

July 2013
Volume 3, Issue 6

Things My Mother Taught Me

By Revd Wendy Scott

Statistically there is no denying that many of our church congregations are aging and the ratio of older women to men seems disproportionate. Knowing who makes up our congregations, identifying strengths and challenges, playing to our strengths and being prepared to meet our challenges square on helps us to be realistic as we build our future as a church. Often throughout my travels I hear the cry for the need to grow youth ministry and to invest in children's and families ministry. While I do not deny the importance of investing in our younger generation I feel we risk ignoring our older generation at our peril; the journey that they have been through and the faith that has carried them through life, raising families and serving God through their local churches and wider communities is invaluable.

I recently undertook a piece of research as part of my doctoral study in which I was interested in hearing people's stories of their faith, what it meant 'to be Anglican', who they spoke to about their faith, the value they placed on it, and what it is they did with regards to acting out their faith. The stories were enriching; like gems that have shone through time they have ended up sitting in my lap. The findings I present from my study while not from specifically a feminist perspective are through the lens of a woman of God. And as a mother I cannot help but notice what other people have to say about the role their mothers played in the development of their faith and of the significance of those relationships.

Those I interviewed (which I refer to as storytellers) were an average age of 69.4 years, ranging in age from 40-80, 11 of them were women and four were men. I think this reflects a good picture of the gender split in our churches currently. Each of the storytellers described themselves as "generational Anglicans" ranging from second to fifth generation New Zealanders. The majority of the respondents had grown up in rural New Zea-



land and had only moved to larger cities for schooling, marriage or work. All of these people had experienced Sunday school in one shape or another, for some in the cohort Sunday school had been via correspondence or in other denominations because of their geographical isolation. Six out of the 15 had attended Anglican schools and had positive memories of Anglican traditions from their school experience.

Adopting a narrative approach and using a semi structured questionnaire to gather information was like pulling a Christmas cracker, you have to pull it right to get the bang and the present is always a surprise. While you want your questions answered you have to be prepared to let the story evolve as it is told, which means you are

never quite sure where the story tellers will lead you. As the story listener, after the first few stories you begin to hear a rhythm if you have pitched your questions well. Although the story tellers had not seen the questions before and many of the story tellers did not know the other story tellers, the stories they shared had a familiarity although many of the themes that developed were unexpected.

These 'surprises' were treasures that will remain with me long after the doctorate is submitted. What people felt about 'being Anglican' and the words they used to describe what it meant to be Anglican spoke volumes about the 'substance' of the church - the love of the liturgy and the traditions of the church and how we remember and recognize critical life events and stages, such as death, violence, poverty, illness. For them this was where God had become incarnational; those experiences even though they may be seen as negative life events had transformed their faith.

One of the most poignant themes was who fostered their faith (male or female) – in just about the case of all those interviewed it was said to be their mothers and grandmother who had influenced them most. Each story I heard paid homage to a mother or grandmother who had nurtured them into a faith that had become real and unshakable.

I went to church with mum; you know you sit in the services and eventually a little bit of that stuff actually does sink in.

My mother made sure that she had us understand little

bits of the Bible stories. She made sure we went to Sunday school. Some of the time we liked it, a lot of the time we thought it was pretty dull and ritualistic but the values of Christendom were there right from a very early age.

Mum's always taken me to church.

My mum was Anglican, her parents were Anglican from the UK... we always went to church as a family but I always remember sitting next to my mum.

The role of gender is paramount when it comes to storytelling, often the first stories we hear are the stories mothers tell their children, they happen on laps, at bed time and quiet times on the couch. The women of the family had helped develop children's sense of Christian identity. How we learn as a human is by imitation, whether we do what we see or have learnt by story. Mother's had told their faith to their children not just in repeating biblical narratives but had shown children how to live out their faith by the life choices they made. Men were seen less prominent in this role by all of the story tellers.

Dad, I don't think went along to church but mum... the standards were built up as a child and I can remember when she was telling me about things, especially when I had come home from school as a teenager and going off crook about somebody, she used to sit me down and say "now you just stop and think, why was that person like that? What do you think is the right thing to do?" Just basic principles. Dad never had very much to say – he was very quiet.

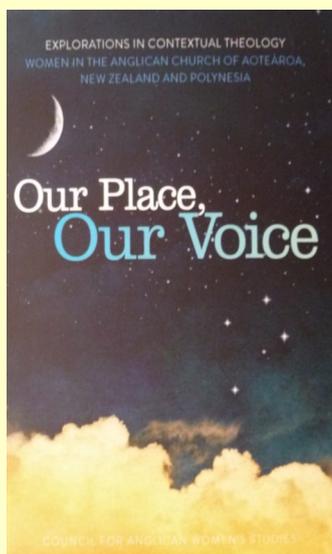
My mother was a very good church person. My father was spasmodic. I went to Sunday school and then I went to boarding school.

Although we can argue that men in our current post modern age are taking on more shared responsibility for nurturing children, women remain the primary caregivers in many families. In the stories I heard fathers were often involved in running the church service as the cleric, reader or vestryman although from the perspective of the storyteller it was the mother's/ grandmother's faith which was considered to be stronger. Only one woman spoke fondly of the role her father had played in the family's faith development, it appeared for this generation that fathers had played less a role in faith development.

I'm from a Christian home and my father used to say prayers with me and that was just lovely and it was always there and I went to Anglican schools and must admit and that helped too.

Dad was Presbyterian, mum attended more than Dad (she sang in the choir) but Dad... he had a faith but didn't go to church as often as mum did. Her father was an Anglican minister so we were sort of had to go. Being Angli-

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cans was the strong element in the family really.

There is a view that storytelling is a vehicle by which children develop communication tools and listening skills*. Those interviewed could remember back to how their faith had been formed. They spoke about what their mothers had done to foster their understanding of who God was, and of the commitment they had made (often generationally) to ensure their children heard the stories of the Bible and the importance those stories held in their family traditions. The Christian life is a life that is a whole way of living not just a set of beliefs. The mothers in the stories had helped shape their children's way of being in the world through their way of being, not just on Sundays but throughout their everyday lives. In turn, they had done the same for their children and grandchildren. The mothers had provided opportunities to orientate their children's lives to a specific way of understanding their world; not all the children who heard the stories chose to accept the Gospel as their way of living but the story was still a part of who they were and how those values had shaped their life.

The stories I heard were generational, mothers had taken their responsibilities seriously to pass on the fundamentals of faith, serving in their wider communities, attending worship regularly, contributing to that worship either through the choir, playing the organ, doing flowers, being an active member of Mother's Union or joining Women's Fellowship, and even cleaning the brass. These aspects of faith had formed a way of being for these people that had been essential to their Christian identity throughout their life. As the mothers had become grandmothers they had in turn taken the role of sharing the story of God with the next generation. The storytellers spoke about how they had done what their own mothers had done in sharing their faith with their own children and in turn grandchildren. They had taken them to church, taught them how to worship, showed them the meaning of service and had recounted the bible stories they had heard when they were children. Many spoke with great joy and a sense of fulfillment when talking about children who had strong faith driven lives and the joy of continuing to attend church together as three generations. They also shared in their stories a deep sense of frustration and sadness when talking about children who had no faith but who were prepared to perhaps join



Revd Wendy Scott with The Right Revd Justin Duckworth, Bishop of Wellington and her mother Barbara McGrath

for Christmas services to remember family traditions. When the mothers spoke of their children and grandchildren this way there was still a sense of prayerfully committing these children to God.

My children are believers but they don't go to church. One does read her Bible quite a lot. They are all confirmed but they don't go to church but they are not non-believers. Do you still talk to them about your faith? Yes. They often talk to me; they say what do you think about that Mum?

I now take my grandchildren to church; we make it a special outing. I try to show them what we do and why we do it.

People spoke about how they had perhaps 'wandered away' from their faith throughout early adulthood but that having children of their own awakened in them a sense of wanting some-

thing familiar and faith based for their own children. Life events also brought people back into a renewed relationship with God, illness, death, critical events in their personal lives lead them to reflect on what for them were the 'bigger questions of life'. The storytellers spoke of going back to what they knew, and when they returned to church that the way of worshipping or people while having changed were still familiar. Each of

these people spoke of 'finding God in that space.' They remembered nostalgically aspects of their childhood that had provided identity and deep meaning when they needed it the most**.

I used to do Sunday school by correspondence first when we lived a long way from church then we moved closer to town and my mother had an active role in the church and making sure I did my lessons, we all had to. She had been bought up reasonably high church in England and she remained a staunch Anglican all her life and my father was active on the vestry and so I went to Ngatawa and the Anglican roots were there. I wandered a bit after that but the bones of my faith had been set even though I had

* Buckley, Ray. 2003. *Dancing with words: Storytelling as legacy, culture and faith*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources. [ibid](#)



Leaders Like Lydia



Revd Sue Halapua invited women from the Diocese to her home at Bishop's House, Suva so that Ulamila Rokatakala and Revd Emily Chambers could share with them their experiences of Leaders Like Lydia hui.

Ulamila demonstrated the Raranga techniques adapting them to the vegetation available in Fiji.



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not realized it, later on when things started to fall apart I went back.

The biblical story has always been and will always continue to be a story that is passed from generation to generation. In spite of modern technology and the opportunities that it creates to 'spread the word' we still need to listen to those who are able to recount their stories. Our old people especially our mothers and grandmothers should be encouraged and empowered, to 'release' their stories, ensuring that their story



is passed onto the next generation. The strength for us as a church is that we have a multitude of story tellers within our church, our role as leaders in the church is to continue to encourage them to continue sharing their stories of faith to their children whether young or old. Helping this older generation to see the value in their faith stories as legacies that can be handed down to future generations provide unique opportunities in sharing our Gospel message to those we love most.

Stories connect us to time and place and help us to find our identity in the wider family and world. Speaking the truth about who we are and what motivates us as Christians becomes all of our responsibility whatever age we may be. Stories help us interpret who we are as individuals and what makes us as church and one body.

The Psalmist reminds us of our responsibility pass on the story of God to succeeding generations in such a way that they become positively engaged and part of that story.

Psalm 78

1 My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth.

2 I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old—

3 things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us.

4 We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.

5 He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to

teach their children,

6 so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.

7 Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.

I have presented but a single component of the stories I collected. The gem which shines out so far within those stories is the part mothers have played in helping in their children form their faith. The richness of these stories is inescapable and unmistakable and will continue to impact on my practice as a priest and on my role as a mother.

** _____. 2003. *Dancing with words: Storytelling as legacy, culture and faith*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources.

Revd Wendy Scott has been the Rural Dean of Northern Wairarapa since 2008. From August 2013, Wendy will take up the role of Ministry Educator for the Diocese of Wellington.



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The Centre for Anglican Women's Studies, commonly known as the **Women's Studies Centre** was set up to serve and to advance the interests and needs of the women of this Church particularly those undertaking Theological training.

The Link Representatives from each Diocese and Hui Amorangi have been chosen for their leadership ability to identify, gather, facilitate, resource and encourage women in their educational preparation for ministry whether lay or ordained. It is hoped that the Women's Studies Centre can continue to enjoy the support of each Diocese and Hui Amorangi in this endeavour.

The issue of increasing numbers of women in representative positions across the councils and committees of the Church is seen as a high priority and the practice of intentional mentoring by those already in national and international representative roles is seen as a good way to expose women of this church to fulfill their potential as leaders.

Ensuring that women's voices and stories are heard now and in the future is also one of our continued aims whether it be by traditional methods of publication or using more contemporary technologies like website publication. We remain optimistic that through continued support, the needs of women throughout this Province will be valued and recognized.



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EDITORIAL DISCLAIMER: *The Anglican Women's Studies Centre is committed to encouraging and enabling women's voices and perspectives from across the diversity of the Church to be shared more widely. We acknowledge that women's experiences of church differ considerably and that resultant theological perspectives also differ considerably. In general the WSC does not exercise editorial control, rather we welcome as many voices as are willing to contribute.*