Motherhood*, 164.

Celebration

Waiting gives way to arrival and with arrival comes celebration, of a long-awaited baby or a spiritual longing met after decades of limbo. These events truly are bursting with spiritual meaning and expression, and the mothering pastor knows these mountaintops well. She remembers the birth of her child and the tearful exuberance that she felt the first time she touched his skin. She remembers the thrill of her first baptism, ushering another child of God into the fold. She remembers even the deathbed joy of a life-long Christian preparing to see Jesus. Such memorable times remind her of God's mothering faithfulness. During life's highest moments, spiritual practices ground the mothering pastor in her child of God identity, so that she can celebrate and enjoy the wonder without losing her place of belonging. She can be assured that it is God's work that is to be celebrated, and not her own accomplishments. She is an instrument of God, grateful for arrivals and happy gatherings.

Holy Spirit Moments

As a mother raises her baby, she notices things along the way that stand out as tangible reminders of God's mothering love. She is changing a diaper and the baby smiles at her from ear to ear. She walks her to school and feels an extra squeeze of her hand. The pastor notices a shy parishioner finding his place in a group at church. She sees two people reconcile after an argument. These are Holy Spirit moments, some small, some large. Some seasons of life feel somehow more Spirit-filled than others. The mothering pastor feels inspired in these pockets of time to craft a new sermon series or innovate a fresh ministry at the church. Or perhaps, at home the Spirit sparks a way for

her to connect with her daughter in a new way, starting a whole new set of meaningful conversations.

God as our mother has ways of surprising us with her Spirit, showing up and keeping us aware of her presence as we move through life, raising children and pastoring our flocks. These Holy Spirit moments are food for our souls, often occurring in private spaces without a lot of noise and publicity. Spiritual awareness is important during these times as we take note of what is happening in our souls and in the souls around us. By naming these moments, we stay attuned to God's constant presence and work in our lives and ministries.

Routine Spirituality

Most of our spiritual time is spent in the day-to-day rhythms of life. These are not flashy seasons and they easily go by unnoticed. But it is in these seasons that the long-term work and benefits of spiritual formation happen. For the mother these periods are filled with school lunches and bedtime routines, with date nights and dinner conversations. For the pastor, routine spirituality consists of lesser-known sermon texts, meetings over building costs, and semi-regular days off.

Ordinary time spirituality for the mothering pastor does not make headlines, but it does build foundation for spiritual health. God as our mother meets us in ordinary time and in ordinary ways, gently collecting us back into place like a mother hen with her chicks. In an ordinary manner, God feeds us like a mother nursing a baby, closely and with perfect nutrition, giving us exactly what we need for each day. And as any ordinary mother does, our mothering God protects us from harm and shields us with her wings

from dangers we may never know exist. And when danger comes that does reach us, she holds us tight until the storm passes by.

Regular spiritual habits are critical for the ordinary times. Routines like prayers breathed in the quiet of a morning shower before waking the children, an afternoon walk before finishing a sermon, or a monthly meeting with a spiritual director, all give the mothering pastor space to receive God's mothering love. God's mothering love is routine and ordinary, in that it is consistent and reliable, but far from ordinary in that it is a divine love, a love that does not end, a love that pursues her child and will not let go. This extraordinary mothering love meets the mothering pastor in the ordinary and holds her steady, speaking words of encouragement.

Guides for the Journey

Seasons of life do move along at a rapid pace, and what seems like an eternity during toddler years or a tricky time at the church suddenly becomes distant past as mothering pastors see their children grown and their churches change. Those women who have lived the decades are ideal spiritual guides who embody God's mothering love for younger women like myself. Diane Millis writes this about the beauty of spiritual companions: "So when all else fails, I have found that it really helps to have others to accompany me in the wilderness, those who encourage me to take my time and listen within, those who embody God's presence when God seems to be absent."³⁰ There is power in spiritual presence, whether through spiritual direction or a seasoned clergy

³⁰ Diane M. Millis, *Conversation, The Sacred Art: Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction* (Nashville, TN: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2013), 33.

mother who can shed some light on the way forward, with willingness to sit in the messy quiet at the same time.

One such seasoned clergy mother offered the following words to me at the close of our interview. In paraphrase, she said: “The enemy wants you to believe that you are far from God. You are not. Spiritual care looks very different with small children. Know that you are loved and close to God.”³¹ If more younger clergy mothers heard this kind of regular encouragement, their sense of spiritual belonging would grow, the spiritual belonging that comes first from a mothering God pouring into her children, actively quieting the voice of the enemy and instead urging us to hear that she has us in her wings and all shall be well.

Conclusion

Spiritual belonging and rest are the hallmarks of trust in a mothering God. If I have achieved anything in this dissertation, I hope it is the permission for mothering pastors to pause and to be reminded of their identity as a deeply cherished child of God. The spiritual implications that flow from a soul grounded in this belief are many, several of which have been addressed in this final chapter. However, there are more implications that could be examined and embraced.

Additional Practical Implications

Spiritual Health in the Church. While this dissertation addressed in part how the church as an institution might utilize mothering God language and thus participate in

³¹ Interview by author, Spokane, WA, March 11, 2019.

the spiritual care of its pastor, it did not study how the church might benefit from a spiritually healthy mothering pastor. A grounded leader will positively impact and influence the people she leads, and it would be fascinating to find out how a mothering God spirituality embraced by a pastor has a ripple effect on her congregation.

Family Spirituality. Likewise, a spiritually refreshed mother will have more energy for the care of her children and household. An additional study could include family liturgical practices as well as long-term data indicating how the spiritual health of spouses and children changed as a result of spiritual care for the mother in their home.

A Deeper Look into Spiritual Seasons. My personal interviews included only a few mothering pastors with fully-grown children. Should this topic be further explored, I think more stories from mature clergy mothers could add a richness to the research. Also, while this dissertation touched on changing seasons in a mothering pastors' life, it did not dive deeply into how spirituality changes as women grow older. This would be a beautiful and important narrative to include.

Additional Research Possibilities

The research included in this dissertation has unpacked a variety of viewpoints, ancient and modern, all with an eye toward enhancing the spiritual life of the mothering pastor. That said, there are research areas yet to be explored, and topics that only received partial treatment in this dissertation. The following represent a sample of further research avenues.

Gender and Neuroscience. While I acknowledged this topic in one footnote, there are volumes of research on questions of sex, gender, and constructionist vs. essentialist theories. This dissertation has certainly raised questions about how nature and

nurture influence gender tendencies, giftedness, and spirituality. These topics are enormous and deserve to be treated in much more exhaustive way.

God-Language and Inclusion. The sections on theology, image of God, and God language provided a first look at this topic, however on their own these topics can easily expand into their own dissertations. More research is needed into how trauma effects peoples' names for God as well as how they experience inclusion or exclusion in religious circles. A mothering God image goes a long way toward the goal of inclusion, but there are many other roads to discover when it comes to experiencing the Sacred.

Personality Differences and Spiritual Needs. Finally, this dissertation addressed spiritual care from a certain personality perspective—my own. While I attempted to include many other voices and desires in my research, I cannot help but highlight my personal spiritual experience and voice. Research that considers personality differences, like a look at Enneagram numbers and spiritual longing for instance, could enhance the findings in this dissertation and make them more personal for each mothering pastor.

Closing Remarks

I titled this dissertation “A Calm and Quieted Soul,” a reference to Psalm 131 and the stunning mothering God imagery that holds the psalmist captive as he writes. It is a Psalm of Ascent, traditionally understood to be the group of songs sung by the Levites as they approached the temple in Jerusalem. These are psalms of preparation for worship. When a mothering pastor makes her own preparations for Sunday morning worship, her soul is rarely in a calm and quieted state. And yet, God as mother invites her into this place of peace as she gathers her thoughts and materials, and her children, so that she can in turn invite her congregation into God's presence. Against all odds and circumstances,

spiritual rest in a mothering God is possible, in longer moments of solitude and even in short chaotic moments just before a sermon. God as our mother goes against the odds and against the circumstances to draw us near, to calm and quiet waters of soul-refreshing streams.

AFTERWORD:

A DREAM

I struggled inwardly for a long time after our two miscarriages. A few years ago, just as I began to experience God's mothering love as spiritual healing, I had a dream. I do not often have spiritual dreams, so this one stands out as important. In the dream, I could see our two babies playing in heaven, skipping through tall grass, and laughing. Jesus played alongside them, holding their hands, delighting in them. When I woke, I felt an enormous sense of peace. Who better to raise my children than Jesus? They were safe and they were being mothered.

God mothers us in a personal way, just as God met me in this dream and showed me life and hope in the midst of my sorrow. God's mothering love fosters deep joy within me, so I can cry out with the Psalmist: "Therefore, my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore."¹

A Joyful Calling

The calling to mother and pastor requires much sacrifice and there are indeed specific spiritual needs that arise, needs met perfectly by our mothering God. And yet, at the same time, this is a joyful calling. It is a privilege to mother children, from their tiniest moments to their tallest grown selves. To pastor is to be invited into not only the

¹ Psalm 16:9-11.

most painful spaces, but also the most celebrated ones. And so, as this dissertation comes to a close, it is this joy that I would like to leave the reader with, joy that flows into us from God, who loves us like a mother loves her own child. We can be sure that our own gifts, of motherhood and ministry, come not from our own achievements or hard work, but are a grace gifted us by God. Margaret Hebblethwaite puts it wonderfully: “All comfort that comes from us, all creativity that breaks out from us, all tenderness that flows from us, comes ultimately from one source—our one, true and eternal mother, who is our God.”² With God’s mothering strength as our encouragement and foundation, we can live joyfully into our calling and find spiritual rest and transformation throughout the varied seasons ahead.

Through the process of researching this dissertation I have noticed my soul gaining a deeper spiritual rootedness. What began as a seed in spiritual direction years ago and started to sprout during the Leadership and Spiritual Formation coursework has now begun to grow into a small tree that promises fruit in due season. Imagining God as my mother in personal spiritual quiet spaces, in leadership preparations as a minister, and in parenting day to day, grounds me in my identity as daughter of Christ and fortifies me for the roads I’m called to tread as a pastor and as a mother. I have greater joy even in the midst of challenge and disruption. Thanks be to my mothering God for this eternal gift.

² Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 147.

APPENDIX A:
MOTHERING GOD ART

My cohort sister and dear friend, Hesed Lee, is a remarkable artist who creates Spirit-inspired pieces of beauty. Her interpretation of God as Mother (copyright 2020) is included here as an additional way to engage imagination around this important image of the Divine.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Achtemeier, Elizabeth. "Institute Essay: Why God is Not Mother." *Christianity Today* 37, no. 9 (August 16, 1992): 16.
- Adesanya, Ineda P., ed. *Kaleidoscope: Broadening the Palette in the Art of Spiritual Direction*. New York: Church Publishing, 2019.
- Anderson, Cameron J. *The Faithful Artist: A Vision for Evangelicalism and the Arts*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016.
- Anderson, Janice Capel. "Mary's Difference: Gender and Patriarchy in the Birth Narratives." *The Journal of Religion* 67, no. 2 (April 1987): 183-202.
- Angelou, Maya. *The Complete Poetry*. New York: Random House, 2015.
- Ashley, Elisa Renae. "Thriving Holistically as a Woman Married to a Minister: A Spiritual Formation Model to Support Women in the United States in the Role of Pastor's Wife." DMin diss., Portland Seminary, Portland, 2020. George Fox University Digital Commons.
- Atwood, Craig. "The Mother of God's People: The Adoration of the Holy Spirit in the Eighteenth-Century Brüdergemeine." *Church History* 68, no. 4 (Dec 1999): 886-909.
- Aurelie M. Athan, and Lisa Miller. "Motherhood as Opportunity to Learn Spiritual Values: Experiences and Insights of New Mothers." *Journal of Prenatal & Perinatal Psychology & Health* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2013): 220-253.
- Avolio, Bruce J., Fred O. Walumbwa, and Todd J. Weber. "Leadership: Current Theories, Research, and Future Directions." *Annual Review of Psychology* 60, no. 1 (2009): 421-49.
- Aquilina, Mike, and Christopher Bailey. *Mothers of the Church: The Witness of Early Christian Women*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2012.
- Baan, Lynne. "A Day Off from the God Stuff: What Is a Sabbath Rest for Pastors, When You Handle Holy Things All Week Long?" *Leadership* 28, no. 2 (2007): 34-37.
- _____. *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
- Barna Group. "How Healthy Are Pastors' Relationships?" Barna, February 15, 2017. <https://www.barna.com/research/healthy-pastors-relationships/>.
- Barton, Ruth Haley. *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018.

- Benner, David G. *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011.
- Benner, David G., and M. Basil Pennington. *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015. ebook.
- Best, Harold M. *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- Blevins, Carolyn. "Under My Wings: Jesus' Motherly Love: Matthew 23:37-39." *Review & Expositor* 104 no. 2 (May 2007): 365-374.
- Bondi, Roberta C. "Be Not Afraid: Praying to God the Father." *Modern Theology* 9, no. 3 (July 1993): 235-248.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954.
- Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*. Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2015-2017.
- Brown, Jessica Young. "Don't Be Afraid of a Future with More Bivocational Ministers." *Thriving in Ministry* (blog), November 12, 2019. <https://thrivinginministry.org/dont-be-afraid-of-a-future-with-more-bivocational-ministers/>.
- Buck, Jennifer M. "Can God Be Father and Mother?: Reflections on Language and Metaphor in Scripture." *Blog Bible* (blog), May 1, 2017. <https://blog.bible/bible-engagers-blog/entry/can-god-be-a-father-and-mother>.
- Burdette, Lauren. *Motherhood as Spiritual Practice*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2019.
- Bynum, Carolyn Walker. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1982.
- Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005.
- Calvin, John. *Commentary on Isaiah*. N.p.: Ravenio Books, 2012. Kindle.
- Campbell, Debra. "Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911): 'Theology of the Mother Hearted God.'" *The University of Chicago Press Journals* 15, no.1 (Autumn 1989): 79-101.
- Chambers, Oswald. *The Love of God: An Intimate Look at the Father-Heart of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1988.

- Chan, Simon. "Why We Call God Father." *Christianity Today* 57, no. 6 (August 13, 2013): 48.
- Chandler, Diane J. *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014.
- _____. "The Impact of Pastors' Spiritual Practices on Burnout." *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 64 no. 2 (June 2019): 1-9.
- Chong, Shiao. "Biblical Maternal Images for God." *Junia Project* (blog), May 7, 2016. <https://juniaproject.com/biblical-maternal-images-for-god/>.
- Clements, E. *Ann. Mothers on the Margin?: The Significance of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014.
- Clement of Alexandria. *Christ the Educator*. Translated by Simon P. Wood, C.P. in *The Fathers of the Church*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953.
- Coakley, Sarah. *God, Sexuality, and the Self*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Cooper-White, Pamela. "Becoming a Clergy Mother: A Study of How Motherhood Changes Ministry." *Alban at Duke Divinity School* (blog), July 7, 2004. <http://alban.org/archive/becoming-a-clergy-mother-a-study-of-how-motherhood-changes-ministry/>.
- Dzubinski, Leanne M., and Amy B. Diehl. "The Problem of Gender Essentialism and its Implication for Women in Leadership." *Journal of Leadership Studies* 12, no. 1 (2018): 56–61.
- Elliot, Mark W. and Dr. Thomas C. Oden, editors. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament XI: Isaiah 40-66*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007. ebook.
- Finley, Kathleen. *The Liturgy of Motherhood: Moments of Grace*. Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2004.
- Foster, Robert L. "The Mothering Love of God: Our Perceptions of an Angry, Old Testament Deity Are Distorted." *Christianity Today* 64, no. 2 (March 2020): 60–64.
- Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.
- Gaboury, Jason. "The Power of Praying the Magnificat Daily." *Intervarsity* (blog), March 8, 2017, <http://intervarsity.org/blog/power-praying-magnificat-daily>.

- Gender and Leadership in The PC(USA) “Summer 2016.”
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/gender-leadership-pcusa/>
- Goldingay, John. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56-66*. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014.
- Graham, Maureen. *Women of Power and Presence: The Spiritual Formation of Four Quaker Women*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #294, 1990.
- Greenman, Jeffrey P., and George Kalantzis, editors. *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.
- Greer, Valerie. “Jesus’ Feminine Self-Representation in the New Testament.” *CBE International*, December 4, 2016,
<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/jesus-feminine-self-presentation-new-testament>.
- St. Gregory the Great. *The Book of Pastoral Rule*. Translated by George E. Demacopoulos. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007.
- Haddad, Mimi. “Evidence for and Significance of Feminine God-Language from the Church Fathers to the Modern Era.” *CBE International*, July 30, 2004.
<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/evidence-and-significance-feminine-god-language>
- Hansen, David. *Long Wandering Prayer: An Invitation to Walk with God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001.
- Harrison, Susan. “What Is the Mother God Experiment?” *The Mother God Experiment: Embracing the Feminine Image of God in the Bible and in Women* (blog). Accessed March 18, 2021. <https://www.mothergodexperiment.com/what-is-the-mother-god-experiment/>
- Hebblethwaite, Margaret. *Motherhood and God*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984.
- Heifetz, Ronald. A. *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. United States: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1994.
- John Paul I. Angelus, Sunday September 10, 1978. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-i/en/angelus/documents/hf_jp_i_ang_10091978.html.
- Julian of Norwich. *Showing of Love*. Translated by Julia Bolton Holloway. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003.
- Kateusz, Ally. *Mary and Early Church Women: Hidden Leadership*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.

- Kelley, Thomas R. *A Testament of Devotion*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.
- Kocher, Craig T., Jason Byasse and James C. Howell, editors. *Mentoring for Ministry: The Grace of Growing Pastors*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017.
- Krejcir, Dr. Richard J. "Statistics on Pastors: 2016 Update." Church Leadership. 2016. <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?blogid=4545&view=post&articleid=Statistics-on-Pastors-2016-Update>.
- Lewis, Thomas, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon. *A General Theory of Love*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.
- Lipman-Blumen, Jean. "Connective Leadership: Female Leadership Styles in the 21st-Century Workplace." *Sociological Perspectives* 35, no. 1 (1992): 183-203.
- Lloyd, Deborah Koehn. *Your Vocational Credo: Practical Steps to Discover Your Unique Purpose*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015.
- Lloyd-Sidle, Patricia, ed. *Celebrating Our Call: Ordination Stories of Presbyterian Women*. Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2006.
- Lovmagne, Megan. "Theresa of Avila on Theology and Shame." *New Blackfriars* 99 no. 1081 (2018): 388–402.
- Markoe, Lauren. "Mommy, Minister and Unmarried: Single Mothers in the Pulpit." PC(USA). August 13, 2014. <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2014/8/13/mommy-minister-and-unmarried-single-mothers-pulpit/>.
- Malina, Bruce J. *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Group, 1996. ebook.
- Massey, Julie Donovan, "God as Mother." *America* 183 no. 21 (December 2000): 17–18.
- Matthews, Alice. *Gender Roles and the People of God: Rethinking What We Were Taught About Men and Women in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017.
- Miller, James E. with Susan C. Cutshall. *The Art of Being a Healing Presence: A Guide for Those in Caring Relationships*. Fort Wayne, IN: Willowgreen Publishing, 2012.
- Miller, Shelley. *Rhythms of Rest: Finding the Spirit of Sabbath in a Busy World*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2016.
- Millis, Diane M. *Conversation, The Sacred Art: Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction*. Nashville, TN: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2013.

- Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014.
- Morse, MaryKate. *A Guidebook to Prayer: Twenty-four Ways to Walk with God*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013.
- Morse, MaryKate. *Lifelong Leadership*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2020.
- Northouse, Peter G. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. 8th ed. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2019.
- Nouwen, Henri. *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2009. ebook.
- Nouwen, Henri. *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- _____. *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010.
- _____. *The Wounded Healer*. New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1979.
- _____. *You Are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living*. New York: Convergent Books, 2017.
- Oliva, Max. *God of Many Loves*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2001.
- Oliver, Mary. *Why I Wake Early*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005. Kindle.
- Oort, Johannes von. "The Holy Spirit as Feminine." *Hervormde theologiese studies* 1, no. 72, no. 1 (August 2016): e1–e6.
- Ostrander, Tina. "Our Father Who Art in Heaven." *CBE International*. January 1999, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/our-father-who-art-heaven>.
- Oswalt, John N. *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.
- Payne, Richard J., ed. *Julian of Norwich: Showings*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978.
- PC (USA). "Denominational Rolls and Statistics." 2017-2019. <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/churchwide-ministries/stats/>
- Percy, Emma. *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Peterson, Eugene. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989.

_____. *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God formed by the Words of God*. Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2017.

_____. *The Pastor: A Memoir*. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

Pew Research Center. <https://pewresearch.org/>

Pomrenke, Lee Ann. "3 Ways That Calling God 'Mother' Transforms Us." *Sojourners*, August 3, 2019. <https://sojo.net/articles/3-ways-calling-god-mother-transforms-us>

Pohl, Christine D. *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012.

Purves, Andrew. *The Resurrection of Ministry: Serving in the Hope of the Risen Lord*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.

Reid, Lucy. *She Changes Everything: Seeking the Divine on a Feminist Path*. New York: T&T Clark, 2005. ebook.

Rolheiser, Ronald. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*. New York: Image, 2014.

Rohrer, David. *The Sacred Wilderness of Pastoral Ministry: Preparing a People for the Presence of the Lord*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

Ruether, Rosemary. *Goddesses and The Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2005. ebook.

Russo, Rebecca. "Bringing Heaven Down to Earth: How Women Have Provided Soul Care and Spiritual Direction in the Church." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39, no.4 (Winter 2011): 369–370.

Ryan, Juanita R. "Seeing God More Clearly: Healing Distorted Images of God". *Journal of Christian Nursing* 13, no. 2 (1996): 23–28.

Samushonga, Hartness M. "A Theological Reflection of Bivocational Pastoral Ministry: A Personal Reflective Account of a Decade Of Bivocational Ministry Practice Experience." *Practical Theology* 5, no. 2 (2019): <https://doiorg.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/1756073X.2019.1575040>

Sawyer, Deborah, David Gunn, and Gary A. Philips. *God, Gender and the Bible*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Sharp, Erin, and Angela Huebner. "Clergywomen and Role Management: A Study of Clergywomen Negotiating Maternity Leave." *Pastoral Psychology* 63 no. 2 (2014): 147–170.

- Simon, Steven C. *Holy Walks: Learning and Praying the Psalms*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019.
- Skurja, Catherine with Jen Johnson. *Paradox Lost: Uncovering Your True Identity in Christ*. North Plains, OR: Imago Dei Ministries, 2012. Kindle.
- Smith, Hannah Whitall. *The God of All Comfort*. N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017. Kindle.
- Smith, Paul R. *Is it Ok to Call God "Mother": Considering the Feminine Face of God*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993.
- Sneddon, Pamela Shires. "Moms in Ministry: No, That's Not an Oxymoron, Just a Challenge. Meet Five Mothers Who've Made It Work." *Christian Parenting Today* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 44.
- Spencer, Aida Besancon. "Does God Have Gender?" *Priscilla Papers, the Academic Journal of CBE International*, Spring 2010.
<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/does-god-have-gender>.
- Stetina, Karin. "What the Reformation Did and Didn't Do For Women." *The Good Book Blog* (blog), October 31, 2017. <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2017/what-the-reformation-did-and-didn-t-do-for-women>.
- Stovell, Beth, ed. *Making Sense of Motherhood: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016.
- Stramara, Daniel. "St. Frances De Sales and the Maternal Love of God." *Magistra Publications* 21, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 3–27.
- Tickle, Phyllis. *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000.
- Thomas, Trudelle. "Becoming a Mother: Matrescence as Spiritual Formation." *Religious Education* 96, no.1 (January 2001): 88–105.
- Thomas, Trudelle. *Spirituality in the Mother Zone: Staying Centered, Finding God*. New York: Paulist Press, 2005.
- Thompson, Curt. *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015.
- Trible, Phyllis. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978.
- Wallace, Charles Jr., ed. *Complete Works of Susanna Wesley*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. ebook.

- Warren, Tish Harrison. "The Church is Your Mom." *Christianity Today*, May 21, 2015. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/may-web-only/church-is-your-mom.html>
- Westermann, Claus. *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1969.
- Wilhite, Lori, and Brandi Wilson. *Leading and Loving It: Encouragement for Pastors' Wives and Women in Leadership*. New York: FaithWord, 2013.
- Woodley, Randy S. *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012.
- Wright, N.T. "The Fifth Gospel: Why Isaiah Matters." *N.T. Wright Online: Renewing Minds Through Biblical Teaching* (blog). Accessed March 18, 2021. <https://www.ntwrightonline.org/the-fifth-gospel-why-isaiah-matters/>
- Zell, Katherine Schutz, and Elise McKee. *Church Mother: The Writings of a Protestant Reformer in Sixteenth-Century Germany*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. ebook.
- Zikmund, Barbara Brown, Adair T. Lummis, Patricia M. Y. Chang. *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Pres, 1998.
- Zylstra, Sarah Eekhoff. "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition, Quantified." *Christianity Today*, July 24, 2017. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/july/praise-lord-pass-ammunition-who-loves-god-guns-pew.html>.