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NARRATIVES OF COUPLES AFFECTED BY INFERTILITY: DARING TO BE FRUITFUL

BY

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SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR

IN

THE FACULTY OF THEOLOGY

PRETORIA UNIVERSITY

AUGUST 2008

SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR JC MüLLER

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To my parents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all who contributed to this thesis, in particular the following people:

The research participants
The reflecting team
Prof J C Müller, my study leader
Dr W V van Deventer
My husband
Reneé Marais
Johann Lodewyk Marais
Retha Kruidenier
Jacqui Vermeulen
Celesté Dennis
Karien Boonzaaier
Antonio Henrico

SUMMARY

Fertility lies at the heart of Life: it re-invigorates and regenerates. It is one of the most intimate areas of human existence.

Worldwide, infertility is on the increase. However, advances in biomedical technologies, such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) give hope to those who are suffering from infertility. At the same time it brings the question of moral responsibility into focus. The availability of donor sperm and eggs, coupled with greater recognition of the rights of lesbians and gays to become parents either by adoption, utilising donor material, or openly exercising their rights as already existing parents, have complicated previous more conservative understandings of what 'family' means.

The epistemological point of departure of this research is described in Chapter 3 and is positioned within postfoundational practical theology, with an emphasis on critical emancipative feminism. The underlying research methodology is the narrative approach, embedded in social constructionism.

The research explores the narratives of four couples. These co-researchers, affected by infertility and childlessness, share their stories of surrogacy, secondary infertility, gay parenting and miscarriage that are presented in Chapters 4 to 7. In Chapter 2 the researcher includes her story as someone living with infertility. Particular attention was paid to understand and develop insights concerning preferred lives of fruitfulness in spite of infertility and childlessness.

The explored narratives revealed varying discourses that are introduced through out the thesis, but are specifically integrated in Chapter 8. In the final chapter the author reflects critically on the research and writing process as a whole.

Key concepts: Narrative, couples, affected, infertility, fruitfulness, practical theology, postfoundationalism, feminism, social constructionism, 'Seven Movements'.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH: TILLING THE SOIL

> Quantum uncertainty may be like this. An infinitely intelligent being with perfect senses – God, Vast Intellect, or Deep Thought – might actually be able to predict exactly when a given atom of radium will decay, a given electron shift in its orbit. But, with our limited intellects and imperfect senses, we may never be able to find the trick. Indeed, because we're part of the universe, our efforts to predict it may interfere with what it was going to do.
>
> (Ian Stewart 1997:366)

1.1 Constructing stories of infertility

This thesis is embedded in the postfoundational social constructionist narrative research approach. It resides within the discipline and movement of practical theology. The practical theological epistemology and related methodology will be explained and clarified in greater detail in Chapter 3. This chapter sets out the basic themes for the rest of the research narrative. It introduces the reader to the themes of infertility and childlessness, the position of the researcher and co-researchers, the underlying interpretive framework and the relevance of the research narrative. It also presents an outline of the design of the thesis.

The stories of four very different couples were used to construct this thesis narrative. These story tellers/co-researchers shared with the researcher their 'worlds' of feelings, emotions, beliefs and interpretations in the context of infertility and childlessness. Together they all contributed to an integrated research thesis, their stories ultimately converging into a comprehensive narrative. A fifth story of infertility has been woven and written into the conversations of the other four narratives: the story of the researcher. All these people were shocked and saddened by the thought that they might never be able to have children of their own. Their stories converse and interconnect with each other, finding expression in the way infertility and childlessness are perceived, felt and lived. The author's story has been recounted because she was unable to detach herself from the text and succeed in becoming 'a neutral, authoritative and scientific voice' (Ellis &

Bochner 1996:19). Her personal narrative is present, expressive and even influential in the research process, because it was not her intention merely to collect data, but also to hear and tell stories. The researcher and the different co-researchers in this thesis narrative became involved in each other's worlds to a greater or lesser degree as they crossed boundaries and entered into each other's experiences and feelings.

The four couples are not the objects of this study. Within the social constructionist view, the 'self' is constituted in relationship with other persons (Freedman & Combs 1996:268). As subjects they live within a specific interactive context, wherein a variety of codes and meanings exits (Denzin 1991:61). Their identities were multiple: they were informants, interpreters, researchers and constructionists. Their willingness to become co-researchers with the author during the research conversations, by sharing and shaping their experiences and by courageously re-living and remembering their heartbreaks, dreams and realities, is laudable. Remembering did not just mean searching their memories (Fowler 1984:488). It also involved, to a certain extent, 're-membering' their life scripts, when, in the telling and re-telling of their stories, certain changes took place in terms of fresh understanding of their experiences and new, open-ended conclusions about them. This took place, despite the fact that it was not the researcher's intention to shape or influence the co-researchers narratives in any way.

According to Morgan (2000:77), the term 're-membering' found its way into the world of narrative therapy through the work of Michael White. Re-membering is an aspect of the narrative re-authoring process whereby people deliberately choose those whom they want to have a stronger presence as members of their club of life, or those whose presence they would like to exclude from their lives. People can also decide to privilege certain beliefs or discourses above others, resisting the beliefs they held previously. This can be one way of bringing new life to a stale situation. To 're-member' seems to point to the deliberate action of rearranging something, of deconstructing and reconstructing it.

Smit (1996:97) points out that one of the fundamental activities of the Christian faith is to remember. The worshipping community is grounded in remembering the

good news: Christ's life story, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection. In urging us to remember, God is also appealing to us to commemorate, to celebrate His narrative in our lives. In the process we are led to the profound spiritual question, not of what and how we are doing, but of whom we are (1996:96). The act of remembering also calls for confession, meaning literally to acknowledge God's viewpoints concerning our nature, distinctive identity, particular circumstances and personal relationships.

The seed of liberation has been planted in the Christian tradition of remembering and confessing, and those who utilize it can potentially be broken by it, but not crushed. Paradoxically, one can be broken into wholeness, into renewal and transformation, where remembering can both cement part of one's identity and rewrite it in a number of ways.

The narratives of these couples affected by infertility described in the pages of this text represent a viewing of their lives within the context of the time and space in which they were experienced and shared. Although their stories were told at a specific moment in time and with distinct understandings, they are not confined within the thesis. Stories are not contained merely because they are documented and presented on the written page. These narratives, told with integrity and honesty, will be moving and changing for as long as their authors re-experience and re-tell them. The thesis manuscript can therefore not have the last word. The reader is cautioned to respect these stories, because they represent the realities and truth for these couples. However, it is fair to expect that, as long as the owners of these stories continue to find new meaning, new understandings will be generated.

The research title is formulated as follows: *Narratives of couples affected by infertility: daring to be fruitful*. According to Polkinghorne (1988:36) narrative is a form of 'meaning making', and recognises the meaningfulness of individual experiences by noting how they function as parts in a whole. Human actions and events that affect human beings configures into wholes according to the roles these actions and events play in bringing about a conclusion of sorts. These

configurations are narratively expressed in linguistic productions, both oral and written.

The experiences of people who are infertile are not as fully and enthusiastically recorded as the experiences of those who have children. Of course, extensive research has been undertaken in the medical and psychological fields, although, within the general discourses and texts of society, the stories of the childless stand in a fainter light than that of those whose lives speak of bearing and rearing offspring.

The reasons for this are paradoxically both simple and complex. It is natural and 'normal' to be able to produce children, and most people are able to turn into parents, willingly or unwillingly. However, the story of infertility is a story about people on the periphery, those outside of the mainstream. It is, at best, an uncomfortable narrative of one of the surprises life throws at one, and, at worst, an angry, tragic tale of sterility and loss. It is possible to imagine that, in the arid landscape of infertility, 'Death' is not purely stealing away a living child (bad as that might be). 'Death' is snuffing out the potential life of the child of infertile parents, preventing it from drawing even a single breath.

There is an uncomfortable silence around the issue of infertility. It is often tough enough to lend an ear to the laments of those who experience such pain, suffering and indignity when it comes to the scourge of barrenness. It can be even more grueling for those who suffer from infertility and its effects to share their feelings and emotions. This is because fertility is, without doubt, one of the most intimate areas of human existence. It reaches deep into an individual's membership of the human race, as well as their place in the extended family. Infertility questions the core of someone's being at the level of sexuality, the marital/life partner, and the ability to impart life to this Life, to conceive and care for the next generation. It is associated with the loss of identity and a shattered sense of belonging (Njoroge 2006:61). It also cuts off someone's hereditary hope (and birthright?) because they are denied leaving their genetic footprint on this world after death.

In certain societies, infertility is a taboo topic. Childless African women and men often encounter a deafening silence within the Church, which echoes the cruel, hushed stigmatization they face in their communities. In most areas of Africa, motherhood is seen as almost sacred. In the absence of children, shame is heaped on the infertile woman. In fact, so utterly shameful is it that speaking about it cannot be tolerated. The question is, then: Where can the words to adequately and creatively name the childless person be found for a description that transcends the narrow, obvious definition offered by mere biological etiquette. Mercy Oduyoye (in Njoroge 2006:63) pleads for a life-giving theology that could bring the realisation that there are numerous ways in which people can be fruitful in the eyes of God. Alas, that message is underdeveloped from a theological perspective:

> There is no aid for the judgments of inferiority and shame, no clarity for the childless couple from an alternative theological view of their forms of fruitfulness, their participation in the glory of God. Only passive resignation is offered in an inadequate eschatological perspective.

The commonly-used description of infertility is: after a year's unprotected sex, no pregnancy has taken place (Uyterlinde 2003:133). It seems that the desire for a child involves a complicated motivation founded on psychological need, biological drives and historical and social tradition (McQuirk & McQuirk 1991:42). The desire for a child, and the experiences of the subsequent outcome of becoming a parent or not, are highly personal and unique. They belong to members who find themselves within the same economic, socio-cultural contexts and even to those with the same family ties.

In the ensuing thesis narrative, the differences and similarities between the four co-researcher couples are considered. In addition, the story of the author as someone living with infertility played a part in the conception and development of this research theme. The interpretations and comments of others, namely the members of the reflecting team, also nurtured the experiences and thoughts surrounding infertility.

1.2 Constructing the thesis narrative

Two ideas of Erickson (in Freedman & Combs 1996:11) largely inform the thesis. The first is that there are 'many possible experiential realities'. In other words, any episode or situation contains a plethora of alternatives. It is clear that, in the context of this thesis, certain perspectives are presented while others have been omitted. At least three agents or groups of agents are involved in this thesis narrative: the researcher and chosen theme, the co-researchers and reflecting group, and the reader. First, there is the perspective of the author/researcher, who chose to assemble the research text in a particular way simply as one amongst a variety of alternative constructs.

For instance, the author has chosen to include references from literature for both inspiration and intervention in the thesis narrative. Literature and the narrative approach, as reflection of the telling, listening and writing of stories, have much in common. Social science, including ethnography, theology and literature are closely linked in their efforts to 'deepen' and extend their 'sense of a human community' (Ellis & Bochner 1996:18). In referring to literature, the researcher also demonstrates and emphasises the permeability of boundaries between different disciplines in general, and those of practical theology and literature in particular. She also employs various styles and forms of writing in the text. For instance, she translates a verbatim report by one of the co-researchers in the form of a poem, and she uses the layered account (Ronai 1992:123) while conveying her own story of infertility. She uses self-reflection and the reflections of the co-researchers on their narratives, as well as reflections by others 'outside' the circle of co-researchers on those narratives, in order to convey and comprehend the lived experiences relevant to the thesis.

Multiple reflections are useful as an attempt to reveal or represent a fuller picture of the 'truth' of a certain event, process or experience. Myerhoff and Metzger (1980:99) argue that 'single reflections', unlike 'multiple images', always distort. 'True reflections can only come from many images, a selection offered from among which one chooses, discards, makes corrections'. Of course, 'true reflection' does not represent an objective truth, but subjective truth, or reality, as it is personally felt and understood. In telling the truth, it would probably be more

fitting to refer to 'preferred' reflection or 'preferred' reality (Freedman & Combs 1996:35) rather than true reflection or true reality.

The author's unique position in terms of her particular life-view and her ideas, experiences, dreams and fears of infertility, and people affected by infertility in particular, were instrumental in the expansion of the text as it came to be written. The experiences contained in the research and described in the text can by no means be generalized, nor are they a thorough or exhaustive reflection of the research theme.

Second, the fact that these four specific groups of co-researchers, not any other groups, took part in the research, and that the specific reflecting group, not a different group, was involved, delivers some of the definite, specific meanings encountered in this thesis narrative. These persons consist of the second group of agents. This reflecting team commented on both the conversations of the four couples and the research text as a whole, and was established as the narratives unfolded. In other words the members of the reflecting team were not picked at the beginning of the research process, but were invited as the co-researchers shared the different narratives. For instance, it seemed relevant to the researchers that an embryologist, amongst others, should reflect on the narrative of Stan and Sena concerning surrogate motherhood, and bio-medical procedures. One could say that the reflecting team 'talked back', making their opinions known within the context of the research. They included a nursing sister, a mission worker, a psychologist, a social worker, an art lover, a linguist, an embryologist, a painter, a mother who wanted more children than she already had, and a lesbian Dutch Reformed minister. The co-researchers and reflecting team consist of the second group of agents.

The third agent involved in the thesis narrative is the reader (or the hearer, when the text is read aloud). Because the reader will not be able to 'receive' the text exactly as it is 'meant' by the author or any of the other participants, a new construction will take shape. This will happen with each different reader, even with the same reader whenever the text is re-read. The meaning of the text will be re-constructed time and again within the specific context according to the reader's

assumptions, understandings, beliefs and experiences. The quality and features of the text are significant, but so also are the reader's.

'The inspirational value of reading', according to Richard Rorty (in Ellis & Bochner 1996:23), lies in allowing another person's experiences to encourage critical reflection on one's own. The reader re-arranges or re-contextualizes her current knowledge of the author's life experiences (1996:22), and in bringing herself to a textual encounter with the story, she may very well change. The direction and intensity of change cannot be predicted. The reader feels, thinks and reflects as a reader, but is, at the same time, more than just a consumer of information. Rather, she is someone who is moved by the feelings and culture of the storyteller, because she has stepped into the author's shoes. In a small way, she meets the world through the eyes of the other person/character.

Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* is a good example of 'allowing another person's experiences to encourage critical reflection of your own', as cited in the above paragraph. Written by a German jurist, the novel addresses the relationship between Michael Berg (the narrator/fictional jurist) and Hanna Schmitz as an analogy of the relationship between the generations of post-war Germany. History and philosophy are reconfigured into a human love affair suffused with guilt and romance. The affair, starting when Michael is fifteen and Hanna (a former SS guard) is thirty-six, can be compared to Germany's 'affair' with the Nazi movement (Lawyeraau 2004). Michael represents Germany's post-war generation, who judge not only the Nazi past (represented by Hanna) but also the active or passive participation of their parents and grandparents in the Holocaust atrocities (Alison 2006:163). The novel's title refers to Michael's vocal reading of his schoolbooks to Hanna. Hanna is, unbeknown to Michael, illiterate, and the reading can be interpreted as an aspect of their lovemaking ritual, with Hanna demanding that he read to her before 'she took [him] into the shower and then to bed (Schlink 1997:40). It is only later, when serving time in jail for her war crimes that Hanna learns to read and write. It becomes clear that her reading disability has determined all her life decisions (Alison 2006:163). *The Reader* also points to the dynamic between Schlink's book and the literal readers/consumers of the book. The author invites the reader to consider the idea that moral responsibility,

collective guilt, individual motivation and love are not uncomplicated black and white issues, but instead have intricate ramifications.

Schlink received critical praise from some quarters for his moving, daring novel. Other critics, though, condemned the work as sickening and depraved. Some of the most scathing attacks came from critics who felt Schlink had duped his readers into accepting Hanna, the perpetrator, too readily, because of his over-sympathetic portrayal. In a sense, she becomes the victim, while the (nameless) Jewish daughter's pain (representing that of the murdered Jews) is glossed over. Hall (2006:449) points out that, although Schlink challenges his readers to confront extremely difficult questions about guilt and moral accountability concerning the Holocaust, he also closes those questions down with his use of certain writing techniques. In locating the novel in the detective genre as well as presenting it as a love story, Schlink renders the readers more likely to 'accept the value judgments the text(s) offer, particularly in relation to their perpetrator depictions, because these make interpretive sense within the popular literary paradigms the text employs and thereby enhance the enjoyment of the reading experience' (Hall 2006:450). Clearly, the way in which a text is written influences the way in which it is read. Whether an author writes social science or fiction, he inscribes the characters' lives. With his 'narrative structures and strategies, he stages the text' (Richardson 1992:131). Even when researcher and the co-researcher together construct the research story, the author still bestows personal meaning and value, which substantially influences the reading of the text (Richardson 1992:13).

If a fourth agent could be named in the thesis narrative, it would be the theme or 'knowledge' of infertility and the various discourses existing around it. This theme presented itself to the researcher as part of her 'lived experience' of infertility. The theme's emotional and cognitive language was fervently embedded in the author's interpretative framework, to such an extent that it broadened its influence to become the object and reason for research investigation.

The second of Erickson's ideas that informed the research text is that a person's experiential realities are constituted through language (Freedman & Combs 1996:12). In this sense, language is unable to accurately represent the reality out

there, but individuals and societies choose specific language to describe their beliefs about the world. Concurrently with describing what we experience or believe about our realities, we construct those realities. The fact that language is an interactive process between people implies the possibility of negotiating different meanings in order to achieve some shared understanding (1996:28). 'Language provides us with a structure that enables us to give form and meaning to our experiences' (Demasure & Müller 2006:414).

1.3 Relevance and context

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that begetting children is integral to the human experience of the natural seasons and cycles of life. Infertility interrupts the basic progression from being a child to begetting a child, and eventually, in old age, becoming as helpless as a child. People who battle to conceive frequently feel overlooked, powerless, angry and hurt (Coetsee 1989:19). These feelings and emotions reside in the intimate personal and family spheres, often finding play, too, in the community context within which the childless individual lives. Their experiences are regularly minimized and inadequately supported within various contexts, such as communities, government, religious institutions and the media.

When childless people attempt to adopt children, they seem obliged to 'prove' that they are able and worthy of being entrusted with someone else's child. They feel prevailed on to persuade the adoption authorities and/or birth mother that they are a better option than those others who are standing in wait for the same baby. For gay people wishing to adopt, there are even more obstacles, like prejudice and often naked abhorrence on the part of others. Those couples brave enough to undergo intensive medical intervention to have a child of their own carry the additional burden of exorbitant costs (which medical aid companies do not normally cover) as well as their own and society's ethical concerns. Infertile black women in South Africa arguably have an even worse deal than that of infertile women from other race groups. They are silenced by their shame at bearing the burden of childlessness, silenced by virtue of their femaleness within the politics of gender power, silenced by the situation of poverty and illiteracy in which they often find themselves, and silenced ultimately by the fact that they will never call out

their children's names summoning them to come and sit at the kitchen table for dinner.

As mentioned earlier, the author's experiences as someone living with infertility encouraged her interest in hearing the stories of others in a similar predicament. Because she herself had, for a long time, been in subjection to the convincing voice of Silence, it was a very daring proposition to approach infertility in such an overtly public manifestation as a written document. Step by step, she overcame the dread, distress and pain of infertility that had been smothered by Silence. Since then, she has not only developed the desire to give voice to her own experiences, but, in particular, to become involved in a process that would, in a meaningful way, story and perhaps even re-story, the experiences of others affected by infertility and childlessness.

Frank (1995:xii) stresses that ill or suffering people are wounded not only in body, but also in voice, in this way corroborating the researcher's experience of allowing muteness in her life. He challenges the dominant cultural conception that the ill or suffering person should be approached as a passive 'victim' of a kind, for instance, a victim of infertility or rape. In empowering the suffering person to sooner turn her illness into story, misfortune is converted into experience, 'the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability' (1995:xii). In becoming wounded storytellers, they create emotional bonds between themselves and their listeners. As stories are told again and again, the bonds of shared experience strengthen and widen. Those who listen tell others. Storytelling helps the tellers to recover their voice in both mind and spirit, even though the mystery of illness and suffering may remain.

In support of that idea, Epston and White (1992:16) describe how they have assisted those living with loss and grief to 'publicize and circulate' the newly-constructed, alternative solution 'knowledges' emerging from their dealings with loss. Instead of keeping their experiences to themselves in their exclusive and private lives, they are challenged to share them with an identified and recruited audience of significant persons and agencies. In telling their stories to others, they

not only 'free their lives' to become 'reincorporated', but also inspire others to express their own preferred ways of living their life-stories in like manner.

Part of the relevance and value of this study lies in the opportunity that these four couples simultaneously both seized and created, that of speaking out and being heard. The context and uniqueness of their experiences are also significant. The author's curiosity about the deadness and sadness that infertility often perpetuates prompted her to find out how these couples, identified by unfruitfulness and childlessness, recognise and seek out Life through these dominant discourses. The author/ researcher was interested in whether and to what extent the above-mentioned and other socially constructed discourses of infertility affected them, and vice-versa. She was also inquisitive about the possibility of deconstructing and reconstructing aspects of their narratives.

Furthermore, the author hoped that the narratives of these couples would reach the ears and eyes of other infertile persons, but especially the hearts and minds of whose who are ignorant of, and sometimes inadvertently insensitive to the struggle of those who have to privately and publicly bear and bare their childlessness.

1.4 Literature review

The literature review the author carried out concerned the subject fields of theology, philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, medical science, bioethics and spirituality. Some of the journals consulted were:

Bibliotheca Sacra, The Christian Ministry, Word and World, Jewish Publication Society, Worship, The Journal of Pastoral Care, Journal of Religion and Health, Modern Theology, Die Kerkbode, Die Hervormer, Pastoral Psychology, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, South African Psychiatry Review, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, Social Work in Health Care, Journal of Social Issues, Women and Health, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, Journal of Health Psychology, Psychology, Social Science and Medicine, Sociological Inquiry, Evolution and Gender, Journal of Family Issues, Health Care Analysis, Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology, Bioethics and Patient Education and Counseling.

Some of the websites visited include:

http://www.ethnography.com/

http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~genzuk/Ethnographic_Research.html

http://www.qsrinternational.com/what-is-qualitative-research.aspx

http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_4/HTML/moen.htm

http:/ carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc/pract_res.html

The wide diversity of the experiences and issues of the four (five) couples stretched the range of the thesis. Contradictions and comparisons flowed from their stories. However, the general themes addressed in the literature are:

- The need to redefine and acknowledge the definition of family, including gender issues, sexuality and identities;
- Reflection on homosexuality by the Christian Church;
- An appeal to foster new languages and rituals to describe and support those who suffer from miscarriage and infertility;
- Describing infertility from a narrative, social constructionist viewpoint;
- Gay sexuality and parenthood;
- Black feminist theological viewpoints on women and childlessness;
- The emotional and ethical aspects of assisted reproductive techniques (ART);
- Recognising God's presence or absence in the face of infertility.

In the light of the research title and literature review, the primary research question posed is: What are the different perspectives or experiences of couples affected by infertility? At the end of Chapter 2, further research questions related to that general question will be asked.

1.5 Epistemology and methodology

The epistemological point of departure is postfoundationalist practical theology, which holds great respect for a particular and actual situation as a starting point for

research, but, at the same time, accedes to the influence of tradition and trans-disciplinary concerns on understandings of knowledge (Müller 2004:7). The assumptions and underpinning of postfoundationalist practical theology will be reflected in the research by the presence of the 'Seven Movements' described by Müller, based on the work of Van Huyssteen (2004:6). The process adheres to the hermeneutical dimensions of feminist theology, while a qualitative, narrative, social constructionist stance is followed. All these aspects will be considered extensively in Chapter 3.

1.6 Outline of the thesis research design

The nine chapters constructed flowed from the author's interest in the theme of infertility, and were written with the accompanying contributions of the co-researchers and reflecting team. The co-researchers were in continuous partnership with the researcher and were given opportunities to view and comment on the research report. The knowledge presented in these pages suggests that 'knowing requires a knower' who evaluates and interprets, and that any 'learning' that takes place in this respect has social and political implications (Steedman 1991:53). It means that we can so influence the kind of world in which we live that we can help to create a particular social world (1991:61).

Furthermore, the way in which this written document was constructed centers on the idea of reflexivity. The research process was experienced and documented as a socially constructed, circular process. According to Steier (1991:2), in this circular process, reflexivity is seen as the 'guiding relationship allowing for the circularity'. Just as the research process for this thesis bent or looped back on itself, so did the process of reporting and documenting. The author and co-researchers revisited different parts of the document to re-think and re-construct the process. It unfolded in a spiraling progression that allowed for multiple perspectives. The preferred epistemologies and methodologies utilized in this text informed the issues of infertility as pronounced by the meanings of the co-researchers as well as the declarations and influence of broader contexts that were present. The opposite is also true.

The author found attractive the metaphor of planting as a way of pointing in the direction of the research process. Various images of farming or cultivating the land correspond to the development of life, the close proximity of life and death and the intrinsic mystery of the interlinking between farmer, seed, soil and nature's blessings.

Chapter 2: Harrowing the seedbeds: giving a layered account

In Chapter 2, the author expands on her motivation for her research focus and her field of experience. Her explanation inevitably involves sharing part of her own story concerning her own understanding of childlessness, and is presented in a layered format.

Chapter 3: Positioning of the research: planting and fertilising the field

The epistemological issues relating to this research are explained and the practical theological positioning described. An exploration of the research design and methodology underpinning this thesis is set out.

The reader is then introduced to the narratives of the couples, or co-researchers, from Chapters 4 to 7.

Chapter 4: Harvest song of Stan and Sena: surrogate motherhood

In this chapter the narratives of Stan and Sena are documented. This includes their experiences based on the difficulties they encountered in falling pregnant with the aid of assisted reproductive technology, and the eventual outcome of begetting triplets from a procedure that included a surrogate mother. The main themes and discourses that came to the fore in the conversations are further explored.

Chapter 5: Harvest song of Hester and Florence: losing infants, inheriting a child

Hester, an unmarried black woman who suffers from secondary infertility, shares her story. Florence, the stepdaughter Hester inherited from her brother, joins in the description of their family situation. Issues like infertility in the African tradition, infant loss and African feminist theology are discussed.

Chapter 6: Harvest song of Samuel and Tienie: the making of a gay family

In this section of the research document, Samuel and Tienie, the two homosexual fathers of adopted daughters, allow the researcher into the heart of their family. The homophobia and judgmental attitudes of society at large and the Church in particular constitute a considerable challenge to their living as a 'normal' family.

Chapter 7: Harvest song of Helga and James: from miscarriage to voluntary childlessness

Helga and James is a married couple who have endured numerous miscarriages. The male voice on the subject of infertility is not often heard. In this chapter, they share the experiences of their loss and grief, and the alternative choice into which they have grown.

Chapter 8: Watering the land: discourses of growth and upgrowth

Narratives of fertility and infertility are explored from a practical theological viewpoint, and extended towards optimal cohesion with other disciplines, particularly those of medical science, psychology, ethics and sociology. Involuntary and voluntary childlessness are described in terms of identity, sexuality, motherhood, families and parenthood. Spirituality and its focus on symbol and ritual is perceived in terms of having or not having children as part one's life.

Chapter 9: Pasturing, reflecting and giving rest to the land

In the final chapter, the planting and harvesting seasons have made way for a time of rest and contemplation. Towards the ending of the research process and thesis, the author reflects critically upon the title, epistemology and methodology, the co-researchers, conversations and themes, and she concludes this document by sharing a dream.

In summary, the experiences of those living with infertility have not generally received a great deal of attention, partly because they restrict expression by others on this personal and sensitive subject. At the same time, many of the major social agents like schools, religious institutions, popular media and families either do not encourage dialogue on the experiences of infertility or else they address it in a rather superficial way. This probably intensifies the conviction of those affected by

infertility and childlessness that they are living on the periphery, and are consequently misrepresented.

This research promotes the idea of acknowledging the contextual 'truths' of people's experiences by giving voice to their stories according to their interpretations. In the process, care has been taken not to privilege the researcher's voice above those taking part in the research. The research recognises that people live their life stories within multiple realities. It also supports the plurality of the text, meaning that the research document is open to many interpretations (Ellis & Bochner 1996:15). It also recognises the position of the researcher/author as neutral, but interactive from both a personal and professional point of view. Furthermore, the language used to describe experiences and document the research process is also not neutral. This is another way of saying that we as researchers or co-researchers cannot 'extricate ourselves from language' (Ellis & Bochner 1996:20): it clings to who we are, and it clings to the world we are trying to describe.

In the following chapter, the researcher will share more of her own story as it is an integral part of the social constructionist, narrative approach that she prefers.

CHAPTER 2

HARROWING THE SEEDBEDS: GIVING A LAYERED ACCOUNT

> Katz (1988) contends that many sociologists feel repelled or threatened by the unruly content of subjective experiences. They shy away from the investigation of subjectivity in much the same fashion that individuals avoid unpleasant or dangerous activities. Subjectivity can be both unpleasant and dangerous: unpleasant because emotional, cognitive, and physical experiences frequently concern events that, in spite of their importance, are deemed inappropriate topics for polite society (including that of sociologists); dangerous because the workings of subjectivity seem to contradict so much of the rational-actor world-view on which mainstream sociology is premised.
>
> (Carolyn Ellis & Michael Flaherty 1992:1)

2.1 My story

In Chapter 1, the researcher indicated that in this section she would expand on what had motivated her research theme on the narratives of four couples affected by infertility. The research seed relating to infertility was planted from three motivational perspectives and weaved into the narrative of this chapter: foremost was the presence of God as creator of Life, crucified Lord and unknowable mystery. The second perspective came from professional interest, while the third developed from the writer's personal relationship with infertility. These three perspectives will be woven into the chapter.

This chapter, unlike the rest, is written in an unconventional manner, using a technique called the 'layered approach' (Ronai 1995:396). The aim is to textually and emotionally demonstrate the multiple identities of the researcher as they experientially emerged in the preparation for and documentation of the research. The researcher is, *inter alia*, a curious listener, a daughter, a student, a counsellor, a childless woman, a storyteller, a wife, a sister and a friend. This layered account is designed to draw the reader into some of the researcher's lived experiences, which led, in particular, to her decision to undertake research on infertility. The

reader is intended to note the fragmented way in which multiple identities present themselves, and the different modes of language they employ.

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I remember, standing at a time and place that roughly marked the 'beginning' of this research journey, wondering how 'my story' would position itself within the framework of the story of the thesis. In opting for the narrative approach, I acknowledged the social constructionist viewpoint, which asserts that the researcher finds it impossible to stand apart from that which s/he explores. In fact, the researcher brings a 'gendered, historical self' (Denzin 2001:3) to the very processes of study. The inquirer's standpoint is a reflection of what is inquired, and how it is to be done. In speaking as a researcher, I am also therefore speaking as a woman. While I am not speaking for all women or about all women, I am also not buying into the myth of 'positionless speech', which would amount to my believing that I speak from within a category inclusive of men and women (Davis 1992:54). 'Positionless speech' claims to pave the way for 'positionless truth', which is supposed to produce the kind of truth that remains unchanging, irrespective of who one is (gender included) and where one stands (1992:54). When I indicate that I am speaking as a woman, I am not attempting to reinforce the male/female dichotomy, but am rather making an honest effort to 'mark my position as female/feminist speaker' and to highlight the way in which the sexes are 'constituted through and in terms of existing discourses' (Davis 1992:54). In acknowledging our epistemological, gendered, historical and social positions as writers, researchers and storytellers, we can become more aware of our points of reference, and, precisely on this account, act more ethically.

In adhering to the rules of narrative (co-) research, I can avoid sinking into a self-indulgent quagmire of personal emotions and opinions, assumptions and biases. At the same time, I can effectively avoid pretending to be an impartial, politically-neutral, research-scientist existing in a value-free vacuum in which I am not linked to the spheres of my understandings, experiences, dreams and ideas on self.

****

After rereading the previous paragraph, I realised that something had taken place between the conception of the first and second chapters. In order to tell and write my personal narrative with a certain amount of truthful, reflexive self-expression, the identity of the 'author/researcher' invited the first person's 'I' to stand alongside it, at least, in this particular chapter, but also, in some instances, in other chapters. Incidentally, that does not mean that I had ceased to be the researcher: I was simply attempting to reveal aspects of my lived experiences as researcher for the sake of the reader, for the sake of my own understanding, and to hold on to the demands of the text in terms of the social constructionist, narrative approach. As researcher, I shall, at certain times in the space of this chapter, allow myself to speak in the first person. My story will be told, intermittently, from the different perspectives of researcher self, professional self and personal self. In order to underscore the experience of being part of all these stories at the same time, no sub-headings will be used. A brief row of asterisks will indicate that I am 'shifting forward, backward, and sideways through time, space, and various attitudes in a narrative format' (Ronai 1992:103).

****

I wrote this chapter in the form of a layered account (Ronai 1995:396), thereby constructing an emotional, introspective narrative (Ellis 1991:24) as understood in the context of auto-ethnography. Ethnography (Ellis & Bochner 1992:16) should not be seen as a discipline, but rather as an activity whereby 'patterns of cultural experience' are 'inscribed'. It crosses the borders into narrative research by falling within the social sciences and utilising subjective integrity and social constructionism in an attempt to investigate emotions, thoughts and subjective meaning (Ellis 1991:27). Both disciplines listen reflexively to the practices, texts, and representations that circulate and mediate lived experience' (Ellis & Bochner 1992:17). Ethnography, literally meaning, 'a portrait of a people', relies on up-close, personal experience and possible participation by the researcher (Genzuk 2008:2).

Ronai (1992:123) describes the layered account as an attempt to re-capture one's lived experience so that the reader can 'vicariously live' the experience through the medium of the text. She adds (1995:396):

> The layered account offers an impressionistic sketch, handing readers layers of experience so they may fill in the spaces and construct an interpretation of the writer's narrative. The readers reconstruct the subject, thus projecting more of themselves into it, and taking away more from it.

In recapturing the experience of infertility, I interact with my story emotionally, revealing my values and position, as well as the 'situationally embedded contexts' out of which such emotions and responses arise.

When I am writing in this collage form, the focus is simultaneously on my experience as a person affected by infertility, and on my experience as a researcher of the stories of others affected by infertility. Further, according to Ronai (1992:123), the layered account makes it possible to express 'the multiplicity of identities I embody when making a report'. This not only takes the reader into the cognitive and emotional responses of the researcher in a powerful way, but it also reflects on the complex, fragmented way in which 'experience is experienced'. It also underscores the fact that different disciplines, for instance, various aspects of ethnography, literature and narrative research, could impregnate each other in terms of their understandings of meaning and forms of writing/documenting. Its effect is to enrich the experience of the researcher, co-researcher and reader.

When writing this chapter I subsequently took the liberty of using my more distant voice as researcher, reporting on theoretical aspects, alongside the introspective, narrative voice (Fox 1992:330) of someone living in the experience of infertility. In the end, I suppose it is really one and the same voice, expressing multiple realities of a multiple self in multiple ways. At the same time, it makes multiple readings possible (Davies 1992:75).

****

As researcher, I am interested in the experiences of people who long for parenthood, and the ways in which they construct their realities when it is problematic or impossible to produce biological offspring in the way nature intended. The couples that were approached to become co-researchers are quite diverse, not only insofar as their specific, individual traits and circumstances are concerned, but also in their particular sexual orientation and views on what the concept 'family' means to them. The word 'couples' in the research title refers to both heterosexual and same-sex partners. They were deliberately chosen to represent a diversity of voices that had been encouraged to tell their marginalised stories. At the same time, their experiences are not representative of any particular 'group' to which they might belong, such as the 'group' of gays who adopt children, black females suffering from secondary infertility, IVF recipients, or married couples suffering miscarriages. Further, their descriptions of their lived experiences did not exhaust the many potential ways in which they could have constructed (and deconstructed) their realities around the issue of children.

The reference to diversity also points to the different responses of the four couples relative to their position of both primary and secondary infertility/childlessness. It also refers to the ways in which their stories developed. One of the couples had taken the route of undergoing fertility treatment and two couples had adopted. The fourth couple had made the decision, after numerous miscarriages, to remain 'child free'. Although it went against the grain of what they initially hoped for, they have gradually (and partially) grown into that resolution. They are in the process of seeing it as the working out of an alternative plan in their life story. It is what Berer (1990:10) would call a constructive choice and a positive development, in terms of their new, reconstructed life story.

It goes without saying that a couple consisting of two males or two females is physically incapable of having a biological child containing both their genetic material. With the inclusion of same-sex couples in this research, the definition of infertility/childlessness will thus be understood in its widest possible sense. An individual's particular sexual orientation clearly does not determine whether that person desires to have children or not, nor does it settle the issue of whether such

a person would be a 'good parent'. Gay men and lesbian women become parents in a number of ways: by becoming the partner of someone who already has children, through heterosexual relationships before they 'come out' as lesbian or gay, through adoption or fostering, and through the use of donor insemination or surrogacy (Clarke 2001:556).

It was mentioned that the interviewees/co-researchers have been invited to tell their marginalised stories. Their experiences speak from the borders of mainstream familial living. They do not fall within the normative standard of society; their stories are not typical. People who either cannot have, or do not want children, do not fit the norm. Those whom society often feels 'shouldn't have' children, for example, homosexuals, but do have them, are not regarded as normative either. Societies and communities frequently do not want to listen to the voices of these 'different lives'. At best, society gives them limited attention, because what they say does not accommodate the main plot and, even worse, often involves the uncomfortable elements of loss and hurt.

Sometimes, stories like these are not shared because the couples themselves shy away from revealing such aspects of their lives. In my experience, many from the Land of the Childless feel odd, different, even disabled in comparison with those who do not experience infertility difficulties. Much energy, time and money are spent in the quest for a baby. Such couples sense that stories of their struggling, unsuccessful attempts at becoming parents are not welcome amidst other successful, fertile stories. It could simply be too difficult to talk about. Because of some of the responses their stories have elicited in the past, the involuntary childless quickly become careful not to repeat themselves. From experience they have learned that they will probably have to endure lame jokes, shows of superficial sympathy, uncomfortable silences or unwanted, well-meant advice serving as an attempt to give some meaningful perspective. The emotional pain and anger caused by such remarks could be difficult to understand for those not in the position of desperately wanting to have children.

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(Gentle chuckle): 'Are you sure you know how children are made? You have to have sex, remember!' *(Thank you, I didn't think of that.)*
'You can have my children with pleasure'. (*No, thank you, I want my own.)*
'Count your blessings that you don't have kids, they ruin your body and your budget'. (*I don't think I would mind, I feel as if my body has let me down.)*
(Said proudly): 'My husband just looks at me, and next thing you know, I'm pregnant!' (*Are you trying to make me feel better?)*
'My life would have been completely empty without my children.' (*Yes, that is a good description of the painful hole in my heart.)*
'God has a reason for not giving you children'. *(I don't understand what I did wrong not to deserve children, and what you did right.)*
'Just pray and believe, and God will bless you with children.' *(I have prayed and believed, but maybe I should pray harder.)*
'Whose fault is it?' *(Would that change anything? Should the one 'at fault' then offer to separate from the one who is 'not at fault'?*

****

There are those (family, friends, colleagues) who may very well be genuinely concerned and emphatic about a couple's childless situation, but are aware that it is probably a very sensitive subject. They are the ones who want to reach out and say they care, but, precisely because they weigh their words, they are careful about raising the topic. They are unsure of the right thing to say, so they say too little or nothing at all. The opportunity to give much-needed support passes by. The couple tend to isolate themselves from those close to them, and often withdraw from each other, because it is so difficult to deal with the empty spaces childlessness creates.

Frequently, what are supposed to be pleasant social gatherings or close-knit family events can become uncomfortable, stressful situations for those struggling to have children. Baby showers, family gatherings where very young children are present or other celebrations of parenthood, such as christenings and children's birthday parties become dreaded events. Christmas is particularly stressful for many infertile couples. Christmas celebrates God's love for a sinful world, when he

sent His son to be born as the Saviour of sinners (Luke 2:11), and as the true Light of the world (John 1:9). However, for an infertile couple, that focus is also interpreted within a family structure: the birth of baby Jesus, the Virgin Mary as mother, and God's parenthood. In delivering His son to the world, God the Father forms a family with humankind. Now, more than ever before, His followers can be called sons and daughters, and Jesus, their saviour and their brother.

Within a family context, Christmas centres mainly on the needs and presence of small children. The many toys under the tree are another painful reminder of a couple's childlessness, and renew the realisation that another year has passed without having their own baby (McGuirk & McGuirk1991:98).

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I am astounded
Hope never seems to let up

This immense longing to see
my unborn children doesn't waver
All this time I've foolishly depended
on a sense of resignation
to gently embrace me
to protect me
from this river of weeping

For a long time I had no idea
how much this shattered me
The yearning inherits my bones
It makes me pick family names I'll never need

Fact is my loss seems more prominent with
the passing of time
Mothering my aging mother brings me face to face
with a new, bittersweet knowledge
this is how caring for a child feels

Attending a niece's wedding
I try to imagine how it would feel
to be the mother of the bride

I say to myself this is the closest you'll ever get
Remember this day

I wonder how small speaking statistically
is the chance of falling pregnant
at 45
Before it is too late

Is it too late?

My body stays defiantly empty
Its DNA formula a once-off language
Its secrets hidden from the next generation

But hope never seems to let up

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Being confronted by the reality of struggling to fall pregnant, let alone the possibility of being infertile, many couples are struck by an initial feeling of surprise and shock. Their view of themselves as individual people, as marriage partners and as members of an extended family or group is threatened. They often feel betrayed by their bodies (Louw 1998:5).

Susan Sontag (1990:125) points out that, etymologically speaking, 'sufferer' means 'patient'. She says that everyone born holds dual citizenship of both the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. Sooner or later, at least for a while, each of us is obliged to take on the passport of that 'more onerous citizenship'. She takes issue, not with the fact of illness (or suffering) itself, but with the fact that illness is often embalmed in metaphoric thinking, the kind of metaphoric thinking that encourages untruthful, stereotypical, sentimental or punitive fantasies about illness. Sontag says tuberculosis, cancer and AIDS in particular are diseases that have been affected by lurid metaphors of description to such an extent that it is hardly possible to separate the metaphoric characteristics that cling to the illness from the ill person (1990:3).

The infertile are not 'ill', not noticeably disabled, but are indeed afflicted by a condition that prevents full participation in the life cycle. The metaphors clinging to infertility have a ring of truth, but do not tell the whole story, because being infertile does not necessary equal living an infertile life.

The word 'barren' literally means 'incapable of producing offspring', 'not producing', 'bearing no fruit', and 'unfertile, producing no vegetation'. Figuratively speaking, it refers to something or some undertaking as 'fruitless', 'unprofitable', 'uninventive' and 'dull' (Hayward & Sparks 1982:90). It would indeed be quite correct to describe an infertile person as barren, since the word aptly explains such a person's physical condition.

Speaking of infertility and barrenness is reminiscent of desolation and despair. It is difficult to escape the label that such powerful language establishes around the lives of the childless. It evokes images of stark, sterile landscapes where neither seed nor water will bring life.

The metaphors of the barren earth and unfertile soil are often used in Scripture to convey a place, a people or a situation that is uncultivable. Furthermore, when God threatens to strike individuals or nations with barrenness it is usually meant as judgment and punishment in response to various forms of sinful living. Psalm 107:33 & 34 says: 'He turns rivers into a wilderness, water springs into a thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a barren, salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who dwell in it.' Barrenness normally points to a breakdown in the relationship between creator and creation. On the other hand, fertility in all its forms seems to be a clear sign of God's general goodness, and His blessed involvement, in particular, in the lives of people who are in right standing with Him. Deuteronomy 7:13 &14 says: 'And He will love you, bless you, and multiply you: He will also bless the fruit of your body and the fruit of your land… You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be male or female barren among you or among your cattle.' With these scriptures in mind, people struggling with childlessness tend to ask themselves: Did I do something to anger God? Does this mean I am not blessed, and do not deserve to have children? What should I do? How should I interpret this?

Jewish people, like their biblical ancestors, regard children as 'one of God's choicest blessings and the inability to bear children as a sorrow for which one prayed for relief' (Washofsky 2000:135). Moreover, it is a *mitzvah* (religious duty) for men and women to bring children into the world as recognition of the

sacredness of their marriage union. As God created Adam and Eve from the dust of the earth, man and woman, jointly with God, now create human life. For Jews, bearing children is indeed a very special *mitzvah*, seen in the light of 'the fulfilment of the age-old ideal of Jewish life and marriage and as an act of faith in God and in our future as a people' (2000:135).

In the African culture, having children is seen as the supreme reason for marriage. According to Gabobonwe (2004:20), most African myths of creation refer to God creating men and women and subsequently ordering them to multiply. All marriage ceremonies among African nations conclude with a request to God and the ancestors to let the newly married couple have many children. God is seen as the One who gives children as a blessing, while infertility or barrenness is interpreted as 'some sign of displeasure and judgment on the side of God (2004:22).

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For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,
says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are My ways higher than your ways and
My thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and snow come down from the heavens,
and return not there again, but water the earth
and make it bring forth and sprout, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

So shall my word be that goes forth out of My mouth:
it shall not return to Me void,
but it shall accomplish that which I please and purpose,
and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

(Isaiah 55:8-11)

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It seems as if God assures the hearer in this excerpt that whatever He wills will certainly come to pass; that the creations He speaks into existence will fit His

purposes. He will make sure of that, He promises. He also makes it clear that He is unknowable, apparently, a mystery.

Van Niekerk (2005:64) explains the idea of a mystery in the following number of ways. Firstly, it is a kind of uncertainty about something that we supposedly ought to 'know'. It is different from a problem or a riddle in that we don't succeed in solving it, but, instead, it takes hold of us. Secondly, knowledge about mystery is always veiled knowledge. Although we can make corrections or reinterpretations about the mystery as time goes by, we never succeed in solving it. In fact, our greater understanding about mystery constantly drives our attention back to the mystery, and reminds us that we have hardly any understanding. In the third place, he describes knowledge of mystery as existential knowledge. It can simply never be solved. At best, we can attempt merely to try and make sense of it. Attempting to find such meaning touches the core of our being, and changes us deeply and inherently. It changes our outlook on the world. Van Niekerk (2005:69) describes knowledge of mystery as knowledge of the whole. Not even the fabulous achievements of science can explain the totality of our existence. Lastly, he says, mystery teaches us to live with uncertainty, but at the same time, we need to orientate ourselves to searching for and receiving wisdom.

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God, I actually meant it when I said, let's call it a day.
Let's just leave it.
You and I are never going to pull off a pregnancy
and they' ve declined the opportunity to be born.
Never mind, I'm fine.
And it's really not the end of the world.

I really can find my way without my own children.

Besides, I've learned a few things from Infertility:
how to wait
how to live
how to know their voices without hearing them
how to care for the others who are disabled, off centre
how not to think about You
how to realign my faith

I can find my way without them.

I've been thinking, God,
what makes a good mother?

And if You were a mother, would You have healed my womb?

****

Agricultural communities of old learnt from nature herself the 'doctrine of death' (Lewis 1940:82), of the buried seed and the risen corn. The repeated cycles of the seasonal changes tell the drama of spring awakening from the death of winter. Lewis states that the concept of sacrifice, whether of animal or human, is as long as the history of mankind. The shedding of blood (of life) under the law is a requirement for the remission of sin and its guilt (Hebrews 9:22). Both the Indian ascetic and the Greek philosopher understand that some form of death is necessary to attain wisdom and life. 'Before the soul can stand in the presence of the Master, its feet must be washed in the blood of the heart' (Narayani 1992). It means that only through some sacrifice or suffering can we move forward.

Life and death are blood brothers and soul sisters. Hand in hand, it seems as if one is present the other is also near. A kind of death (a leaving behind, a letting go of something or someone) often necessitates the breaking forth of life. Suffering and elevation are named in one breath. One of the major themes of Christianity echoes this law:

I assure you, most solemnly I tell you.
Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just one grain: it never becomes more,
but lives by itself alone. But if it dies,
it produces many others and yields a rich harvest.

(John 12:24)

Although life is planted in us by God as an abundant gift, to actually grow in fullness and richness like a seed in good soil is not necessarily a given. If Death begins with birth, then Life has to be fought for, or at least sought out. It seems that to comprehend even a little of the processes of growth and fruitfulness, and to attain and radiate them, a counter-entry must be endured. A certain amount of

disability and death must be accepted. Maybe none of us deserves this life, and this life doesn't deserve us.

Lewis (1940:82) points out that, when it comes to the doctrine of death, the great act of martyrdom has been initiated for us, and done on our behalf, by Christ at Calvary:

> There the degree of accepted Death reaches the utmost of the imaginable and perhaps goes beyond them; not only all natural supports, but the presence of the very Father to whom the sacrifice is made deserts the victim, and surrender to God does not falter though God 'forsakes' it.

The epistemological principle of the theology of the cross, says Moltmann (1973:26), can only be the dialectic principle, that the deity of God is revealed in the paradox of the cross. Christ revealed his identity amongst those who had lost theirs, namely the sick, rejected and despised. It was precisely those who 'had been deprived of their humanity that recognised Him as the Son of Man' (1973:27). It is the marginalised who contradict societal norms, or who find themselves unable to participate in the *imago Dei*, that manages to find their experiences in the Disabled God (Willis 2002:223). Jesus is aptly named the Disabled God, because He chose to become disabled on humanity's behalf, because He refused to abandon those on the margins, but also because He was resurrected as the Disabled God. His body, bearing the marks of his wounds, corresponds with all humankind, disabled humankind, who knows and live in successive moments of disability (Shearer 1984:i), but especially with those who are noticeably and permanently disabled in body or mind.

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My initial research topic was on far safer ground in terms of my 'embodied, lived, emotional experiences' (Ronai 1992:103). I planned to explore the relationship dynamics of couples, one of which was religious and the other not. It was most certainly intellectually stimulating, researchable and scientifically acceptable, and would have made for a number of interesting stories. It would have been, by far, the easier research road to take in terms of emotional vulnerability, but it lacked an

element of authenticity and risk, because its origins did not lie within my own experiences and reflections.

Victor Frankl (1962:5) likewise expressed vulnerability when he wrote a book following his three years in four different Nazi death camps, where he came face to face with the worst of human suffering. Initially he wanted to publish the book anonymously, using only his prison number. However, he came to see that this would devalue his convictions, so, despite 'his intense dislike of exhibitionism', he eventually published under his own name. In sharing his thoughts and experiences, some of which he was not particularly proud, he lent integrity and truthfulness to his existence. He wrote about ghastly inhumaneness without resorting to drama and self-pity, and came to the conclusion that endurance is stretched to the extreme limit if meaning can be found in suffering.

I use the word, 'vulnerable', because in doing narrative research, the researcher has little place to hide behind a front of distant aloofness (read objectivity) and expertise. Richardson (in Blyer 1996:335) says the narrator's (researcher's) voice is not a 'godlike, all knowing voice, without human subjectivity and fallibility'. The stories of the researcher and the researched are, indeed, interlinked in a way that leads to a multi-voiced and participatory situation. He says the way in which the participants (researcher and co-researchers) tell their narratives must be seen as types of social analysis.

I was somewhat reluctant to do research on infertility, because I felt that confronting a personal issue with co-researchers and reflecting teams, and eventually documenting it would be too much of an expressive risk. Another personal difficulty lies in the images the very word 'infertility' conjures up. I do not think one can even mention the issue without stirring up images of unfulfilled longing, grief and wretchedness. It is potentially a dark, sombre, heavy subject. I have journeyed a long way with this theme and I have met sorrow and disappointment head-on, but my severe disappointment was tempered by time, some acceptance and even, at times, relief that I have no children. However, in choosing this theme, I worried about being perceived as a glutton for grief. In fact,

that was exactly how I felt at one of the PhD student group gatherings that were part of this research passage.

During one of those student meetings, after I had shared some of my research notes on the subject of infertility, a male co-student expressed his discomfort: 'Oh no, please, I haven't got the stomach for all this aching and agonising. This suffering's going to drive me to depression!' The group, including me, laughed heartily and with understanding at his desperate attempt to avoid the topic of loss and death. My interpretation of this minister's comment was: 'I empathise with you, but this is really too heavy for me. Rather get over it in private'. I felt like one of those 'tedious despairing literary mothers', in the words of Piet Gerbrandy referred to in the following paragraphs.

My preferred reality means not being perceived as someone who pines and suffers over her losses, and then forces her tale of woe on others. I didn't want to skim over it, or try to generate sympathy. At the same time, I wanted to write about it.

In a recent article by Leon Hanssen, *Een dorst die nooit vergaat* (2004:41), he comments on the fact that some male Dutch literary reviewers, namely Jos Joosten, Ilja Leonard Pfeiffer and Piet Gerbrandy delivered scathing critiques on female poets in particular and writers who have written about devastating sadness in the context of the death of children. He says that a tradition has evolved in which male reviewers scornfully criticise the textual pathos of grieving women writers. This is particularly so if the writing is about the loss of these mothers' own children and the grief that accompanies it. They have been accused of using their personal pain to get publicity. Instead, they are advised to try and work through their dramas as quietly as possible. '*In plaats van het drama zo stil mogelijk te verwerken, had ze de publiciteit gezocht in de rol van 'die droevige mevrouw die zo aangrijpend over haar dogter schrijft'* (Hanssen 2004:41). This comment was made about the poet Anna Enquist, who wrote '*De tussentijd'* after the death of her grown daughter in a road accident. She has been labelled as one of the '*literaturelurende wanhoopsmoeders'* (tedious literary despairing mothers) and advised not to parade her grief any longer if she wished to be taken seriously by

readers of poetry. It seems that to take autobiographical reality as a starting point, trying to achieve originality, makes for bad poetry, according to literary critic Piet Gerbrandy. However, Hanssen (2004:41) tries to show that these poets are, in fact, in a long line of respectable autobiographical authors spanning centuries.

P F Thomése, a Dutch writer, who used to be very critical of writing about personal pain, which he called 'the curse of the authentic', lost his baby daughter in 2002 and wrote *Schaduwkind* (Shadow child), which was translated into a number of languages. He said that writing about her death in an autobiographical way made it possible for him to understand his grief, and that everything he had ever learned about how one ought to write immediately became irrelevant when she died.

Renée Marais (2007:2) asks how the use of language and the process of documentation can help in assimilating the loss of a child. (And, I want to add, the loss of a child who will never be born, will never even be formed in the mother's uterus.) She discusses Jan Wolkers' novel *Een roos van vlees,* which addresses the death of his two-year old daughter, who died in 1951 from burn wounds. Wolkers was convinced that, instead of writing things away from you, you write them, in a fitting manner, towards you. Thomése (2005) uses language to preserve his daughter, to keep her in his memory. In lamenting her, he maintains that, if she is yet to be found anywhere, it is in language. At the same time, though, he bemoans the insufficiencies of language and the fact that he has to look for language to keep her alive: 'Uit haar lichaam getild en in de taal gelegd. Ze is iemand geworden die steeds opnieuw geboren moet ziet te worden: in die woorden die ik voor haar vond' (2005:80). She is now dissociated from her body and embedded in language. She has to be born anew in the words that he (her father) composes for her.

****

I have a red, red ring.

I wore it on the day I looked at that painting by my friend, Maryna.
She opens herself to her subconscious, she says,
and spills her guts in oil on canvas.

Her subconscious left a raw inferno
that took up nearly all the white space.

I have a red, red ring with nine rubies.

Behind the rampant waves of fire in the foreground
I saw something that looked like a wooden cross.
Simple and slightly skew.
Ha! She didn't even notice it!
Maryna's writing stands out in tall, bold letters,
'Red is the colour of loss,
And it smells like burnt roses'.

No, I protested, it's unfair. Red is also the colour of life.
She smiled as if she knew.
Just then I remembered the damned menstruation.

I have a red, red ring with nine blobs of blood.

****

My decision to do research in this context is relevant to my career as counsellor and trainer. I head up the Counselling and Spiritual Care division of an independent organisation at a state hospital. My approach to counselling is influenced by my studies in psychology and theology. I assumed those two disciplines would help to unlock the 'truth' about the intricacies and mysteries of human behaviour and the human mind.

Years ago, as a drama student, I was intensely interested in the motivational thinking of the characters in the plays we rehearsed. I wrote page after page of personal notes in my quest to find reasons and meaning for every action and response in their lives. The thinking behind the thinking behind acting and the reasons for a character's emotions and beliefs fascinated me. Why does character A perceives the situation in that way, and why does character B respond like that? Why are people so different? What makes them want to change?

I spent nearly as much time trying to understand the mind of the character as I did rehearsing the play. One of our textbooks stated the following: 'An actor must make the study of human nature one of his major concerns' (McGaw 1980:69). I

took that seriously. It seems that both acting and counselling have something in common with archaeology. Both try to unearth the hidden, what is not in line with an obvious, surface scan. Actors try to find the meaning 'of what lies beneath the line, how it is related to the dramatic action and to the motivating desire of the character' (McGaw 1980:152). And narrative therapists are interested in many possibilities, more realities than only the known, familiar ones. They help people experience alternative realities in their lives (Freedman & Combs 1996:11), and make use of the constructive powers of language to do so. Finding meaning, negotiating meaning between people, unearthing new meaning in things we think we've understood in a certain way can be a continuously enriching experience.

In my capacity as counsellor at a hospital, I'm involved in the holistic medical and emotional landscape of pain, illness and suffering arising from a whole spectrum of ailments. Even in this apparently depressing picture, there is hope and healing. While it may not always be on the physical level, it is often on the emotional or spiritual. I am privileged to be witness to that.

I've also been involved in the lives of patients who've experienced infertility, who've lost embryos, foetuses and children. I've journeyed with patients who've had abortions, either by choice or as an unfortunate, painful experience. I've also met and counselled those who have chosen, for various reasons, not to have children.

****

I like to believe that I have discarded many of my prejudices about people's decisions about their lives, their children and their bodies in the 12 years I've worked in the hospital environment as counsellor. It can be a difficult challenge for a woman struggling to fall pregnant to understand another female's decision to deliberately abort her baby.

For six years I was involved at the TOP (Termination of Pregnancy) clinic as supporter/counsellor/tea-maker. I was responsible, with the sister-in-charge, for briefing the potential abortion patients on their pregnancy choices. They were

reminded of their options on termination, adoption or keeping the child. Often shocked and panicky, the young girls or women would tell nobody else about their pregnancy, and then struggle alone. Sometimes they were 'nudged' to take a certain option by their mothers, friends, husbands or boyfriends. We had the responsibility of making sure that the pregnant women made an informed decision. We gave them emotional support in whatever decision they made.

If those female patients decided to go through with the termination, they would come back two to three days later to have the procedure done. The intention was to give them time to think their options through.

Working in the TOP clinic was often very hard on some of the staff members. What really got the sister in charge down was that some women came back repeatedly for termination after termination. Despite her explanations and admonitions to take precautions against falling pregnant, some girls tended to see the abortion procedure as a contraceptive.

****

'There will be no anaesthetic and as soon as you feel ok you can go home.'
The blonde woman looked spaced out and a little scared.
'O', she said, only half believing it.

Afterwards, she looked ancient, and had to lie down
in the recovery room.
Voiceless, she held my hand.
I tried to 'be there for her', but
I sensed her spirit
had left the room.

When she eventually got up, she only managed a few steps
before her arms and legs shook
and jerked into extraordinary forms.
Her head pulled backwards and away from her body.

It all happened so quickly then.

The doctor (from some Eastern bloc country,
Speaking incomprehensibly bad English) appeared from the theatre.
He shoved the 'bedpan' in my hands to help.

I shouldn't have looked at the bloody chaos

an abstract painting by Jackson Pollock
scrambled dialogue from
the theatre of the absurd
a beginning that forwards to its end

a nowhere to be seen father
a fractured counsellor
a rejected blonde

****

Heather Walton writes about conceiving theology out of infertility when she listens to 'tales of fate and not judgment' among 'women in a hospital for wombs', where she herself is a patient (Walton 2000:196). She describes a female side ward ('an alcove') where she and other women are admitted, linked by one thing: their wombs. Heather suffers from infertility and the next day a camera will probe into her body to solve the riddle of why she cannot conceive. Another patient in the ward has a dead baby inside her that has to be removed. Then there is a third patient, a minister's wife, who is also barren, like Heather. She is offered an in vitro fertilisation option that she finds impossible to accept as such an intervention would not be from the 'hand of God', but from 'human hands' (2000:200). There is also the fat, old mother, scheduled to have her womb cut away the following day. Last of all, a new girl arrives in the ward. She shrinks away from them, hiding behind 'a novel and French cigarettes' (2000:200) and apologises because she is there to have an abortion. She curses the fact that they are all 'mixed' together in such a manner. It is obscene, she says. Heather feels that, although this is abstract, it seems preposterous and awful to have all of them with their different needs in the same ward. 'In reality it feels there can't be another way' because the 'hospital is the same place exactly as the whole universe' (2000:201). In the context of her experiences in that hospital for wombs', where 'the small stories of human freedom and divine judgment' are lived and told by her and her 'sisters', she recognises God and knows herself. When she hugs her sisters to her bosom, whether it is the one with the dead baby, or the one preparing to end a life, she begins to understand. She hopes that, perhaps, 'in the future the almost impossible birth might take place in one of us' (Walton 2000:201). Instead of only

looking towards the light, she now sees God 'beyond the little lights and into the greater darkness' (2002:201):

> Here is your faith
> God is God
> of the living and the Dead
> this is how theology is done

I can echo the same kind of strange acceptance of what Heather talks about. To 'look into the greater darkness' (Walton 2002:201) means to flow with the mystery of why life gives us different gifts.

****

Human beings love and long for and care for children not only with their minds and their hearts, but also with their bodies. A woman who has carried a baby and given birth shows the physical signs of her pregnancy and labour of love. The story of her motherhood is written all over her body. Her breasts respond with flowing milk when she merely thinks about nursing her baby.

Interestingly, Candice Pert (in Damant 2003:17) proposes that emotions have a molecular basis in the body. The molecules of emotion apparently link the body and mind in one system. She sees infertility as a possible way in which the body tells a story of unexpressed pain.

The nature of trauma is such that when an individual experiences something of such great significance it cannot be ignored. However, trauma and emotional anguish are often inexpressibly painful, sometimes the person is unable to voice the pain verbally. It seems that in such instances the body is reverential of the story in the pain, and not allowing the mind to disregard the narrative, the body respects the mind's inability to language the complexity of the pain and therefore stores the story in cellular memory. The body then becomes the template on which the story is etched and subsequently played out (Damant 2003:24).

This could explain why couples that have been to gynaecologists to undergo tests concerning their inability to fall pregnant are sometimes told that: 'There is nothing really wrong with you, physically. There is really no reason why you shouldn't be able to conceive'.

****

Part of my personal life story involves a desire to fall pregnant and have children. This has played a role in planting a seed connecting researcher and research context. I thought long and hard about the wisdom of writing about and researching the issue of infertility, because it reaches into the soft belly of my own story.

****

I've just read that, and decided to rewrite it.

Part of my personal life story involves a desire to claim my place amongst women, a place reserved for those who have carried children under their hearts. Not being able to give birth has planted the seed connecting researcher and research context. I thought long and hard about the wisdom of writing about and researching the issue of infertility, because my story lies in the intimate lines of my womb.

****

It was long after my childhood years that I was conducting this research on infertility, and was once again reminded of this story. Some stories are told over and over again, as if no other interpretation is possible, just as certain recipes are always made without ever changing the ingredients. With time, the listener gets to know the story by heart: the content, the intonations and the 'message'. As a child I often listened to the story of 'The Childless Couple' alternatively entitled 'Poor Dawid and Rosa' (although that is not their real names). The couple were good friends of my parents, and were more or less the same age.

While three little girls were born to Mom and Dad, their friends remained childless. For many years they were hoping and trying for a child. When I had grown too big for the cot (painted blue-gray, decorated with little black elephants), it was passed on to them to furnish their nursery. Sometimes, when you prepare for something to happen, even if it's highly unlikely, it actually does. However, the cot was returned after a few years when it had become clear that there would be no baby.

When the story of the 'Childless Couple' was recounted, their plight was described somewhat in the fashion of a Greek tragedy. It contained the heart-rending elements of desire, bitterness, pain, hopelessness, defeat and reconciliation. It went like this. They got married because they loved each other, but life played a cruel trick on them. It was their allotted fate not to receive children. They suffered loneliness, grief and bewilderment. They tried to find answers, because they wanted to make sense of their loss. Nobody understood why it happened, and they certainly had not done anything to deserve it. Unable to come to terms with their 'disabled, second-rate marriage', scarred and shamed by their childlessness, they eventually decided to divorce.

In the year before I started school, my mother took up a teaching job. An arrangement was made with her friend, Rosa, to look after me during the mornings, until I could be fetched. My mother never dropped me without my green blanket and lots of miniature bottles of sherbet. Then auntie Rosa and I would have a ball. We sewed clothes for my yellow teddy bear on the Singer, played house-house outside in the garden, baked cookies and painted pictures.

The subtext of the 'Childless Couple's' separation implied that one of them probably blamed the other and that they subsequently decided to part ways. It was suggested that the collective pain over the children they would never have cancelled out everything that was worthwhile in their relationship. Perhaps they wanted to be free to find new partners, get married, and again try to have children. In fact, they both stayed single after the divorce, and after some time they got back together again. The often-repeated comment at this stage of the story was that

they had resumed their relationship because, after all, they only had each other. So they shouldn't live apart.

****

As I've mentioned, it was long after my childhood years, while doing this research on infertility, that I was once again reminded of this story. Some stories are told over and over, as if no other interpretations are possible, in the same way that some recipes are always made without ever changing the ingredients.

In the year before little Cindy started school, I took her under my wing. She has small fingers and thin black legs. I'm white and grownup. She's like a child and I'm like a mother. We often have a ball. We play with Barbie, do puzzles, draw pictures, and eat sandwiches dipped in hot tea. She hates potatoes.

It is then that I wonder how auntie Rosa must have felt when I was five years old and spending all those mornings with her.

****

Females are born with approximately 400 000 oocytes (ova/eggs). Every month during a woman's reproductive life only one will mature (Van Zyl 2005:18). A procedure called super-ovulation involves stimulation of the ovaries in order to increase the number of available oocytes for fertilisation (2005:29). The aim of hormone therapy is to stimulate egg production in order to enhance the chances of falling pregnant. As a woman ages, her eggs steadily deplete.

In my case, trying to fall pregnant included several unsuccessful in vitro attempts. It was an expensive endeavour in more ways than one. Financially there is a high cost to pay, and emotionally it can, at times, become unbearable. Amongst other things, it fiercely challenges a woman to revisit and re-negotiate many aspects of her life: her identity as a female, her understanding of what it means to be called a mother. It can also force her to face up to her faith in her God, in fact to ask herself in what kind of God she believes.

****

In the light of the general narrative question posed in Chapter 1, which referred to the experiential narratives of the four couples living with multiple interpretations of infertility and childlessness, as well as in view of the above layered account of the researcher's own story, further narrative questions are posed. Identifying the questions that concerned me at this early stage of the research helped me find direction for the planned conversations with my co-researchers. As expected, though, more research questions and concerns were articulated as conversations with the co-researchers commenced. They developed even further after feedback from the reflecting team. It was meaningful to revisit these questions at the closing stages of the research and the writing of the thesis, although the epistemology and methodology followed in this study never intended to seek for answers, but rather to develop dimensions of understanding and meaning. This thesis, therefore, does not build towards 'findings' and 'recommendations' in the traditional sense of the word.

- The first question stemmed from my curiosity about infertility from both a personal and professional perspective. I am living with infertility. I have never given birth and have never experienced being pregnant. I underwent numerous assisted reproductive procedures as a patient. I also function as a counsellor for people experiencing issues with their children, or because of their lack of children. I wanted to find out how the people in these research groups experienced and coped with infertility, as well as how and why they had opted for alternatives.

- Infertility is a sensitive subject. It does not correspond to the norm, and those affected by it often suffer in silence. A certain stigma surrounds it, which is more prevalent in some cultural contexts than others. I believed that the insights and interpretations that this research would bring forth would be helpful in empowering and emancipating these silent, and

sometimes shamed, voices. In what ways can the infertile, the childless, speak out without feeling even more helpless?

- The questions of morality and ethics came to the fore with the advances in new biomedical treatment options. There are, for instance, the possibilities of using donor eggs or sperm, surrogate mothers, and freezing fertilised eggs to implant at a later stage. Discarding fertilised eggs begs for ethically responsible conduct. The issue of adoption also stimulates the need to expect integrity and fairness in making and passing legislation, and the use of selection procedures. The issues of gay couples adopting children, single persons adopting babies and the practice of adopting children from a race group other than your own, ought to be revisited.

- As societal norms change and adapt to people's real life practices, family structures that were unthinkable a few decades ago are becoming more and more common. However, such 'different' families often suffer because they are seen as abnormal and unhealthy. In this research I wanted to ask the question: What constitutes a family? What meaning do children have in the lives and family relationships of the co-researchers?

- I am interested in the concept of infertility or barrenness not only from a theological viewpoint, but also from the standpoint of other disciplines. Psychological issues and societal rejection or alienation relating to infertility and parenthood make it paramount to integrating those disciplines. What kind of questions and in what language are psychology, sociology and medical science asking about infertility, and in what ways do these questions connect with the discipline of practical theology? Literature and scripture are saturated with images, words and symbols representing motherhood and fertility. Interestingly these can have enormous, albeit subtle, power in enhancing the grief and discomfort of the involuntary childless.

- The concept of fertility has a certain mythical and mystical character. From earliest times, different societies have believed that fertility can be invoked and maintained by some kind of offering. Infertile couples are often tempted to hold on to similar beliefs. Sometimes they find that their gifts have not had the desired effect, even if they've sacrificed dearly. The question of finding alternatives for infertility came to mind, and I believed that the use of a narrative research approach would lend itself well to that possibility. If, and how were the stories of infertility integrated into the lives of those affected by it, in order to make healing, fruitfulness and empowerment possible?

- Asking myself what the ultimate narrative question would be within this thesis context, the question that no one has ever asked me and that should be asked is, I think: What is the poetry and interconnectedness of love of all those who are mothered and become mothers in whatever way (including the mothering that males give).

****

In summary, both my personal experiences of battling with infertility problems and my role as counsellor have led me to this field of research. Certain preferred research questions and concerns grew out of those experiences, and it is with those issues in mind that I have constructed this research study. To a great extent this gave form and cognition to my approach and the design of this thesis narrative. In addressing the issue of people's lived experiences with infertility, I have also addressed the issue of the silences that surround it.

I chose to use the layered account to convey my story. In the process, I demonstrated that multiple identities of myself: researcher, childless woman, wife, counsellor, friend and daughter, exist side-by-side, all giving voice to this narrative.

In sharing some of my own story, I have clearly demonstrated my position as a female, subjective researcher. My biases, values and perceptions are standing in

the way of objectivity and detachment. In identifying myself as a narrative researcher, I have chosen to conduct this research process and thesis narrative with subjective integrity, within the realm of social constructionism. In Chapter 3, I will therefore proceed with an explanation of the epistemological positioning and methodological approach.

CHAPTER 3

POSITIONING OF THE RESEARCH: PLANTING AND FERTILISING THE FIELD

I am keeping the metaphors of ripening, pregnancy and birthing in mind when doing this research on infertility. I have the expectation that some kind of union, some kind of integration, is taking place between the researcher and the research process, as well as between the researcher and the co-researchers. 'For us, the aim of research is not to bring about change, but to listen to the stories and to be drawn into those stories' (Müller et al 2001:2). I foresee that we will be touched by each other's stories, and that we will perhaps be, in some way, different after these encounters.

At the same time, I believe that a separating or a bringing forth (a type of birthing) will continue, partly because of the spiraling, circular movement that takes place when research is done, when the notion of reflexivity has been implemented. According to Steier (1991:2), reflexivity makes multiple perspectives possible, including the perceiving of the self. Reflexivity is described as a 'turning back of one's experience upon oneself', by Mead (in Steier 1991:2). These processes of bending back, as well as the experiences of coming to different understandings, must be understood as socially constructed. It can be referred to as a circular process, with reflexivity as the motioning relationship, allowing for the circularity (Steier 1991:2). In the same vein, Berg (1998:17) proposes a research process that is spiraling rather than linear. Starting with an idea, the researcher is spiraling forward through all the subsequent stages of research. However, no stage (from idea, theory, design, data collection, to analysis and findings) is ever completely left behind, since there is a continuous harking back to previous processes. The 'emergent design' is described, as the fourth and final element in the hermeneutic circle in the context of research inquiry (Guba & Lincoln 1989:179). It refers to the research process of cycling and recycling the hermeneutic circle, of going back and forth as a way to get a more focused research design. The researcher is positioned from a place of 'not knowing' (or not knowing what he or she doesn't know) about various design issues, and evaluation takes place as 'an emergent

process' (1989:254). As new information emerges, and new constructions are unfolding, the design takes shape in a serial manner.

In arguing for a 'reflexive methodology' in research, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000:248) highlight the importance of breath and variation in interpretation. The principle of reflection and interpretation represents a movement of 'quadri-hermeneutics'. They identify four levels of interpretation, consisting of the empirical material or construction of data, interpretation, critical interpretation and self-critical and linguistic reflection. Various directions and reversals in the process of reflection are posited, thereby emphasising a 'broader, multilevel area of reflection' (2000:248). The term, reflexive, are preferred, instead of 'reflecting', indicating that the abovementioned levels, are' reflected in each other', and not merely, reflected upon.

Lawson (in Michael 1990:179) describes reflexivity as a critical review of one's premises and says that, taken to its extreme, it can lead to non-belief in epistemological, moral or aesthetic fundamentals. In taking reflexivity to its furthest point, all premises are enduringly questioned. Although it can be argued that reflexivity is latent in all behaviour Harr, (in Michael 1990:180), taking a stance in favour of reflexivity will enhance the conscious questioning of one's perspectives and the options of substitute points of understanding. I am confident that new meaning, new possibilities, will be born out of the telling and interpreting, the re-telling and re-interpreting that go hand in hand with narrative research.

In undertaking this research, I am paying respect to ethics and acknowledging my own values when it comes to how I think about the world, about people and about myself. I believe that, in choosing to do research in this way, on this theme, it says a great deal about me. But it also points to the kind of world I would like to live in. Steier (1991:3) suggests that we see research 'as constituted by processes of social reflexivity, and then, of self-reflexivity as social process'.

I will explain the epistemological contexts from both the theological and the methodological perspectives. In accordance with the metaphors of pregnancy and birth, that intention implies a coming together of two worlds, a complementary

relationship, I am making use of certain methodologies as a fitting response to and effusion of the theological grounding on which I have decided. Epistemologically, I position myself within the postfoundationalist point of departure and narrative practical theology. I associate myself with some of the viewpoints and values of feminist theology, specifically those of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Denise Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm. As far as my methodological preferences are concerned, I am comfortable with the assumptions of the social constructionist paradigm, and my approach will embrace some of the basic ideas of participatory action research.

3.1 Epistemology: points of departure

Epistemology points to a philosophical reflection on knowledge, including its origin, foundations, language, limitations, nature and the means of acquiring it (Deist 1984:84). Epistemology can also be seen as the 'nature of knowledge and justification' (Schwandt 1997:39), as it goes a long way to justifying the use of one particular methodology in preference to any other for a particular research project. The aim, practice and assumptions of epistemological theory and the methodology for exploring it must be in harmony.

Tracy's viewpoint deserves broad attention. Tracy (1981:5) states that, if one would like to know what theology is, one should first ask questions about the theologian's self-understanding. He explains that each theologian addresses three specific, related social realities (or publics), namely, the wider society, the academy and the church. The reality of each 'particular social locus' affects the theology and the kind of emphasis the theologian places on it. It also affects the self-understanding of the theologian' (Tracy 1981:5).

However, it is not only social realities that influence the theologian (person or group), but also the theologian, who in turn affects social realities, says Tracy (1981:69):

> Any proper understanding of praxis demands some form of authentic personal involvement and/or commitment. Any individual becomes who he or she is as an authentic or inauthentic subject by actions in an inter-subjective world with other

subjects and in relationship to concrete social and historical structures and movements'.

Tracy thus emphasises the interrelatedness of people, institutions and ideas in society and their influence on society.

He also makes a distinction between the three different disciplines of theologies as he sees them, namely, the fundamental, the systematic and the practical. Regarding the field of practical theologies, Tracy (1981:58) explains their character and focus in relation to the following five areas.

With regard to the area of primary reference group, practical theology addresses society in terms of the social, political, cultural or pastoral movement in respect of the religious focus.

Concerning modes of argument, he states that practical theologies regard praxis as the best way to understand and measure the meaning and truth of theology. In this sense, praxis is to be understood as practice that is informed by and capable of informing, as well as transforming existing theory.

Tracy regards the ethical stances of practical theologies as 'giving responsible commitment to and sometimes even involvement in a situation of praxis' (Tracy 1981:57).

Concerning religious stances, he believes practical theologians usually become personally drawn in and committed to a 'particular religious tradition or a particular praxis movement bearing religious significance'.

Lastly, with reference to expressing claims about meaning and truth, he describes practical theologies as becoming involved in praxis that leads to transformation, in addition to being able to clearly articulate this in a theological and 'philosophical, social-scientific, culturally analytic or religiously prophetic manner'.

According to Poling and Miller (in Burger 1991:17), David Tracy understands doing theology in the context of the social community as practical theology. For Tracy, the core question is how the world can be transformed in the context of theological ethics. The focus is firmly on the world, and not on the academy (which he calls fundamental theology) or on the church (which he calls systematic theology).
Does this imply, then, that theology can be practical only if it concerns the world outside the church and academe?

Demasure (2004:222) explains Tracy's definition of practical theology as follows:

> Practical Theology is the mutually critical correlation of the interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian fact and the interpreted theory and praxis of the contemporary situation.

She understands Tracy's 'mutually critical correlation' to refer to the diverse ways in which the correlation can take place: questioning and answering in a reciprocal manner between human beings, as well as a Christian message. This differs from the approach of Paul Tillich, who places the idea of questioning solely on the shoulders of the human agent, and answering only on the account of the Christian message. The term 'interpreted' points to the fact that language and symbols are needed to mediate between tradition and the here and now. Demasure explains Tracy's understanding of praxis and theory as interconnected, in such a way that praxis is seen as an expression of theory, although not as a deduction of a particular theory (when the theory would not be influenced by praxis). Tracy uses the phrase 'Christian fact', says Demasure, instead of terms like *kerugma* and message, to illustrate that Christianity is embedded, not in the imagination, but in reality. It also illustrates that Tracy, in using the term 'fact', believes that more than merely the text is embraced. Life itself is involved: events, practices, rituals and imaginings are involved. The wording of 'the contemporary situation' points to the way in which it is instrumental in the interpretation of tradition, and it also addresses the complexity of the context. It is clearly the context that shapes those questions that could or even should be asked about a certain situation (Demasure 2004:224).

The ideas of postmodernism and social constructionism have challenged all disciplines, including theology. My preference in the understanding of practical theological research (which fits in with the worldview of social constructionism) is to listen to the stories of the perspectives and convictions of people sharing how they think about God, how they believe He is communicating to them and others, how they know He is present or absent in their lives, and in the lives of the communities in which they are living. Amirtham (1989: vii) urges:

> For the sake of vitality and faithfulness, for the sake of relevance and wholeness, theology needs the experience and faith reflections of all believers. It is they who live amidst the conflicts and challenges of everyday life, it is they who strive to relate their struggles and aspirations to the faith.

Of course, the practical theologian does not come to an understanding merely by way of attaining knowledge in the act or art of listening, but by adhering to a certain process that is indeed practical in character.

In my work environment at a large state hospital, where I engage in pastoral counselling (sometimes called facilitating) with patients, family and hospital staff, the above certainly holds true. The nursing staff experience God in various ways and to different degrees in their understaffed, underpaid, conflict-ridden working conditions. Patients experience God in their emotional or physical pain: a stillbirth, HIV positive, an amputated leg, a brain tumour or a kidney transplant. They wonder what God thinks about them, or what He is trying to tell them. They sometimes want to know what I (as counsellor) think is happening to them, because often the God they meet in their hospital experience is not the one they thought they knew. The cleaners, porters and doctors would certainly arrive at uniquely different descriptions and reflections of God's presence or absence in the passages of the hospital. All these perspectives are equally valid and true, and their stories of need, of God, life, hope and death infuse my own experiences and ideas about practical theology. It also influences other areas of my existence, for example, the people, processes and particular context of this study. To say that one is doing practical theology in the hospital environment, or any other environment for that matter, means starting and staying in the context, reminding

yourself to come back to the context if you have strayed and continuously reflecting on the context. In this research, I followed similar patterns of listening and reflecting with the co-researchers concerning their stories of infertility.

3.1.1 Practical Theology

What is the task of Practical Theology, Childs (1998) asks. He distinguishes clearly between systematic and pastoral theologians, describing the latter as those 'involved in the practice of and reflection upon pastoral care' (1998:202). He emphasises that pastoral theology has two characteristics. First is its particular empiricism of being specific: the detail of the case, the situation. This is and should be the focus point. Secondly, Childs describes pastoral theology as 'a form of practical wisdom' (1998:196) notably incapable of prescribing how to do things in general because it cannot predict how things, people or situations are going to develop or turn out. The knowledge derived through practical wisdom can thus only be learned in the practical moments of caring. Childs maintains that it is a knowledge that grows out of experience and is not cognitive or intellectual. Because it involves diverse, unpredictable human beings, the strength of practical wisdom lies in its being aware and able to respond to the 'action' and the 'particular' (Childs 1998:197). This viewpoint echoes van Huyssteen's (1997:4) focus on and acknowledgment of the contextuality of theology as seen from a postfoundationalist viewpoint.

Childs gives another important insight. Practical wisdom is not acquired or 'done' in an individual manner. Instead, it involves working closely with others who share the same tradition of what practical wisdom means. It entails relationship with others and with God. It involves emotion and reflectivity, and contains the possibility of self-enrichment.

Müller (2005:3) maintains that Practical Theology should stand out clearly from its theological cousins by virtue of its focus on a specific context. Arguably, all theology should be practical, but the discipline of Practical Theology should be even more so. Its focus should furthermore include a kind of methodology that honours the abovementioned practical, contextual stance. Müller proposes a methodology that maps the movement from context to theory and yet again to

context, with purpose and intent. He describes this as the circle of practical wisdom (Müller 2005:3).

The discipline of Practical Theology has at times seemed to struggle to find its identity and calling regarding the notion of praxis, but Browning's clarification helped in some ways to find the road back to the roots of practice. Müller (2005:1) refers to the concept of postfoundationalist practical theology as 'in itself a re-discovery of the basic forms of practical theology'.

Browning (1987:7) offered a new formulation for the historical way in which theological disciplines were described. Instead of regarding practical theology as only one of the subdivisions of a long line of theological disciplines, he sees theology in its entirety as 'fundamental practical theology' (1987:8). He links his different formulation, one that he regards as 'a revolution long overdue' (1987:8), to the logical effects of the practical philosophies of Ricoeur, Gadamer, Habermas and Rorty on the discipline of theology. He was influenced in his formulation by the fact that the basic assumptions of these practical philosophies point to practical thinking as the pivotal axis of human thinking. He sees theoretical and technical thinking as mere abstractions following practical thinking.

Let me digress for a moment to consider Gadamer's conception of the hermeneutic circle, otherwise called the 'circle of understanding', as he comments on Dasein's being in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Grondin (2003:104) says that both Heidegger and Gadamer stress the phenomenological meaning of the notion of a circle as the idea 'that all understanding necessarily (ontologically) proceeds from an anticipation of meaning'. For Gadamer, it is important to insist on the phenomenological aspect of a circle because it takes into consideration the interpreter's relatedness to both his/her object and tradition. Grondin (2003:107) explains Gadamer's thoughts on the ontological nature of the circle of understanding. The *terms of the circle* point to the circle as the whole as well as to its parts. As far as the *logical pertinence* is concerned, the circle indicates a rule of interpretation, a rhetorical issue. This phenomenological circle describes 'a constant process of revision in the anticipations of understanding, in the light of a greater knowledge of the parts and in the name of a greater coherence of

interpretation'. The *limit of the metaphor* of the 'circle of understanding' is that there is really no true circle (because it should not be defined from a linear, Cartesian perspective), but it symbolises the 'necessary coming-and-going of all understanding'. In fact, the circle invites 'constant revision (re-interpretation) of the hypotheses of meaning (in the name of 'the anticipation of perfection' recognised by the thing to be understood'. According to Gadamer's thinking, *to understand* is 'above all to listen to each other about the thing'. Furthermore, the future is not within our grasp, and can be anticipated solely because of our acquired past experiences. He believes, therefore, that the *source of anticipations* lies in the precedence of the past (a work of history), and not the future.

Grondin believes the circle points to the fact that 'all understanding emerges in favour of a universal context of which we are always and already a part' (2003:106). The idea of the circle can just as well be supplanted by the notion of a 'constellation of understanding', as the subject of understanding is in the grasp of specifics: 'at such a moment, it appears in time and space, in response to such a dialogical context, in such a "stellar" horizon'. He says, 'the subject of understanding always inscribes himself in a universe, in a horizon, of vision and sharing, where he allows himself to be challenged by a constellation of questions' (Grondin 2003:106).

Returning to Browning, it was stated previously that he was influenced by Gadamer's beliefs, and he adheres to the idea that people think practically. According to Browning, fundamental practical theology contains four sub-movements: descriptive theology, historical theology, systematic and strategic practical theology. In this last analysis, practical theology comes into its full practical bloom (Browning 1987:9). Transformation often becomes possible when a community is in crisis. In the midst of the discomfort of concrete situations, new questions emerge that attest to the practical situation, which leads to new theories about the praxis (Demasure 2004:27).

Browning (in Demasure 2004:225) advocates for a conversation between three parties in order for practical theology to be relevant as 'a revised correlational conversation' in which a critical approach is at stake. The three parties include the

voices of the Christian testimony in historical context, Christian experience and practice in the current context and the Christian experience in the personal context. Browning (in Demasure 2004:226) expresses himself as follows:

> [Practical theology] must find ways to include what is so often excluded, i.e. the personal experience and practices of the interpreter and, of course, the individuals in his or her audience, but always in dialogue with both wider cultural experience and normative Christian meanings and practices.

In defending his conviction that in theology there should be a movement from practice to theory to practice, he points out that theory always springs forth from practice, it never stands on its own; and that it points to the way human thinking is inclined. Furthermore, in comprehending and utilising the composition of practice-theory-practice, formal, academic theological thinking and writing on the one hand, and the more informal, practical efforts on the other hand, are brought closer together (Browning 1987:9).

There has also been, over the past few decades, some discrepancy between the academic standing of Practical Theology as a university subject as opposed to that of other theological subjects. One of the most frequent questions concerned whether practical theology was indeed theology rather than mere technique. Another point of view questioned whether practical theology was, in fact, simply theological application, a kind of after-thought, lacking context and methodology (Burger 1991:21). These stances also affected the ways in which both the task and the vision of practical theology were formulated. Theology students often understood practical theology to be the terrain where applied skills acquired from theoretical knowledge could be exercised. Müller (2005:2) states that one of the implications of practical theology's battle to be taken seriously as a scientific partner equal to the other theological disciplines was that it was (unfortunately) becoming more and more of an intellectual academic exercise. In its efforts to obtain scientific status, practical theology had lost its sense of the balance between theory and practice. As Müller (2005:2) explains, 'a disregard has developed for the many levels and forms of the practice of practical theology on the local as well as informal level'.

Heitink's (1993:18) definition of practical theology is as follows:

> Practical Theology as science of conduct (*handelingswetenschap*) is understood here in terms of empirically orientated theological theory of mediating the Christian faith within the praxis of modern society. (*My translation*).

He stresses the continuous tension between Christian tradition/faith and the modern community because the two influence each other. One without the other means that the true context of practical theology is not acknowledged.

Gerkin (1997) promotes a cultural-linguistic model for pastoral care, whereby the role of language and interpretation is acknowledged in an effort to understand human situations. He envisages the pastor as the interpretative guide who facilitates dialogue between the 'stories of life' and the 'grounding story of the Christian faith' (Gerkin 1997:111). Practical theology thus emphasises the connection between the two.

He advocates for the continuous implementation of certain images from the history and traditions of pastoral care, which are still applicable, although modified, to the changing future that lies ahead. The first image or function is that of the pastor in the roles of priest, prophet and wise guide, to be implemented with the necessary creative wisdom. The importance of balancing the functions of ritual practices, education and prophetic imagination, in which socio-cultural discourses shape and often suppress, is crucial (Gerkin 1997:80). The second image of the pastor is as a shepherd of the flock instead of judge and director of people. Gerkin emphasises that the shepherd should protect and strengthen those who are rendered powerless by their communities. The role of pastor as mediator and reconciler must be played out in such a way as to invite listening, consideration and explanations of all concerned, those in the faith community as well as the individual members of that community. In the last instance, Gerkin (1997:82) presents the image of the pastor as ritualistic leader, functioning not only with sacramental and symbolic acts but also as soul-carer of the flock. He acknowledges that individuals and communities are formed and shaped by perceptions, behaviours and meanings from socio-cultural dynamics.

Lartey's description (2000:74) of practical theology in terms of what he calls the 'way of being and doing' approach also reflects an awareness of the influence of socio-cultural forces on individuals, groups and the Christian faith itself. This approach invites theologians to be concerned about doing theology in such a way as to be reflective, thoughtful and inclusive. It also focuses on context, aware that faith exists in practice, and that faith and experience could be transformative. He mentions that this approach of hands-on practical theology (including some feminist and black theologies) was itself marginalised, and underutilised, because it stemmed from the greater value placed on theorising and the abstractions of practical theology, in addition to the drive for scientific status (see Müller 2005).

A distrust and dislike of interpreting scripture and the sources of the Christian tradition in the abstract is one of the characteristics of the theology of liberation. Gibellini (1987:10) is careful to point out that the theology of liberation is not the whole of theology, but rather a secondary theology that presupposes:

> Christian revelation and salvation, where a multiple and varied mediation continues to be at work: philology, history and philosophy. But in the specific quality of its discourse the theology of liberation gives priority to socio-analytical mediation.

Mediation, in this instance, means the instrument to achieve its goal.

Gibellini (1987:8) describes liberation theology according to Leonard Boff's definition in terms of four elements: first the preferred option, and thereafter, three mediations. Quoted by Gibbelini, Boff says:

> The theology of liberation tries to articulate a reading of reality beginning from the poor and with a concern for the liberation of the poor; to do this it uses the humane sciences and the social sciences, engages in theological meditation and calls for pastoral actions which help the way of the oppressed.

First, liberation theology prefers and presupposes a foregoing political and ethical option *vis à vis* the gospel. It chooses to evaluate the social world from the viewpoint of the poor, reflecting on the causes or reasons for poverty, and

subsequently acting for the liberation of the poor, alongside those who are oppressed. The fact that liberation theology is guided by the force of this ethical and political option makes it 'a theology of *desde* and *sobre,* from and about praxis, theology understood strictly as a second act' (1987:9).

The three mediations in which liberation theology engages are socio-analytics, hermeneutics and praxis. Liberation theology does not use philosophical methods or mediation in order to reflect and act, but rather uses the *social sciences,* favouring *socio-analytical* mediation, in its determination to both begin and aim at praxis.

Secondly, liberation theology uses hermeneutical mediation in the light of a specific political and social state of affairs, and does not interpret scripture or Christian tradition in the abstract. In fact, an understanding of social reality is articulated into a theological understanding, with the help of the theological concept of *salvation*, and the sociological concept of *liberation* in such a way that the theological proposition of *liberation is salvation* results. The hermeneutical circle consists of a specific situation that gives rise to present questions that are then positioned to the revelation. In Gibellini's words (1987:11), liberation theology claims that, in adhering to the cycle of the hermeneutical circle, it unshackles theology from false universalism, and indeed liberates theology.

In the third instance, liberation theology is focused on praxis. It makes use of practical and pastoral mediation following the acceptance of the previous two mediations. Together, the mutual articulation of three mediations leads to 'praxis of liberation', a balanced trilogy of scrutinising the experienced reality, theological reflection and pastoral reflections and actions (Gibellini 1987:11).

Pattison and Woodward (2000:36) pose the question of how pastoral theology is done, and present a critical, creative, conversational model using three viewpoints. The conversation is firstly from the viewpoint of one's own perceptions and assumptions, feelings, ideas, beliefs. Secondly, it uses those from the Christian community and tradition. In the third place, the conversation is with the situation or practice at hand. They regard pastoral theologies as transformational knowledge

that embraces wisdom and intuition. In other words, it involves more than just cognitive knowledge, but instead engages a 'complex view of reality which incorporates meanings, images, metaphors, stories and feelings as well as thoughts and actions' (Pattison & Woodward 2000:38). Pastoral theologies must also be truthful about (one's own) reality or the realities (of other people), even if this proves difficult. Furthermore, it should be apophatic, meaning that it has credibility and relevance only if it can fearlessly face the hiddenness and uncertainties associated with a God who is often known more by His apparent absence than His presence. Pastoral theologies should also be able to reflect on experience and situations in relation to theory and faith. This refers to an ordered and self-conscious reflection that focuses on human discourse (not only on God), a reflection in which insight is expected and which engages in reflection on the reflective process itself. This critical process of reflection is, amongst others, present in feminist practical theology that is, due to the nature of this study, of epistemological relevance.

3.1.2 Feminist Practical Theology

Schumacher (2004:ix) says a *new feminism,* was first launched by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium vitae* when he said:

> In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of male domination, in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation.

This new feminism, unlike traditional feminism, supports the full development of human life for the common good of all (Schumacher 2004:x).

Nicholas regards feminist practical theology as a division of practical theology, with a particular focus on women. It includes women's lives, the diversity of their experiences, 'and the particular features of their lives that are structured or constrained by a sexist society and theology' (Nicholas 1998:158). She explains that the methods of liberation theology drew her because of its focus on the

description of people's lived experiences; it also challenged the status quo of marginalised people. The method of liberation theology allowed for an interactive process between lived experience and discourses in both society and Church. Nicholas (1998) echoes other feminist theologians like Bons-Storm (1998:6) and Ackermann (1998:94) by underlining the importance of practical theology in liberating, healing and transforming. If practical theology were about listening and reflection alone, it would be helpless to unsettle the power structures of those more privileged. Practical theology, according to Nicholas, should therefore also be about questioning the various 'interpretive frameworks' people use to make sense of their lives. These frameworks function like filters that add or subtract value to people and things. Good practical theology cannot function within 'traditional frameworks of understanding and meaning', but must activate transformation and liberation (Nicholas 1998:158) by questioning and imagining new possibilities.

Riet Bons-Storm (1998:15) sees practical theology as 'faith lived in context' which combines the following: the context of the Christian tradition in terms of different theologies and its impact in the form of sermons and Christian education, the context in which people live their lives, as well as the quickening work of the Holy Spirit. She believes this communication of the Holy Spirit speaks to the hearts of women who long for a life of abundance as envisioned by God. This communication from God to women empowers them as 'theological agents' (1998:14) and gives them the right to be heard and taken seriously. She chooses the image of a child, the most vulnerable person in society, as a suitable metaphoric instrument to measure and test the inclusiveness of the practice of practical theology. But this image is more than merely a measuring rod. Her dream for theology is that it would undergo a practical change if marginalised small voices (like those of children, women and other unheard groups) could speak out with hope and imagination, trusting those with dominant voices to be included in the 'dialogue of faith' (1998:21).

Riet Bons-Storm (1998:16) uses the metaphor of a ladder to describe the hierarchical power-rendering factors an individual has at any given time in a social–cultural climate that determines their position on a particular rung of the

ladder. Those with a considerable number of 'power-rendering factors' in their favour are at the top of the ladder. Bons-Storm points out that the lower positions are synonymous with being sidelined and silenced. Feminist practical theology makes a point of bringing the voiceless, those in a weak position on the lowest rungs of the ladder, into the conversation. However, feminist theology does not intend to listen only to the marginalised; it is inclusive and inviting to all who want to take part in a dialogue of faith.

Bons-Storm describes a type of conversation that aims at mutual understanding, and at the same time acknowledges that God cannot be known. She points out that no one can claim to have the last word about God. What is possible, however, is that, without trying to 'convince or defeat' each other, the conversation about people's inspirational vision of hope can be shared in an equal, meaningful way, to include everyone's voice, but especially the voices of those who are powerless (Bons-Storm 1998:17).

The themes of women learning to listen to themselves, the effects of patriarchal power and the possibilities of healing have been addressed by Mary Daly in her groundbreaking book *Beyond God the Father*. Insight into sexism gives hope for change, because it exposes the evil of oppression and the damage it causes to members of both sexes. In her writings, Daly describes the 'worldwide phenomenon of sexual caste' (1973:2), stretching from Saudi Arabia to Sweden, and points out how this depressing system is kept in place by both the dominant and the so-called weaker sexes. She believes female consent is obtained through *sex role socialisation*, starting at birth. Most role players (parents, teachers, media, clothes manufacturers and professionals like doctors and psychologists) contribute to the unconscious and largely uncalculated dynamics of this socialisation process. However, the effect is that the attitudes, assumptions and arrangements of a sexually hierarchical society are kept in place.

Daly (1973:2) argues that women's low caste status has been and is, to this day, masked by *sex role segregation*. It boils down to a subtle but potent message about women who should (could?) be equal but different, where 'different' actually implies 'unequal', in an understated way. It feeds an unending cycle. Low caste

status is also masked by the fact that women have various forms of *unoriginal (derivative) status* relative to their ties with men, who possess the pivotal position in society. For instance, being both a daughter and wife supports identification with patriarchal institutions and often has the effect of pitting women against each other within their families. Lastly, *ideologies* have the power to confer certain identities upon men and women, with patriarchal religion as a particularly guilty party.

Daly maintains that the Christian tradition's interpretation of the story of the fall of Adam and Eve has held far-reaching implications for both the Church and society. 'As long as the myth of feminine evil is allowed to dominate human consciousness and social arrangements, it provides the setting for women's victimisation by both women and men' (1973:48). Women are blamed for bringing 'original sin' into the world because Eve offered the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to Adam, and women henceforth internalise the blame and guilt that go with it. Their complicity in believing this false naming is largely enforced by conditioning. The real culprit is not women (who are condemned to playing the part of the original sinner/temptress), but the 'demonic power structures which induce individuals to internalize false identities' (1973:49). She points out that the revelations offered by the myth of the Fall (which many people joke about and say that they don't take seriously) has, despite the light-hearted protestations, projected a negative image of the relationship between males and females, as well as the 'nature' of women, although this is often expressed in a veiled and residual manner.

Daly's viewpoint is that the myth of women's sin in Paradise has negatively prejudiced Church doctrines and civil laws, while male-centred ethical theories, social customs and destructive cultural patterns have no doubt influenced the thinking and formulations of feminist theology. The effect has been to cast light on the way in which the Judeo-Christian tradition lies embedded in patriarchy and in the self-righteous manner in which patriarchal religion has named, interpreted and spoken for women and about women, without ever acknowledging them in their fullness as human beings. The male viewpoint was basically metamorphosed into God's viewpoint, in which process the false naming relating to women and sin was legitimised. Daly (1973:4) is unapologetic about believing that the entire conceptual systems of theology and ethics have been developed under the

conditions of patriarchy. In making use of exclusively masculine symbolism for God, using masculine symbolism for the idea of divine 'incarnation' in human nature and applying masculine symbolism in terms of the creaturely relationship to God, sexual hierarchy is promoted and even glorified. Where does healing lie? Daly proposes that 'the liberation of language is rooted in the liberation of ourselves' (1973:8).

Rosemary Radford Ruether (2000:70) maintains that the 'experience of Christ in our lives reveals the nature of God as the power of co-humanity'. The Logos-Sophia of God is beyond male and female, and Christ's human maleness represents merely one expression of his many identities. A feminist view of ministry understands the Church as both a nurturing and a prophetic community of liberation from evil, including the evil that lives in the Church itself. Feminist theology moves through a 'continually deepening spiral of critique and reconstruction' in an attempt to bring healing to the Church as a whole, and in particular to men and women, who both 'possess the fullness of human nature in its complexity' (Ruether 2000:70). She mentions that several important feminist theologians, such as Mary Daly, had left Christianity because they've lost hope that Christianity can truly reform to display an inclusive character.

3.1.3 Postfoundational Practical Theology

A more recent development in practical theology, which is also relevant to feminist practical theology, is that of postfoundational practical theology. Van Huyssteen (1997:278) understands postmodernism as a continuation of the critical aspect of modernism turned against the questions it raised, and not directly opposed to modernism. Postmodern thought is in that sense part of the modern, and at once separated, since it critically reviews modernity's foundational assumptions. Furthermore, Van Huyssteen reintroduces modernity's two distinguishing ideas in a new light. Modernity's notion of the human being as basically rational and autonomous, and the differentiation of culture into autonomous spheres, such as science, art, morality and religion, linked in a universal notion of rationality, is reconfigured in the following way: The human subject is seen as shaped, but not determined by its context; as embedded in its traditions, while at the same time capable of criticizing it (Stone 2000:416).

Both science and theology are challenged in the light of postmodernism's discard of meta-narratives, and its acceptance of pluralism as a whole (Van Huyssteen 1997:268). Van Huyssteen's (1997:1) concern about Christian theology's interdisciplinary status facing up to the diversity and pluralism of contemporary postmodern thought, resulted in him exploring if and how Christian theology can join the postmodern conversation with especially the discipline of natural, scientific knowledge. The latter, usually accepted as the ultimate paradigm of human rationality, in relation to theology's character of ever so often, private and esoteric knowledge claims. The epistemological reason for the arguments in his essays (1997) is that contemporary philosophy of science, with its enduring focus on the problem of rationality, is probably the most important connection in the debate about the nature and standing of theological knowledge. He proposes a postfoundationalist theology as a 'positive appropriation of some constructive forms of postmodern criticism', and as an alternative to the claims of foundationalism's alleged objectivity on the one hand, and the extreme forms of most non-foundationalism, on the other. He describes foundationalism as the thesis that beliefs can be justified by some self-evident item of knowledge, resulting in an inflexible and infallible position, supported by evidential systems of various convictional beliefs. Within the world of postmodernism, non-foundationalism (or anti-foundationalism) has replaced foundationalism, in both theology and philosophy of science, as the preferred form of rationality. Non-foundationalists reject the idea of strong foundations underlying our beliefs, and rather describe belief-systems as together forming 'a groundless web of interrelated beliefs' (Van Huyssteen 1997:3). In addition, it argues that every community and context has its own rationality. Van Huyssteen cautions that the interdisciplinary status of theology could be fatally undermined if non-foundationalism is applied in its extreme form, where a total relativism of rationalities is implied. He proposes instead a postfoundationalist theology as a viable third epistemological option that makes the following two moves. 'First, it fully acknowledges contextuality, the epistemically crucial role of interpreted experience, and the way that tradition shapes the epistemic and non-epistemic values that inform our reflection about God and what some of us believe to be God's presence in this world. At the same time, however, a postfoundationalist

notion of rationality in theological reflection claims to point creatively beyond the confines of the local community, group or culture towards a plausible form of interdisciplinary conversation' (Van Huyssteen 1997:4).

Stone (2000:417) comments on Van Huyssteen's refigured notion of rationality, as 'not a superimposed meta-narrative, but rather an emerging pattern that is evident in the ways of trying to make sense in every day life, whether it involves a quest for understanding, intelligibility or judgment'. Van Huyssteen rejects the idea that the domains of religious faith and scientific thought are exemplified by opposing notions of rationality. In the first instance, the a-contextual, generic, abstract (and simple) terms of 'theology and science' should be rejected in favour of specific and definite descriptions in terms of interdisciplinary dialogue between parties. Secondly, what Van Huyssteen calls 'the resources of human rationality' aid in overcoming different and seemingly incompatible reasoning strategies within different disciplines by leaving abstractions behind, and focussing on specific, interdisciplinary problems in a contextual and transversal way.

Flowing from the strengths of this 'more holistic, embodied way' to think about human rationality is the possibility of all theological and scientific disciplines to cross disciplinary lines in multidisciplinary research. While arguing for the integrity of their specific disciplines, overlapping concerns and shared problems can be identified. It opens up the opportunity for intellectual support or new insight from other disciplines.

Van Huyssteen (2006:41) describes interdisciplinary dialogue as a form of transversal reasoning, emerging as a 'performative praxis where our multiple beliefs and practices, our habits of thought and attitudes, our prejudices and judgments converge'. It is possible to maintain personal convictions, while at the same time stepping beyond the limitations and boundaries of specific contexts and disciplines. With this in mind, he proposes that theology should be able to claim a public, democratic voice on a par with other disciplines.

When referring specifically to a postfoundationalist theology, Van Huyssteen once again stresses the movement of being both contextual and interdisciplinary. Not only are we to acknowledge and articulate the way our belief is embedded in God,

and shaped by our personal and ecclesial commitments, but we should be critical of them. A rethinking and reconstructing is possible in as much as we acknowledge how its flexible and fluid nature have been shaped by the ongoing process of history (2006:114). The contextual and interdisciplinary movements as described by Van Huyssteen, form vital elements of the reconstruction of pastoral narrative theology and its related methodological epistemology.

3.1.4 Pastoral narrative theology

Demasure (2004:176) posits that the disciplines of theology, psychology and hermeneutics are all interested in the reality of the 'self'. The perspective differs in each case. What psychology names the self (or ego), theology calls the soul, according to Gerkin (in Demasure 2004:176). Furthermore, the hermeneutical self gives meaning to experiences and events. The life of the soul refers to the dynamics between three angles of a triangle consisting of the self/ego, the social situation and the interpretations of faith and culture. Constant interactions take place between so-called forces (things that are a given in a person's life) and the meaning that the individual ascribes to them. Gerkin (1984:93) maintains:

> The life of the self forms an interpretation, a narrative story, whose central task is to hold in coherence and continuity the relationships of the self within itself and with the object world beyond. I shall call this work of the self's life the hermeneutics of the self or, in more theological language, the life of the soul….

In addition to the complicated reciprocal workings of the elements of the life of the soul, Gerkin (1984:105) also accentuates the perspective of time. The self stands in relation to time and interprets events according to three different concepts of time. Time, as it relates to the experience of one's life cycle places an individual in a position relative to the past, present and future. In trying to find 'coherence' and 'continuity', the person reviews and relives experiences in ways that not only make a new future possible, but can also change their perceptions on the past. The self hovers between anticipation of what is to come, and the memories of what has been. The second concept of time underscores the context of the socio-cultural and historical in the life of an individual. While cultural influences certainly affect people, the opposite is also true. Tradition and innovation are both calling out to the individual and the group. Thirdly, the eschatological time frame overrides the

here and now, as well as the past. God's actions and communication place the person in a space and time between the already and the not yet. Gerkin (1984:146) uses the metaphor of a pilgrimage of the life of a soul, to describe the intention and hermeneutical process of trying to integrate the self in terms of all the different angles and planes described. 'The arena of potential fragmentation is enlarged to include all aspects of the self's interpretive life, including the ultimate aspect of its life in God' (1984:146). Complete integration is, however, not possible in this life. In other words, the self is not heading for the actualisation of itself in the sense that Carl Rogers proposed (Meyer et al 1988:401). That would demand a high level of congruency in which it is possible to know oneself completely (by knowing one's experiences as well as one's psychological and physical abilities) and to actualise one's self by integrating all the factors mentioned. Demasure (2004:180) points out that in Gerkin's critique on Hiltner's description of self-realisation he makes a distinction between the psychological and theological perspectives. In the theological understanding, as he sees it, humans can merely approach wholeness and integration in a fragmentary way, but never attain it.

Gerkin (1986:48) considers narrative theology to be grounded in the belief that the story of God as creator, sustainer and redeemer (as portrayed in the Bible) is also the story of the world. It is the main narrative against which all other narratives are resting. This Story is open-ended and refers to God's activity and stake in all the affairs of the world, and on behalf of the world as a whole, in all its pluralism and inconsistencies.

Furthermore, for Gerkin, the term 'narrative theology' means 'that the interpretation of the affairs of the world by Christian theology is fundamentally metaphorical' (1986:52). The biblical narrative of God conveys a rich variety of stories and themes that simultaneously reveal and hide the story of God. Part of this paradox is brought about by the use of metaphorical language in the Bible, but also because God is so utterly different from His creatures. Gerkin (1986:53) advocates that the story of Christian theology must be continuously set against the stories of all aspects of life, as well as all other religions.

Ganzevoort (1989:9) concurs with Gerkin on the viewpoints of the hermeneutical pastoral approach (1984, 1986) when he describes it as a personal meeting at which the narrative of the patient/client takes centre stage. The atmosphere and intentions in the meeting(s) make possible the action of searching in togetherness for meaning, comprehension, life story, interpretation and patterns of interpretation.

He believes the hermeneutical, interpretive approach is especially helpful for people who have experienced some kind of loss in their lives, for instance people affected by infertility. When people tell their life stories they weave fact and interpretation into authentic experiences. They try to understand what has happened or is happening and how it is affecting their today and tomorrows. In trying to understand, they interpret, and organise what they grasp into a picture, pattern or whole. Boisen (in Ganzevoort 1989:88) explains that spiritual suffering occurs at the point where it becomes difficult or impossible to find a link between an idea, experience or happening and a language of meaning relating to that. It is precisely at those points when the Life story breaks up, when expectations and future dreams collide with daily experiences. Then the Life story can be found again in a new way with new interpretations.

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Gerkin (1984:26) sees the primary function of pastoral counsellors to be that of listening and interpreting. Listening demonstrates caring, and makes healing possible. It is a powerful, but very elementary way of forging a link with another person. To listen to somebody is to give the utmost, namely, your attention, says Rachel Remen (1996:143). She believes that, if one listens without interrupting, a strong connection forms. Respect is shown. Listening means: not interrupting someone's story. In other words, listeners should not be tempted to start pouring out their own stories, even when the motive is to show solidarity with the one they are listening to. The listener should not subtly silence that person. The good intention of immediately giving a tissue in response to a counselee who becomes tearful is an example of an action that could potentially stop the flow of what is being communicated. It could be interpreted as: 'Your tears make me uncomfortable, so please, get a grip on yourself'. Or: 'Please stop crying, so that we can get on with the real communication, which is the verbal conversation

between us'. To encourage the person to keep on crying is equally unacceptable. 'Cry as much as you want to, just let it all out', makes the person self-conscious because it elevates the crying.

It is not a question of refusing the box of tissues when the counselee asks for it, but the counsellor has to be aware of what their words and actions might convey to the other person in terms of directing the process. To cry is to communicate a number of emotions. To be left in peace to cry gives one the chance to experience those emotions and learn from them. Remen (1996:143) confesses that the art of 'just listening' was one of the most difficult things she ever had to learn, because the process meant that she had to unlearn a number of things. She had always thought that just listening reflected timidity and, worse, stupidity. However, silent listening has tremendous healing power.

During a presentation at the University of Pretoria in July 2006, Professor Ganzevoort said that a methodology for pastoral theology that moves beyond mere intuition is needed, and that meaningful narratives help to harmonise a life story. The presence of suffering in an individual's story could be an indication that an inadequate interpretation has been made. In the realm of narrative theology, suffering can be described as fragments that do not fit into a life story. Stories can change someone's life, and a narrative can be seen as one of many possible perspectives on that person's reality. Ganzevoort believes that the most fundamental stories of our lives are conflicting.

He sees religion as narrative at its core, and humans as symbolic in nature. We therefore play the narrative game in our religious rituals and tell stories in our sermons. The question is: How does our religion function in our life stories? Religion itself should be acknowledged as a life story, capable of changing with the larger life story as such. As people can reach out only with symbols and metaphors, a full realisation of God is not possible. Revelation, that is, the way God comes closer and speaks to us, is also embodied by narrative. It is only in the course of our life stories that we can find God.

Truter (2002:2) alludes to this notion, preferring a contextual theology as a safe place for patients to meet God. The meaning that God gives to their lives can be explored within the 'experienced life context of her or his own illness', in other words, in their position of 'illness-as-lived' (2002:2). A relationship with God does not lie within unshakeable dogma and understandings, but rather in finding meaning in conversations with God (and not so much about God) within the unique, daily realities of people's lives.

Whether or not the narrative of the client embodies illness or crisis, Ganzevoort (2006) describes narrative theology as an act of creating a reality by moving from the propositional stance to the performative stance. The propositional narrative question expresses interest in the meaning of something, while the performative narrative question looks into how what someone believes is affecting (helping) them in the life they are living. It is not particularly concerned with whether it is true or not. As language is embedded in relationships, the question to be asked is: How does it shape our relationships? However, it must be accepted as a given that there is always a language barrier of some sort, as it is an aspect of human fallacy. Three different dimensions of text and action are at play. The syntactic dimension asks the question about what is happening in the text, while the semantic is interested in its meaning. In the last instance, the pragmatic or performative dimension is concerned about what text and action do to the interviewer and interviewee.

Ganzevoort (2006) describes three different ways in which practical theology can be applied: as liberating action (pointing to the reason for doing research that will possibly bring about change); as empirical research (to get as close as possible to understanding what is going on); as ministry formation (the training of pastors and ministers). In doing practical theology as liberating action, the interviewer is, in a sense, imposing his or her story on the interviewee. However, in agreeing to participate, the interviewee is playing the game of narrating/ telling stories with the interviewer and both of them anticipate change. In this context, stories are taken as self-construction and narratives are used to promote, for example, empowerment of the marginalised.

Narrative research is characteristically driven towards a culture of action. Its methodology invites action in terms of participation and interpretation, but it reaches beyond the local context to social and cultural patterns. It questions, dares and challenges ideas and practices to change (to act upon themselves).

3.2 Epistemology: methodological perspectives

3.2.1 Social constructionism

In view of the preceding epistemological discussion on practical theological, feminist practical theological, postfoundational practical theological and pastoral narrative theological points of departure, the methodological approach presented below will of consequence reflect an own character. This methodological approach facilitated the whole process of doing research as well as writing this thesis.

Anderson and Goolishan (in McNamee & Gergen 1992) describe the development of systemic (family) therapies during the past decades from second-order cybernetics and then constructivism to a position where interpretation and hermeneutics take centre stage. This narrative social constructionist viewpoint makes room for acknowledgement of the individual's experiences. The cybernetic metaphor of mechanical feedback loops understood and defined humans as 'information processing machines' while third-order cybernetics sets people free to be 'meaning-generating beings' (1992:26).

Van Meygaarden (2005:17) states that social constructionists place an emphasis on social interpretation and the intersubjective influence of language, family and culture, with meanings thus emerging from 'a flow of constantly changing narratives. However, social constructionism is unlike constructivism in that it sees the creation of knowledge not as an internal process, but as an inter-subjective social process where perceptions co-evolve within a network of communication (Van Meygaarden 2005:17). Constructivism does not take into account the role of language in the process of creating meaning, nor the possibility that broader social networks contribute to this process (Van Meygaarden 2005:18).

Van Meygaarden (2005:18) further writes that social constructionism understands reality as a construction that functions in relation to the belief system we bring into

a particular situation and according to which we operate. The context in which we create meaning thus becomes a crucial component.

Van Meygaarden (2005:20) therefore quotes Dell (1982:57) who describes that 'speaking about experience or reporting experience can only be a reflection upon, or a representation of experience'. Dell notes that there are differences between our experience, our description of that experience and our explanation of the description and the experience…Meanings are thus formed in interactions through the medium of language. Social constructionism asserts that knowledge is generated interactively through the vehicle of language within a context that has certain characteristics (Van Meygaarden 2005:19). Social constructionism, thus shares two premises with postmodernism namely, language is important in the process of meaning making and that the central focus is on relationships.

When we use social constructionist frameworks in developing metaphors when doing research, we see how the stories that circulate in society constitute our lives and those of the people with whom we work. Kathy Weingarten (1991:289) writes:

> In social constructionism, the experience of self exists in the ongoing interchange with others… the self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into those narratives.

Freedman and Combs (1996:22) expanded on the social constructionist approach, positioning it within what was referred to earlier on in this section as 'third- order cybernetics'. They emphasise the following four ideas:

(i) Realities are socially constructed:

The social construction of reality describes how ideas, practices, beliefs and the like come to have reality status in a given social group. Hoffman (1990:3) favours ideas relating to social constructionism since, instead of seeing individuals as stuck in 'biological isolation booths', which she conceives as having an evolving set of meanings that emerge from interactions between people. These meanings may not exist in an individual mind as such – they are part of a general flow of constantly changing narratives (Freedman & Combs 1996:26).

(ii) Realities are constituted through language:

In agreeing on the meaning of a particular word or gesture, we agree on a description which shapes subsequent descriptions, and also directs our perceptions towards making new descriptions. 'Our language tells us how to see our world as well as what to see within it…Language does not mirror nature; language creates the natures we know (Freedman & Combs 1996:28).

(iii) Realities are organised and maintained through stories:

Our stories, brought forth in the language we use, are kept alive and passed along in our living and telling thereof (Freedman & Combs 1996:29). Therefore, 'within a social constructionist worldview, it is important to attend to cultural and contextual stories as well as to individual's people's stories (Freedman & Combs 1996:31).

(iv) There are no essential truths:

In the narrative worldview we cannot objectively know reality, but we can only interpret experience. There are many possibilities for how any given experience may be interpreted, but no one interpretation is 'really' true (Freedman & Combs 1996:33).

These four social constructionist ideas fuse to form the framework within which narrative research is understood and practised.

3.2.2 Narrative research

One way of applying social constructionism is by means of the narrative approach of listening to, developing and writing stories. The way Stephen King (2000) describes the writer's craft in his book *On Writing* has interesting parallels to the way in which the research process is documented from the viewpoint of the narrative paradigm. He is the writer of, *inter alia*, *The shining*, *Carrie* and *Fire Starter* which were all made into films.

According to King, writing is a meeting of minds and a type of telepathy, where the writer sends out signals and the reader receives them. Of course, there is a lot of room for interpretation and imagination because people do not look at and

measure the world with 'similar eyes'. The important thing is an understanding between reader and writer of what is described 'in terms of rough comparison' (2000:105). It is the descriptive tool in the writer's box that draws the reader into the sensory world of the writer and forms a participants' bond between them. King cautions against 'thin description which leaves the reader feeling bewildered and nearsighted' (2000:174). On the other hand, overdoing description brings in too many details and images, to the extent that the story that wants to be shared is sidetracked.

King (2000:163) says stories consist of three parts. Narration moves the story from one point to another. Description gives sensory reality to the reader, and dialogue is the characters' speech. As writer, King does not plan plots for his stories, because he believes stories should be found or dug up from the ground like fossils and relics. Stories make themselves. They already exist, 'part of an undiscovered pre-existing world' (2000:163). According to King, to produce a plot means to be untruthful to the real lives of people, because, despite their efforts to plan and take care, the plot for the most part just unfolds as it wishes. Furthermore, deliberately constructing the plot minimises the spontaneity of the creative process.

In using the metaphor of excavation to uncover story fossils, large or small, there will always be a few 'breaks and losses' in the process of liberating the fossils from the ground (King 2000:164). That metaphor holds also true for narrative research. Despite anyone's best efforts to explain and re-explain in order to aid understanding, the researcher always hears the story of the co-researcher coloured by his/her own background, perceptions and life story. It is never possible to understand the other's story exactly as it has been lived from that person's point of view, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

He advises the prospective writer to let his/her completed book rest for about six weeks, resisting the temptation to read 'snippets' from it here and there. Establishing distance from the piece of writing is important, he says, not only from the point of view of a time frame but also in terms of being mentally unoccupied with it. Re-reading it after an interval of some weeks feels as if it could be someone else's work, although it sounds very familiar. King (2000:213) sees this

time of rest as a recuperation period that so refreshes the writer that it becomes easier to re-read the work critically, and re-discover it. When a writer has actually completed a novel, the next stage would be to change aspects of the writing that need to be worked on. In conducting narrative research, 'going back' to the research document after a resting period would not involve those kinds of changes, but could help the writer to reflect anew on what has been seen, heard and experienced as well as the way in which it was done.

During the years of developing their narrative approach to therapy, White and Epston (1992:8) were reluctant to name or give 'simple, conclusive descriptions' for what they were engaging in. The act of giving a name to something is in itself an attempt to pin it down and give it certain characteristics. The down side is that what has been 'created' and boxed in through baptising will, in turn, have the power to capture and restrict the creator. Neither do these writers associate themselves with any particular 'school' of family therapy. What they do say by assuming this preferred positioning is that they want to remain as free and adventurous as possible in their minds about exploring and practising narrative approaches. This leads to a continuous evolution of their ideas and practices, although the values and commitments to which they adhere in their work remain solid and stable.

The narrative approach makes possible a mutual enriching of lives between therapist/researcher and families/co-researchers. It happens not only on the level of sharing information, but also in the realm of human beings sharing their selves, as they interpret their worlds.

Kathy Weingarten (1994:73) describes how she used to view 'self' as "as simply a form of the letter 'I' itself". Until her diagnosis with breast cancer, she concurred with the idea that self is 'singular, compact, clear, and defined', and that included her experience of herself. She agrees with other writers that people's ideas of the Western self has undergone many changes during the last twenty five hundred years, and that the way we understand 'self' is entwined with our concept of the individual. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (in Weingarten 1994:64) depicts the

Western understanding of the 'self' of the past two hundred years as 'a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe'.

Although the concept of the individual took flight during and after the 18th century revolutions, when hierarchical features were done away with, the privilege of attaining individuality was not extended to everybody. In particular, women, children, slaves and poor males were excluded from the rights of individuals, in the sense that they were not seen individually as 'a solitary, autonomous, self-sufficient entity' (1994:64). Furthermore, a new concept of motherhood developed, in which a woman's highest calling was not to enjoy or develop her own individuality but to nurture it in her children and to care for her husband in the context of her home surroundings. What motherhood should or should not entail depends to a great extent on what culture determines at any particular time.

Various child-rearing ideologies, from Rousseau in the 18th century to Benjamin Spock in the 20th century, proposed that the mother's needs and desires had to be crucified until she became a 'selfless vessel' for the development of her children into socially and emotionally well-adjusted adults (Weingarten 1994:65). This paved the way for the polarised, dichotomised idea of the good versus the bad mother. It played itself out in various areas, such as the cold, uncaring mother versus the sacrificing, nurturing one. In the long run it is still mainly the choice between home and work, and the particulars of the choice that defines a woman according to the good mother/ bad mother dichotomy (1994:88). Coupled with the idea of the self as 'one stable, coherent entity', making even minor decisions about child rearing can have major ramifications for a mother's understanding of the type of self she is, that is, good or bad. For instance, if the mother allows her children to make a loud, continual noise with their friends, she can see herself as a good mother but a bad individualist. When she tells them to be quiet and sends the friends home, she can see herself as a bad mother, but a good individualist (1994:74). This makes possible only two choices, and they are both crippling, because they leave too little leeway for describing the real self and inhibit the true voice of the mother.

If a mother can be seen as good or bad in relation to her children, a wife/ girlfriend can be seen as good or bad when it comes to her ability or otherwise to produce children. Women who want to fall pregnant but fail to do so normally evoke a certain amount of sympathy. However, women who choose not to become mothers often provoke a kind of unease in society. They tend to get neither sympathy nor understanding. Weingarten (1994:74) proposes that redefining the self, not as an entity that develops stability over time, but as someone with the capacity to render a coherent account of oneself over time, frees one from entrapment in cheap and easy dichotomies. With this alternative view of the self, a person is liberated from descriptions of merely who one is. Rather, the focus is on what one decides to do in a particular context, and 'with this view of the self, the self is no longer an entity but an account, a narrative or a story' (1994:74).

3.2.3 Narrative or story

Certain characteristics of qualitative research conform favourably to the assumptions of the narrative approach in research, which in turn is based on the social constructionist paradigm. Leedy and Ormrod (2001:147) state that, despite differences in qualitative approaches, there are two commonalities: first, the focus is on phenomena occurring in natural settings, and, second, the intricacies and full complexities of those phenomena are taken into account. The narrative approach places a high premium on people's 'telling' of their own lives (Freedman & Comb 1996:29). This has implications for at least three areas: whatever is being researched, the researcher and the kind of information that is focused on, as well as the way in which the information is understood and applied.

The qualitative researcher is interested in the perspectives of those being researched on the subjective level. Phenomenological studies in particular probe 'a person's perception of the meaning of an event' (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:153). The nature of a lengthy, open-ended interview/conversation/narration also enhances the chances of a person's telling something from a position of greater personal strength and control. Parry (1993:457) says it is 'this sense of finding one's own voice, describing one's own experiences in one's own words, that is challenging us to a new kind of strength. We then realize that it is not only our own stories that are valid and true, equally those of others'.

Qualitative research in the realm of the narrative approach has implications for the understanding of the role of researcher. 'Qualitative researchers believe that the researcher's ability to interpret and make sense of what he or she sees is critical for an understanding of any social phenomenon. The researcher is thus an instrument in much the same way that a sociogram rating scale, or intelligence test is an instrument' (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:147). The researcher is, of course, more than that: the mere presence of the researcher as a subjective human being, intervening in people's lives (Müller & Schoeman 2004:3), is an acknowledgement that the research dynamics between role players are relational, and thus influential in all directions.

The kind of information on which the focus lies in a narrative approach looks at the context of an individual in relation to wider society, and also at the phenomenon of how knowledge is formed and upheld, the role that power plays in this and its effects on people's experiences and expectations.

McTaggart (1997:2) …understands the issues of community, solidarity and commitment, as channels that are necessary for doing authentic research in social life. It also refers to the questions of ethics, morality and values. McTaggart prefers the description of movement because it points to the implicitly political character of all methods of research, specifically the power play between researcher and researched. It also puts on the table the politics of being heard, which potentially and hopefully could lead to being understood and accommodated in liberating ways.

'Qualitative inquiry' is normally used as a comprehensive term for all kinds of inquiry such as, *inter alia*, ethnography, case study research, life history methodology, ethnomethodology and narrative inquiry. In explanation, qualitative research is normally compared to quantitative research, in other words, non-numeric data in the form of words in contrast to numeric data. Swandt (1997:130) further mentions that the word 'qualitative' refers to a quality that points to an inherent or essential characteristic of something, an object or an experience. He mentions that, interestingly, Elliot Eisner's understanding of qualitative, as

explained in his book *The enlightened eye,* (1991) appears to be the only definition that takes quality as its starting point, in that he views inquiry as a matter of perception of qualities and an assessment of their value.

Berg (1989:6) points out that the aim of qualitative research is to appropriately search for answers using systematic procedures. It is not only a matter of amassing nominal (in contrast to numerical) data. Research methods influence the researcher, those being researched and ultimately the conclusions drawn. Social researchers apply techniques that range from near totally uncontrolled methods (observations in natural settings) to extremely controlled methods of observation.

Jennifer Mason (1996:3) maintains that qualitative research is generally associated with the interpretivist sociological tradition, specifically phenomenology, ethnomethodology (1967) and symbolic interactionism. Here, the focus is continuously on the experiences of a person or group within the context of their own perceptions, and positivistic and behaviouristic frameworks, where methods of experimenting and measuring are used, or rejected (Plug et al 1987:100). According to Berg, various related theoretical orientations developed from a symbolic interactionist perspective, Dewy (1930), Mead (1938) and Blumer (1969) being regarded as its main proponents. According to Blumer (in Berg 1989:7) 'symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products formed through activities of people interacting'. It is not a question of things having any intrinsic meaning *per se*, nor is it the psychological elements between people that lead to meaning. It is implied, then, that people are capable of generating numerous realities by way of interpreting their situations. This implies that there are no 'correct' or 'wrong' interpretations. Experiencing a situation as real makes it indeed real for someone.

Berg (1989:8) posits that the techniques of qualitative research in the theoretical school of symbolic interaction focus on examining social settings as well as how the occupants of these settings live and make sense of their lived experiences. People, as occupants of their social settings, make use of symbols, rituals, social structures and social roles to create their surroundings and try to understand them. Researchers in this genre are interested in people's subjective understandings

and perceptions of their environments. Despite the diversities within symbolic interactionist views, there are three binding elements. First, there is the possibility of negotiating about definitions. Thomas and Swaine (in Berg 1989:8) explain that the nature and meaning of people's actions, as well as the setting itself, are determined by the manner in which they (the inhabitants of a setting) define their situations. The second binding element is the perspectives and ability of people (participants) to act with empathy, in other words, to put themselves in another's shoes. The third binding element is the fact that social interactions and the meanings they convey are the source of research data, and are of key importance in the formulation of theory.

Jennifer Mason (1996:3) argues that, although qualitative research encompasses a wide variety of philosophical ideas and different methodologies (anthropology, linguistics and semiotics, discourse and content analysis and feminism), a loose definition would entail the following: Qualitative research lies within an interpretivist philosophical position. The aim is to try to interpret, understand and experience the social world (seen as complex and multi-layered), while focusing on meaning, practices, discourses and constructions. Mason further proposes that qualitative research should involve critical self-scrutiny, or active reflexivity. Researchers should continually try to understand their role in the research process, seeing that they are not detached from their 'data', but are, in fact, integral to it. Another important point she makes is that qualitative researchers should aim at giving a wider resonance to the contextual, social explanations they find. However, this does not mean that broad generalisations can be made.

It is more correct to talk about 'qualitative methodologies' in the plural, because researchers with quite different epistemological positions conduct qualitative research (Willig 2001:8). Qualitative research should be conducted ethically, taking into account both the preferred methodology and its political milieu. The epistemological position adopted by a researcher prescribes to a great extent the methods that should be used. These should be more than just descriptive or exploratory in response to interesting and perplexing questions. Research should be conducted with a social conscience and with durable, long-lasting social change in mind. Mason (1996:6) argues that researchers have a responsibility to

ground their questions in the essence of the epistemological and methodological relevance of what they are enquiring into, and that they should look for analytical links both in the discipline in which they are engaging and in other disciplines (1996:16). Therefore, this research and thesis is grounded in a clearly chosen epistemology of practical theology, feminist practical theology, postfoundational practical theology, pastoral narrative theology and its related social constructionist methodology.

Willig (2001:5) points out how feminist scholars of the 1960s and 1970s critiqued conventional epistemologies that tended to consistently prove the inferiority of females to males in areas like moral development and intelligence. Feminists argued that these so-called findings were used to excuse and perpetuate sexist ideas and unequal practice towards women in many social quarters. Feminist scholars questioned the foundations and assumptions of the epistemologies and methodologies of the so-called 'male science' on at least two levels. In the first instance, the male was used as the norm (because of easy accessibility and because men were regarded as the supreme human subject) in the majority of social studies. Women as research subjects were merely measured against the male example without the relevant differences being taken into account. Some studies were also designed in such a way that they favoured male subjects. Willig points out thet Kohlberg's scale (1976), for example, was used to prove that women's moral development was less advanced than that of men. Feminist scholars also challenged the claim by 'male science' that it conducted objective research, and pointed out the impossibility of the researcher's not influencing and being influenced by the research process. Donna Haraway (in Willig 2001:7) referred to this impossible claim to objectivity as the 'God's eye view'. The notion of reflexivity accommodates the dynamics of the researcher's involvement in the process and findings of doing research.

Willig (2001:10) points out that 'qualitative methodologies', to a greater or lesser extent, place importance on the role of language and the use of reflexivity. There is a distinction between personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. The first points to the way in which researchers themselves reflect on how their own positioning *inter alia,* values, social identity, political commitments, experiences,

shape the research they conduct. In addition, personal reflexivity also involves thinking about how their research has influenced them personally.

Second, epistemological reflexivity is part of the approach inherent in qualitative methodologies. It takes into account how the design, questions and world-view standpoints of the researchers have led to certain understandings about the research context itself, as well as what the implications are for the research findings and the wider societal contexts alike.

Rubin and Rubin (1995:38) explain that the feminist model and the interpretive approach have influenced the model they propose for qualitative interviewing. They underwrite some of the ideas of the feminist approach, especially handling the interviewees with gentleness and protecting them from any harm arising from the research. The issues of supremacy and compliance as they affect women in a male-dominated society were a cause for concern in feminist methodology. This concern was extended to rooting out any insensitivity to power games inherent in research. Giving interviewees a voice in research is tantamount to giving back their humanity, and is making a political statement, according to the feminist approach.

Rubin and Rubin (1995:38) acknowledge that the world is a continuously changing place. Their model of the qualitative interview focuses on specific contextual circumstances in the multifaceted world of research. Part of this challenging complexity is that every aspect of the research process, including the participants, has a reciprocal influence on a number of other aspects. They cite three characteristics of qualitative interviews (1995:8):

- The listener must 'hear the meaning of what is being said'. Like an ordinary conversation, interviews are unpredictable, unfolding as they take place, so they should not be pre-planned. At the same time, the researcher is extremely interested in the detail of the interviewees' experiences and thinking in order to get to a deeper understanding of the issues.

- The aim of the qualitative interviewer is to discover how the interviewee sees the situation and his/her world in relation to the context. It is understood that different people reflect different perspectives, and a dissimilar viewpoint is not indicative of whether someone is intrinsically right or wrong.

- Interviewees take an active part in the research process in their role of the interviewers' conversational partners. They are encouraged to direct the conversation with their individual interests and responses, which mean that the interviewer must be highly tolerant and flexible. S/he must be willing to be challenged and questioned, and must thus be entirely at ease with an interesting but unpredictable situation in which improvising on the spot is par for the course. The interviewer thus has to take part in the research process in a personal sense, not just directing it from a planned script (Rubin & Rubin 1995:41). A good balance would be to show some empathy with the interviewees, but not too much involvement; if the interviewees requested it, something of the interviewer's personal life could be shared, if relevant, but the role of the interviewer should be retained.

In view of the above discussion, postfoundationalist, social constructionist, narrative research is therefore not merely a matter of collecting stories and analysing them narratologically. Rather, postfoundational, social constructionist, narrative research is about a particular epistemological point of departure as described under paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2, and implies processes which can in some instances make use of certain qualitative methods. However, postfoundational, social constructionist, narrative research is not concerned with models and techniques, but with movements that bring forth multiple dimensions of understanding.

3.2.4 Methodological design: 'The Seven Movements'

Müller designed a practical theological research process by making use of Wenzel van Huyssteen's core ideas on postfoundationalist theology (Müller 2002:8). This research process formulates Van Huyssteen's understanding of the grounding and

suppositions of practical theology into a research design of 'Seven Movements'. I intend using this design as a framework for the research on the narratives of couples affected by infertility.

Müller (2002:8) elaborates on this practical process by describing seven complementary research movements according to five major headings. At a glance, it comprises the following:

The context and interpreted experience

1. A specific context is described.
2. In-context experiences are listened to and described.
3. Interpretations of experiences are made, described and developed in collaboration with 'co-researchers'.

Traditions of interpretation

4. A description of experiences as they are continually informed by traditions of interpretation.

God's presence

5. A reflection on God's presence as it is understood and experienced in a specific situation.

Thickened through interdisciplinary investigation

6. A description of experience through interdisciplinary investigation.

Point beyond the local community

7. The development of alternative interpretations that point beyond the local community.

The first heading comprises the *context and interpreted experience*. The first movement under this heading points to a *specific context that is being described*. Müller insists that, even though practical theology can be utilised in diverse ways, ranging from formal to more informal applications, its contextuality is non-

negotiable, as that is what gives practical theology its particular, concrete character.

This refers to the specific research framework decided on by the researcher. It has also been described as the action field (Müller, Van Deventer & Human 2001:4). These authors (2001) made use of Anne Lamott's model for writing fiction as metaphor for understanding and explaining the process of research from a narrative perspective. This approach, also known as the ABDCE approach, differs in some ways from the research process in 'Seven Movements' later developed by Müller. However, the in-context experiences, as well as the action field, refer to what is happening in the here and now, including difficulties that might be encountered. However, the in-context experiences are not stated as a problem that has to be solved (Müller et al 2001:2).

The second movement refers to *in-context experiences that are both listened to and described.* The in-context experiences are both the starting point and the focus of the research. The integrity of practical theology lies in acknowledging and developing the research from the context.

The third movement is concerned with *interpreting, describing and developing experiences in collaboration with co-researchers.*

The second heading refers to *traditions of interpretation.* Falling under this heading, the fourth movement is *a description of experiences as they are continually informed by traditions of interpretation.*

The third heading refers to *God's presence*. What is here taken into account *is a reflection of God's presence as it is understood and experienced in a specific situation.*

Ganzevoort in his before mentioned presentation (2006) I pointed out that God narratives are indeed narratives about human life, albeit told in a different language. Every language has its own possibilities and disadvantages. In the

language of God narratives, people share a very specific viewpoint informed by their specific experiences and interpretation of those experiences.

God means different things to different people. There are not only vast differences in how God is imagined and understood in diverse religious traditions and communities, but also among people who are part of the same religious traditions and communities. It is therefore essential to show respect for the different faiths by which people journey towards a preferred spirituality (Hudson & Kotze 2002:270). Placher (1998:155) refers to the many existing theories about the role and function of Christ. He points out that, far from ever being able to produce 'one definite account' on the central belief regarding the work of Christ, Christian doctrine is saturated with different theories. The work of Christ (including the presence of God) is understood in various ways because it speaks to unique and personal lives.

Placher (1998:156) describes the work of Christ with the help of the three long-standing historical images in the Christian tradition: solidarity, reconciliation and redemption. Each of these images or metaphors speaks a different language and tells only part of the story of Christ's work. It is therefore imperative to respect all these relevant metaphors and give them equal value. In order to find the fullest and richest notion of who Christ is and what his life and death portray, these scriptural images should all be pondered on and synthesised into a new whole.

In speaking the language of solidarity, Jesus communicates two things. The first is that God is with us in the whole range of life's pain: injustice, emotional anguish, betrayal, separation and death, to name a few. In fact, solidarity says that God goes before us and assures us that He has already been there. He knows the pain, and has conquered it. Secondly, Christ's expression of his fear, distress, and emotional and physical pain tells us that it is acceptable to admit that we, as humans, live in the realm of pain. It is acceptable and healthy for males and females alike to express the accompanying fear, doubts and anxiety.

A second image that should be added to the first is reconciliation. Placher (1998:160) puts it poignantly when he says:

> Talk of solidarity assures us that Christ is with us. The language of reconciliation reminds us of how deeply we are estranged from God. Put the two together and it seems that Christ, in solidarity with us, must be estranged from God, that indeed somehow his estrangement is our reconciliation.

Christ and the cross are doubly mysteries: the man who is also God and the pain of the cross's abandonment and death, which brings new life. When confronted with our own dreadful sufferings, we could be tempted to think that the cross of Christ was more bearable to him than our own cross is to us, seeing that he is, after all, the sovereign and powerful God himself. We may be tempted to think that, because Christ knew who he was and why he had to be crucified, his sufferings were more tolerable than ours because we have limited insight in both this life and the next.

Placher (1998:159) urges us always to keep the theology of the unity of the three persons of the trinity in mind. It is one-sided and damaging to the truthful image of the Father God to regard him as the spiteful judge who hard-heartedly sent his son to death because he wanted compensation for the wrongs done to him. This false image has created an aversion to bonding with the Father God. One of the arguments goes: 'I want nothing to do with a God who sends his own son to suffer and die'. Rather, Christian theology says the Father, Son and Spirit think, decide and act together. It is not only a question of the suffering Christ, but also of the suffering Father and Holy Spirit. Love must surely have been costly to all three of them individually, and in their mutual relationships as One God.

The third image to illuminate the work of Christ is redemption. It implies that we have fallen under the power of someone or something other than our Maker that wants to possess us. It also points to the fact that we cannot save ourselves from this enslavement, either because we do not realise that our captivity is dire, or because we are incapable of breaking the shackles of possession. One has, perhaps, a sense of being cornered, of being in a place where one would rather not be, of doing things that cause self-hatred because acting like this is against one's will. Paul expressed this by saying that his actions were often at

loggerheads with his will (Romans 7:19-24), and that he seemed like putty in the hands of his captor, who was directing him on a course that he did not want to take. The image of redemption refers to the victory of the Trinity in overcoming evil with the sacrifice of love. The human race is saved from the destructive forces opposing God's will by the power of the blood shed on the cross.

But how does everyone, male or female, make personal sense of the theodicy question? Where is God when I am suffering? Or in what way can the role of divine providence in the face of suffering and death be justified (Deist 1984:258)? The answers to these questions seem highly specific, tailored to fill the vicissitudes of everyone's unique life understandings. The narrative researcher has the privilege of exploring with the co-researchers their efforts at making sense of the paradoxical nature of love. Although love can move mountains, it seems, at face value, to be rather weak and impotent. The images of Christ the warrior and Christ the Prince of Peace, even the lamb willing to be slaughtered, are mentioned in the same breath. And although love is powerful, it calls for suffering and is expensive in terms of personal cost. However, suffering should never be easily and passively embraced without an effort to alleviate it. Without the effort, suffering is futile and without purpose, but when suffering is endured to gain some understanding, to love more or to make the world a better place, it could be worth the pain (Placher 1998:163).

The fourth heading of 'The Seven Movements' refers to *interdisciplinary investigation*. The focus is on *a description of experience thickened through interdisciplinary investigation.* Childs (1998:195) sees pastoral care as the care of people, including the rest of creation (plant and animal life) and points out that knowledge about the complexity of humanity is necessary. Although the different theological branches, for example the doctrinal or historical, should be explored in search of that knowledge, he urges theology to learn from other disciplines as well, especially the human sciences of sociology, neurobiology and psychology.

The fifth heading refers to the fact that it *points beyond the local community*, implying the development of alternative interpretations to reach beyond the local community.

These 'Seven Movements' discussed above were jointly as well as separately utilised throughout the research process as well as the writing of the thesis. Due to the fact that these movements are by no means linear applications of a model, but rather an approach, the different movements are reflected in various ways throughout the thesis, with some dominating in certain chapters e g 'method' in this chapter, 'context' in Chapters 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7, and 'tradition' in Chapter 8. This does however not mean that the other movements are not present where these three dominate, because 'The Seven Movements' as approach pervades throughout in a recursive and spiralling manner.

3.3 Ethical considerations within the narrative approach

Kotzé (2002:20) argues that the telling of narratives is an important channel for demonstrating and holding onto 'ethical ways of being'. Stories embody ethical wisdoms of people's lives, and are able to encourage the hearer or reader to look for ethical solutions in their own life experiences. It is not so much that a kind of moral lesson must be learned, but rather that these stories speak of real people in real-life situations grappling in their search and choosing a way to live through their difficulties and dilemmas. Stories have content and plot, beginnings and endings, but there is also a story within a story. A number of things are communicated, and because life is complicated, this points to diverse and complex potentialities and decisions. Stories also comment on the effects of people's choices on others. That immediately reminds people of the moral character of everything that is thought, said and acted out.

Kotzé maintains that the concept of ethics should be challenged to become a verb, not just a noun. Ethics should not be merely a part of everyday communication between persons, or a mere aspect of performing therapy or research. Instead it lies at the heart of 'participating in living' (Kotzé 2002:21) and should be acknowledged as such. Adhering to certain 'systems of norms' in order to make choices or utter pronouncements is a coward's way of evading personal accountability.

To ethicise, (meaning to think and act in an ethicising manner), renders participation and transparency inevitable. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, to make decisions or observations on behalf of other people, or to act alone. To be more exact, ethicising means that everything is being done with the participation of the others. To whom does 'the others' refer? It refers to everybody who is part of or possibly affected by ethicising in any given situation, especially in the context of therapy or research. Research is not neutral, but involves and evokes ethical issues (Kotzé 2002:21).

Demasure (2004:365) states that the pastoral theological landscape lost a characteristic moral quality with the entrance of the psychological therapeutic model. The kerugmatik, normative deductive model that was applied in both protestant and catholic pastoral encounters was challenged by psychodynamic assumptions and theories. For instance, a belief in the inherent potential of an individual guided the pastor to where s/he could help someone to help themselves, to develop their self-contained morality. This psychotherapeutic understanding sometimes led to the pastor's acceptance of the client to the extent that it often resulted in turning a moral blind eye. There is a difference between accepting a person and morally condoning their thoughts or actions. In practice, however, the pastor sometimes failed to express that. In the tradition of Rogerian therapy, the person-centred approach involves unconditional acceptance, trying to understand the client from his/her viewpoint and assuming that the client can and should accept responsibility for re-organising him/herself.

Demasure advocates the importance of ethical aspects in pastoral theology. Not only does Practical Theology as science and discipline requires ethical reflection, but the content of the pastoral conversation also makes ethical scrutiny essential. When pastoral care uses therapeutically-inspired theories, it must avoid incorporating ideas on humankind and the world that are incompatible with the understanding and calling of Christianity. In the process, the fine balance of God's character as equally righteous and merciful has been compromised to focus largely on the first equation. The moral quality of a client's ideas and actions has been overshadowed by the prevailing emphasis on merely what the client feels. The fact that feelings (even love) are highly accountable to what is fair, acceptable

and good has thus not been addressed. Christianity is not value-free, and the ethical voice of the church must be integrated into moral theological reflection on society, the church and any specific pastoral conversation that takes place.

Riggs (1998:181) describes Christian ethical reflection as a process of pondering on the meaning of moral life, and what it should be. She explains that the paradigms (or interpretative frameworks) of teleology, deontology and responsibility represent a kind of ethical continuum. These paradigms also present the 'context of meaning for doing Christian ethical reflection'. Teleological ethics pertains to the idea that no action is good or bad in it self, but should be judged by its consequences (Deist 1984:254). Deontological ethics points to the idea of duty as prescribed by divine law, and the requirement for duty to be fulfilled regardless of the consequences (Deist 1984:68).

A shift into a fourth ethical framework is taking place, which is referred to as a liberation paradigm. This seemingly unavoidable direction was prompted by the current socio-moral context reflecting pluralism and postmodernism. A liberation ethical paradigm takes into consideration the accompanying frames of reference of the specific, the contextual and the multiple associated with postmodern thinking and pluralism. Riggs (1998:183) explains that it is precisely some of the characteristic thinking of the liberation ethical paradigm that threatens the Church.

Within the liberation ethical paradigm, morality is understood in the following ways:

- It is recognised that morality is not cast in stone, but is, in fact, coloured by ideology. It flows from the social, cultural, political and economic conditions within a specific historical context of time and place.
- Morality is concerned with what is right and fair, so any issues of power and dominance must be unearthed and brought to light. Such unequal relations have in the past managed to lie concealed behind a moral façade, and were often simply accepted.
- Liberation refers to both a norm and an end.

The liberation ethical paradigm is also disposed to flexibility and creativity. It is capable of reinterpreting various ethical thinking paradigms and of forming a broader, more inclusive paradigm as it takes various discourses into account (Riggs 1998:182). These characteristics make it a fitting thought framework for addressing the fears and defensiveness of the Church in a pluralistic and postmodern society. When the Church fails to see that it is, and, in fact, always has been part of a changing society and that it could and should adapt without losing its own specific character, it easily feels threatened by those whose thought differs from the hardcore traditions and typical understandings it embraces. This reaction is regardless of whether the thinking comes from outside or inside the Church's own ranks.

The Church should, in any case, not merely rethink its formal and informal ethical policies and adapt them to societal trends or turning points occasioned by new philosophical developments when change seems imminent, or when unendurable pressure is exerted by relevant or concerned voices. Rather, it should hone a sustainable, fearless awareness of voices within and without the walls of the Church. Voices stifled by a range of 'isms': ageism, racism, anti-Semitism and sexism have, to a certain extent, found themselves relegated even to the bosom of the Church, albeit only because not enough was and is being done by the Church in recognition of its own compliancy and eradication of it. The discussions being conducted in various denominations focusing on the acceptance and ordination of, for instance, homosexual people is an encouraging sign that a brave attempt is being made to take a new look at an issue that was previously understood, labelled, packaged and sealed.

Riggs (1998:184) sees the key task of Christian ethics as giving practical and procedural direction in forming and preserving the Church's faithfulness in a changing and pluralistic environment. She proposes an ethical stance that incorporates the following four features:

- It acknowledges its distinctiveness from other ethical stances as well as diversity within its own Christian ethical tradition.

- It redefines our present context as a time of promise rather than one of peril.
- It values consensual respect rather than mere toleration of differences.
- It promotes living into the tensions of the perceived socio-ethical dilemmas of this present era.

The first feature refers to the particular frame of reference of the Church and its justified faith claim for Jesus as God in this world in order to save the lost. It points to the Church's assertiveness. Further, the internal pluralism that exists within the Church in the light of various interpretations of this faith claim must be acknowledged in order to minister successfully in the complex context outside the Church, which means that the Church should be self-analytical (Riggs 1998:184).

The second feature accepts the belief that Jesus' coming to this world has made all the difference. Despite the apparent hopelessness and decay in the world, the hope brought through Christ will not be put to shame. Even in the face of virus pandemics, spiritual desolation, devastated natural resources and wars, a creative spiritual awareness and surrender should aid the transformational working of the Spirit to bring about transformation.

Riggs (1998:185) proposes, in line with the third feature, that the Church takes a standpoint to show consensual respect for the pluralism it encounters both within and without its walls. To promote and demonstrate consensual respect means to work actively towards cohesion and unity. It invites mutuality and solidarity while living, confidently and committed, upholding its own beliefs and character, in the context of pluralism. It stands in opposition to mere tolerance, which indeed recognises differences, but often does so with a hostile attitude.

The fourth feature of this ethical stance accepts the challenge of the postmodern, pluralistic context by 'living into the tensions of that context' (1998:185). Riggs says the Church need not focus on achieving an end result of absolute unity and integration within the Church and within society, but its role is to be continuously engaged in a mediating process between opposing sides. This should be

composed in such a way that, no matter the end result, at least 'interposition and communication' (in other words, 'living in tension with') has taken place.

If ethics can be understood as the norms of Christian conduct in particular, and the moral behaviour regarding concrete situations of people in general (Deist 1984:87), the male-dominated Christian church has the responsibility of acknowledging its impact on the way women experience their spirituality and its effects on them.

Schneiders (1986:32) mentions a number of areas where their experiences of 'religious marginalisation, exclusion and subordination have affected women's ministry and their sense of themselves in relation to God'. Whether women welcomed or despised their lower position in the Christian Church it influenced both men and women. While Schneiders views the effects of male dominance on women's spirituality in a largely negative light, she also highlights the positive effects that grew out of these hurtful and challenging circumstances. Knowledge and implementation of the positives or, as she calls it, the 'flip side' of the negative effects can, on the whole, benefit the Church as institution and its body of members, as well as helping to install and stabilise a more balanced way of addressing Christian ethics (Schneiders 1986:33). Paul Tournier (1982:57) laments the fact that males and females fail to complement each other in a balanced way as far as the family, Church and society are concerned, as God commissioned.

The part women should play in their service to Christ and others is under utilised and, worse, tolerated to what it should have been. Humankind finds it difficult to respect gender and intra-gender differences without power ratings. In Christianity, other religions, and most societies, an unseen measuring stick rates the male higher than the female (Karssen 1987:74). It throws the potential richness of life and relationships out of balance, so both sexes pay dearly for the injustice. A re-thinking and re-interpretation of the role and standing of women in the Church, and a re-assessment of the negative effects of male-domination, correlate clearly with the ideals of the liberation ethical paradigm.

Schneiders (1986:32) indicates certain areas where the effects of male dominion in the Church have had their most significant influence on women: the ministry, socialisation and women's religious experiences of God. When it comes to women's exclusion from the ministry, the fact that they could not be ordained has stunted and distorted the forming of young women's religious imagination and their self-image as females in their relationship with God. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church has never offered them the opportunity of becoming part of its formal ministry. Further, the fact that women played largely non-public roles in the secular and religious spheres, where they were male-dependant, resulted in a 'humanly destructive and spiritually traumatic' experience (1986:32). Women experienced a sense of 'sacral unworthiness': by dint of their femaleness they were not allowed even to touch the sacred vessels, bear the processional cross or be in the sanctuary during divine service. This meant they were inferior, subordinate and dependant on men to serve them the sacraments. Concomitant with their exclusion from the realm of the divine was the 'divinized' male, who was also positioned as the mediator between God and women.

Schneiders (1986:34) mentions the upside of the negative effects of women's positions. Women's ministry had not been ritualised, which allowed it to attain its blessed, personal character. Schneiders believes that the act of ritualising leads to de-personalisation. Although ritual gains something in terms of the profound meaning it communicates, at the same time it often diminishes the individualisation of those taking part in the ritual. Women's ministry consists mainly of showing love and care in a personal way in specific and individual situations. Schneiders maintains that women's ministry has been effective in counteracting the image of God as stern, judgmental and even violent. Women have understood and conducted their ministries in a genuine effort to serve, and they have the ability to identify with and respond to the needs of the oppressed in unconventional, but truthful ways.

Their ministries of working with children, the sick and dying and those in the guilty throes of sin needing forgiveness and understanding, have not violated their involvement as a way of demonstrating power. Women are in a particularly authentic position to relate to Jesus, who himself was undervalued and humiliated.

He was without the status, power and backup of a formal synagogue position. He seemed to feel personally involved with all who crossed his path (meaning that he acknowledged every person's individual circumstances and worth), in particular the 'rough diamonds' of society. He pointed to the very real possibility of reaching for new beginnings in even the most disheartening situations. Even while he addressed the destructive work of sin in people's lives and the fact that it was unacceptable to God, He opened the door to forgiveness and reconciliation.

His unprejudiced actions towards women defied the contemporary male attitude. He promulgated the principle of 'do[ing] unto others what you want others to do unto you', an admonition that overrides the disparity between the sexes. Interestingly, the Jews credit the injunction 'Do not do unto others what you don't want others to do unto you' to Hillel, who lived a hundred years before Jesus. The vast philosophic difference between the two sayings leaves one asking: Which of them would I prefer to be applied to myself (Dimont 1962:44)?

Ethical spirituality implies a journey undertaken after we have become aware that something or someone divine is urging us to look for meaning. Or perhaps we had already started on the journey long before becoming aware that we were on it. The search on which we are invited includes searching within ourselves for answers (Vardey 1995:20). We have to recognise that we can hear and be heard by God, be it through intuition, prayer, meditation, dreams and visions or just by being aware of our very existence in this moment and in this particular place. Martin Buber (Vardey 1995:23) explains that a great treasure can be found in the specific place where one is standing at in this very moment. He calls it the 'fulfilment of existence'. We often find it hard to believe, when we experience in every moment life's deficits and insufficiencies, that our fulfilment does not lie in another time and space from the particular context in which we are standing now. We frequently feel that life is passing us by, that there must be more to life than what we have and that our 'life does not participate in true, fulfilled existence'. Buber (Vardy 1995:23) says we must find the treasure, right where we stand, to try and 'shine the light of the hidden divine life'. Why are we standing in this place at this very moment? Were we drawn here by our own peculiarities and dispositions, or was this place assigned to us as our fate, to be used in carrying out our indispensable functions?

Buber says the realisation that the quest for spirituality takes place in the very place where we are presently, makes real the possibility of experiencing a fulfilled existence.

Some people see God's presence as an abstract spiritual awareness, something that they have difficulty in delineating, and something in which they participate privately. Yet, for others, spirituality cannot be defined unless it entails finding and maintaining relationship with the rest of creation. David Steindl-Rast (Vardy 1995:22) says that, in searching for meaning, mankind will hopefully find God: as to search for meaning is also to search for belonging. The search takes place in God-territory, but because the landscape is so vast it is possible that the seeker, while exploring this territory, will never meet others exploring in other parts. When confronted with crossroads, we choose to go in a certain (mind) direction that makes it likely or unlikely to reach others where they too are looking for spiritual answers. Amongst the countless turns that can be taken at these many crossroads is the discovery that belonging is shared. Steindl-Rast expresses mysticism thus: 'If we belong to God, God belongs to us; we are in a relationship' (Vardy 1995:22). And dare it be said that, if it rings true, we also belong to each other. We are certainly accountable to our neighbour, but the kind of spirituality that looks for meaning will probably find much more than that.

According to M. Scott Peck (1990:192), mysticism takes many forms, but one of the common threads woven through the accepted wisdom of mystics of every kind of religious belief through the ages is that there is unity between humans, other creatures and even inanimate matter in the universe. There are ostensibly imperceptible, underlying knots that tie the cosmos together. Mystics are generally conscious that the world as a whole is a community and that the absence of this awareness of kinship amongst all causes division and leads to the mentality of 'us' and 'them'.

Peck (1990:188) describes how, from personal experience, he has come to understand human spiritual development. Suffice it to say that he names the stages as: Stage 1: chaotic, antisocial; Stage 2: formal, institutional; Stage 3: sceptic, individual: Stage 4: mystic, communal. People in the last stage have been

transformed to such an extent that they are willing to embrace and penetrate the unknown, the mysterious. They have grown past the need for the simplistic, black and white dogmatic structures of Stage 2. Those described as mystics recognised the supernatural interdependence in our world, and the vast unknowingness of the possible worlds beyond this one we inhabit, even looking deeper into the heart of life itself. They developed the insight to move beyond their own prejudices and fixed ideas. The emptying of self allowed the opening up to what is different, to the otherness of people, ideas or God (Peck 1990:226). To empty yourself involves the sacrifice of something that has found a home inside you, something that has became a part of you. In addition, emptying is not an end in itself, but simply the means to an end. 'Emptying' seems to make space for another in your heart and mind. It makes space for acceptance, inclusiveness, grace, spiritual power, holiness and humility. Emptying creates silence, which, in turn, makes listening possible because 'it makes room for the other' (Peck 990:212).

Peck (1990:212) reminds us that Christian mystics sometimes use the expression 'before the Word there was silence'. Indeed, out of the silence of the formlessness and emptiness of the origins of creation, God brought His Word forth in Genesis 1:1-3:

> In the beginning God prepared and created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and an empty waste, and darkness was upon the face of the very great deep. The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light.

Emptying almost always leads to risk and vulnerability. Paradoxically, from the Christian perspective, to become empty (to die to self) indicates becoming able to receive something new from outside of oneself. To be vulnerable implies a willingness to be wounded, but such a 'wounded ness' speaks of strength, since all are vulnerable but only some courageously and truthfully demonstrate this in their lives and relationships. Peck regards all people as teachers, healers and ministers (not only those who are in the so-called helping professions), and says that the more we are willing to acknowledge our weaknesses and imperfections, the more truthful and reliable we appear (1990:226).

Doing research from a narrative perspective embraces the idea that researchers enter the research context as subjective participants, well aware of their own prejudices, vulnerabilities and uncertainties as well as those of their research projects. The narrative research perspective even provides the opportunity for researchers to acknowledge these qualms and reservations. Instead of using psychological defences and scientific-empirical distances as tools in research, narrative researchers communicate from a position of 'emptiness' and even vulnerability and inquisitiveness, because they do not know for certain. A kind of communal spirituality is present when researchers are willing to share themselves, not just their research undertaking, with the relevant research others. Attempting to share with and learn from the co-researchers, they enter into something that goes beyond gathering information, especially if it is harvested in a respectful way. That 'something' entered into is the moving forward to a place where honest human, personal relationships are possible, a place where all the participants will probably be changed.

Hudson and Kotzé (2002:269) propose a spirituality that is life-giving and ethical, and suggest how it can be formed within the context of everyday life. They describe (2002:270) three ways in which a narrative approach can provide an ethical spirituality that is meaningful not only to Christians, but also to those who belong to other faith traditions or who do not have any faith orientation. In the first instance, they point out that the character of a narrative approach does not tolerate the imposition of scriptural truths, morality or spiritual principals on the lives of others. Such an approach is an improvisation rather than an imposition. Instead, the truths and stories of scripture are laid over people's personal stories in a way that allows for contextual, individual movement. In other words the sacred text of Scripture is seen as a living transcript that speaks into people's lives, but at the same time is pliable enough to receive those stories into its own outline.

Secondly, a narrative approach invites critical reflection on what people say and do to those around them. In pondering on the effects of what we choose to do, as well as what we neglect to do, we learn about responsibility and ethical sensitivity.

Thirdly, a narrative approach points to an individual's socio-political background, the broader context in which that person's experiences are grounded. The relationship of power/knowledge (White & Epston, in Hudson & Kotzé 2002:272) means that we experience the effects of others' power over us at the same time as we have power over them (cf Foucalt 1980). Professional and laypersons working narratively are thus especially accountable to the bigger picture that houses social processes.

Throughout the research process as well as during the writing of this thesis a high degree of sensitivity was maintained concerning the power relationships between the researcher and co-researchers, and where needed, these power relationships were deconstructed and reconstructed by means of the application of the essential ethical principles such as informed consent (see Adendum A), voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, benevolence, non-malificence, and respect.

In summary, this chapter explained the epistemological points of departure and its related methodology. The research positioning was described in terms of practical theology, feminist practical theology, postfoundational practical theology and pastoral narrative theology, while the research methodology was explained from a social constructionist, narrative perspective as applied by means of the 'Seven Movements'. In the following four chapters the stories of the couples/co-researchers will be introduced and their relevant discourses discussed.

CHAPTER 4

HARVEST SONG OF STAN AND SENA: SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD

The first of the four couples invited by the author to become storytellers in the research for this thesis were Stan and Sena. With the inclusion of co-researchers who had experienced IVF (in vitro fertilisation) and surrogate motherhood, the issues of kinship and assisted reproduction were introduced. Over a 14-year period, Stan and Sena had undertaken a great many fertility treatments, ranging from GIFT to IVF, eventually resorting to surrogate motherhood in their determination to become parents. With their third attempt, and their second surrogate, there was a pregnancy, and triplets were born.

The researcher will focus initially on a few theological and ethical considerations concerning fertility treatments, including surrogate motherhood that emerged from the conversations with Stan and Sena. Some aspects of the well-known Biblical narrative on surrogacy involving Abraham, Sarah and Hagar will subsequently be discussed. Following this, the narrative of Stan and Sena will be presented in a weaving pattern, which will include the ideas and feelings of the reflecting team and the researcher.

4.1 Biology and Theology

Depending on your point of view, those, along with the other significant role players involved who are brave or foolish enough to undergo assisted reproduction procedures have been described as an inaccessible population (Ragoné 1994:3). Directors and facilitators of surrogate mother programmes, commissioning parents and surrogates are usually reluctant to discuss their decisions and experiences openly. The reasons are manifold, and reflect some of the emotional, scientific and ethical complexities that are, to say the least, compelling and controversial. According to Ciccarelli and Beckman (2005:38), many more research questions of interest need to be posed concerning the potential impact on the children who are born of assisted reproduction involving a third party, as well as children in the surrogate's family. Interestingly, much greater research attention has been given

to the surrogate mother than to the intended (or commissioning) parents. Surrogacy arrangements involve complex interpersonal processes and interactions. There are three individuals involved, each with their own needs and hopes, as well as those of their families, who, in the case of the surrogate, usually include minor children. Add to that public policy and the culturally reinforced influence of the ideal family (Van den Akker 2001:137) and it becomes clear that infertility does not happen in a vacuum. This is true, too, of attempts to become more 'able' within the disablement that it renders.

Theologians and ethicists have expressed their concerns on various levels. The idea of assisted reproduction and surrogacy seems able to unsettle and challenge the traditional convictions on families and parenthood. Some Christian authors regard the use of IVF as a blessing, as long as it takes place within the context of marriage and only the genetic material of both husband and wife are used (Verster 2002:40). Reform Judaism apparently has no qualms about the scientific, laboratory environment in which conception takes place. This constructs IVF as a legitimate measure and a medical procedure in response to the disease of infertility, and represents the view that parenthood is determined genetically. The belief is that moral scrutiny should indeed guard over science and technology, but, at the same time, the couple's desire to have children is of greater concern, and the appropriate response towards them should be compassion, and deep gratitude when their hope for parenthood is realised with the aid of such a procedure (Washofsky 2000:236).

Some Orthodox Jewish scholars and Halachic writings dealing with Torah, (the legal section of the Hebrew Bible) refer to IVF as 'a morally repugnant act, which carries frightening implications for the future of the family and of society at large' (2002:2360). One of the reasons for such a harsh position is that the IVF procedure usually involves the fertilisation of many eggs at a given time in the hope that conception will take place, with at least one embryo implanting in the uterus. The embryos that are not implanted in the womb would in all probability be discarded. Reform Judaism, on the other hand, seems to interpret the morality of this issue in terms of the legal and moral status of the human foetus, as well as the question of whether the embryos are 'wantonly' disposed of. Regarding the

second matter, the Reform Responsa's interpretation is that, in the light of the fact that IVF as a legitimate medical procedure can be judged to be moral and good, the destruction of the remaining embryos 'is justified as the necessary, if unintended, consequence of a morally permissible act' (2002:237). As long as such an embryo is honoured with dignity as potential human life, it may be discarded, utilised in medical research or offered to another couple as an adoptive child (Washofsky 2002:237). As far as the first issue, that of the status of a foetus is concerned, Jewish opinion does not grant the same consideration to a foetus as it does to a live human being, although potential life is always highly valued. The Jewish legal point of view does not regard a foetus in the womb as a person until it has been born, or at least until the greater part of its body has entered the world (Freeman 1996:5). In wrestling with the notion of personhood, clearly a grey area, a range of views had prevailed on when a foetus becomes a person. For example: a pregnancy consists of 'mere fluid' up to the fortieth day; or it is seen as an organic part of the mother's body (Freeman 1996:3).

According to Schenker (2003:246), Jewish Reform Responsa are the analyses and discussion of various attitudes of rabbinical scholars about the way religion should be applied in the changing world with regard to the legal codes, with written opinion given by qualified authorities in answer to questions about aspects of Jewish law.

Most Christians believe that life begins at conception (O'Neill 2005:16). That being the case, it makes sense to accept that an embryo quite possibly embodies a soul, and that to deliberately destroy it could at worst be murder, and at best amount to a callous disregard for the value and purpose of life as it is intended by God. Psalm 139 is often cited as proof that each developing embryo is lovingly formed and wanted by the Creator. Indeed, the psalm says its future earthly life is ordained and known by God long before it came to be. 'For You did form my inward parts: You did knit me together in my mother's womb (Psalm 139:13), and 'Your eyes saw my unformed substance, and in Your book all the days of my life were written before ever they took shape, when as yet there were none of them' (Psalm 139:16).

These scriptures are concerned not so much with the biology of reproduction as with the miraculous, hidden action of God in bringing new life into being. Psalm 139:16 focuses on God's knowledge, as Maker, in terms of the human being He fashions. God, who also fashions the future, plans and knows what will become of the person while s/he is still in an embryonic state. In the case of the prophets, it seems as if they were called or chosen by God for a specific task even before they were born (Jones 2004:10). Jeremiah 1:5 says:

> *Before I formed you in the womb I knew and approved of you as my chosen instrument, and before you were born I separated and set you apart, consecrating you: and I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.*

Christians, Jews, Muslims and those of other religious traditions commonly believe that human beings possess a soul that originates from God and that human life is a gift from the Creator. Jones understands the embryonic Christ to be in solidarity with all human embryos as related to and dependent on God, 'even while it consists of a single cell or just a few cells' (Jones 2004:251). If each embryo is recognised as human life, ethical qualms should indeed be expressed about the fate of the 'extra' fertilised eggs that could potentially be frozen or discarded if they are not 'needed'. For instance, let us speculate that, out of about ten eggs retrieved following the administration of drugs to produce these multiple eggs, four are implanted and three start to grow. The woman gives birth to triplets and does not want any more children. One possible option would be to donate such fertilised eggs to a couple so that the woman or a substitute can gestate the eggs. Dobson (in Van Regenmorter & Van Regenmorter 2004:112) sees this procedure as an opportunity to give life to embryos that would otherwise be destroyed. This is very different from creating a child by using an outside donor or donors, as the embryo (potential human) already exists. The situation could be equated with adoption, albeit at a very early stage of development.

The interesting belief that the mother of a lost foetus will one day be able to meet him or her as a person in the life hereafter is often expressed. Many of those who have either suffered miscarriages or voluntarily terminated their pregnancy find a great deal of solace in such a hope. As Toni says: 'There is nothing in my life that I

regret more than aborting my baby.' One day after I pass from Earth I'll look into the face of Baby and see the gift I refused' (O'Neill 2005:98).

The ethical question of whether it is ever justifiable to either destroy pre-birth life or prevent it from developing to its full potential refers not only to reproductive procedures like IVF, but also to other biomedical technologies like cloning and stem cell research. Van Niekerk (2005:202) posits that it seems inevitable that there will be some experiential victims in the process, in terms of lost embryos. He echoes Washofsky's idea (2002:237) that a few cells (despite the high worth placed on them) cannot be granted the same value as the identity of a living person, and that as long as these moral problems are confronted with an 'ethic of accountability' difficult choices can be made and defended in terms of all the role players and their points of view. That would include ethical concerns from religious, scientific, cultural and utilitarian quarters. He accepts that human life has a very high value, but not an absolute value in the sense that life (in the form of cells or embryos) may never, under any circumstances, be ended, because the complex reality of life often demands making intricate choices. The argument that biomedical technologies are wrong because they go against the natural order would mean that all technological advances should be seen as somehow problematic, including heart bypass operations, organ donations and blood transfusions. It is certainly true that biomedical technologies can be misused, so it is crucial that they be regulated and conducted in a responsible way.

4.2 Surrogate motherhood

Rao (2005:32) posits that surrogacy holds contradictory consequences for the family. Although it appears to reinforce the traditional family concept by allowing infertile married couples to create biological children, it could fundamentally destabilise and disrupt the traditional idea of family. It makes possible the formation of families by gay men, lesbians and single people, and undermines the conventional model of a two-parent, heterosexual, biologically connected family. It redefines family as a social construct rather than a definite biological fact. It potentially takes the concept of 'family' out of entwined intimate relationships into the area of commercial exchange of reproductive goods and services on the marketplace. Moreover, surrogacy contracts potentially open family ties up to a

world of private ordering, where individual choice powerfully overrides natural biology.

Surrogate motherhood is often seen as symptomatic of the disintegration of traditional families, and feminists have also voiced their concerns about the potential abuse of women as surrogates (Ragoné 1994:2). Feminists see surrogate motherhood, especially the commercial variety (in which a woman is paid a fee, not just compensation, to carry and give birth to a child and then give up the child to 'commissioning parents') as morally objectionable in the extreme. Some radical feminist standpoints are that surrogate motherhood is 'reproductive prostitution and incubatory servitude'. The surrogates have been labelled as 'incubators for men's sperm' and 'breeder women', their husbands are called 'pimps or cuckolds', and the children born are named 'chattel and merchandise' (Wilkinson 2003:170). However, their main concerns are the possible harm to surrogates, their children and society, the commoditisation of surrogates, children or women in general and lastly, the exploitation of poor and vulnerable women (Wilkinson 2003:170).

Words like 'procreation' and 'reproduction' hint of potential human and scientific intervention that might override the significance and purpose God intended in the union of marriage. Meilander (1996:11), professor of Theological Ethics, points out that the above words collide with the language of Ancient Israel of 'begetting' and 'siring': words that speak of the natural 'phenomenon of transmission of life from father to son'. He is concerned with the idea that a child can 'be made' scientifically and not 'begotten' as an embodiment of the mutual, passionate 'self-giving' of the father and mother, as the true *pro*creation, where' love-giving' turns to 'life-giving'. Artificial reproduction and surrogacy undermine the moral lines of kinship, Meilander argues. Even when there is no third party involved in terms of donor eggs or sperm, or a surrogate mother, he rules against assisted reproduction, because it leads in the direction of objectifying and instrumentalising the body. He regards surrogate motherhood (where the surrogate donates her egg) as a violation of the human dignity of the child, the gestational mother and the rearing mother. He sees procreation as a task that God undertakes according to His 'command for the sustaining of human life', not as a right or a means of self-

fulfilment. His advice to childless couples is to accept that God has other tasks beside childrearing in store for them, and that He is able to bless their marriage union in other ways, in order to render it creative and fruitful (Meilander 1996:25). The Van Regenmorters (2004:105) disagree. While they do concur that sex, love and procreation belong together, they also view procedures such as artificial insemination or in vitro fertilisation using the couple's genetic material as merely assisting the natural process.

The two major types of surrogacy arrangements are traditional surrogacy and gestational surrogacy. In the first instance, the surrogate is impregnated with the sperm of the male partner of the intended couple. In such a case, the surrogate is both the genetic mother and the birth mother. In the case of gestational surrogacy, the sperm and eggs of the intended parents are implanted in the surrogate. She therefore has no genetic link to the child, although she carries the baby and gives birth to it. This is a complex procedure made possible by sophisticated assisted reproductive techniques. In IVF, eggs from the commissioning mother (egg donor) are extracted, and mixed with the commissioning father's sperm (sperm donor) in vitro. The embryo is then transferred into the uterus of the surrogate, who carries the pregnancy to term and delivers the baby. Altruistic surrogate motherhood (unlike commercial surrogate motherhood) usually takes place when friends or relatives reach agreements. No payment is transacted, or else there is payment only to cover expenses directly related to the treatment, pregnancy and delivery (Galbraith, McLachlan & Swales 2005:13). The couple contracting with the surrogate are called the' intended, social, commissioning or contracting parents (Ciccarelli & Beckman 2005:22).

The South African Children's Act 38 of 2005, referring to surrogate motherhood, stipulates the following concerning the *confirmation by court:*

A court may not confirm a surrogate motherhood agreement unless

a) the commissioning parent or parents are not able to give birth to a child and that the condition is permanent and irreversible,
b) the commissioning parent or parents are in all respects suitable parents to accept the parenthood of the child that is to be conceived,

Inter alia, the Act stipulates that the *surrogate mother* should in all respects be a suitable person to act as surrogate mother. In addition, she is not allowed to use surrogacy as a source of income and she must have entered into the agreement for altruistic reasons, not commercial purposes. The potential surrogate mother must have a documented history of at least one pregnancy and viable delivery, and must have a living child of her own.

Before artificial fertilisation of the surrogate mother takes place, *the surrogate mother agreement* has to be confirmed by the court, and the agreement is valid for a period of 18 months thereafter. In accordance with such an agreement, any child born of a surrogate mother is to all purposes the child of the commissioning parent or parents from the moment of birth.

The Act stipulates that a surrogate mother who is also the genetic parent of the child concerned may, at any time prior to the lapse of a period of sixty days after the birth of the child, terminate the surrogate mother agreement by filing written notice at the court. Whether the agreement is terminated either before or after the child is born, the child is then the child of the surrogate mother and her husband or partner, if any, or, if none, the commissioning father.

The aim of the law is to take the rights, obligations and position of all relevant parties into consideration. Concerning surrogate motherhood, the Children's Act expresses the complexity of balancing the positions of the surrogate, the commissioning parents and the child being born from such an arrangement.

One surrogate exclaimed: 'This baby is one of God's special children, and I'm glad I'm in on it' (Ragoné 1994:69). Another said: 'She (the adoptive mother) was emotionally pregnant, and I was just physically pregnant' (1994:125). An intended (commissioning) mother expressed her feelings about the arrangement as follows: 'Ann is my baby, she was conceived in my heart before she was conceived in Lisa's body' (Ragoné 1994:126). A commissioning (biological) father expressed his concern: 'Yes, the whole thing was at first rather strange. I thought to myself, here she (surrogate) is carrying my baby. Isn't she supposed to be my wife?'

Another biological father said: 'I really empathise with Mark (the surrogate's husband). I really don't understand how he could let his wife have another man's child. I know I couldn't. It's not just her (surrogate) you are affecting' (Ragoné 1994:122).

Surrogacy adds up to basic ideas about parenthood, gender relationship and the importance of a genetic link to the child. As Ciccarelli et al (2005:39) point out, more empirical research is required to aid all the role players in all the stages (pre-contract, during pregnancy, post-birth and long-term) of the surrogacy process to alleviate the stress, stigma and possible long-term regret. It seems that, if expectations of and satisfaction with the relationship between the surrogate and commissioning couple are good, a lot of anxiety, distress and post-birth regret can be avoided. The psychosocial effects of and concerns about surrogacy have been dramatically highlighted by the case of Baby Cotton in the UK, and Baby M in the US, when the surrogate mothers resisted handling over the babies to the commissioning parents, and a court order was eventually obtained to induce the birth mothers to do so (Edelman 2004:125).

In her research on surrogacy, Ragoné (1996:136) found that all the participants involved in the surrogacy process, fathers, surrogates and mothers, wished to find traditional meanings in such extraordinary circumstances. By that Ragoné means that all the role players reconstruct traditional cultural kinship values so that surrogacy becomes consistent for them. For example, from the couple's point of view, traditional surrogacy is conceptualised as an attempt to achieve a traditional and acceptable end (not a radical departure from tradition) by having a child who is biologically related to at least one of them. At the same time, although blood kinship is the initial motive and end goal for surrogacy, it is precisely because the surrogate's involvement (biogenetically, or at least in terms of 'lending' her womb) leads to the biological link that such relatedness is de-emphasised in order to make surrogacy consistent with cultural values about the correct relations between husbands and wives (Ragoné1994:136). As a group, surrogates, for their part, tend to focus on those aspects of surrogacy that are consistent with traditional reproduction, for instance, the significance of motherhood and family. In the words of a surrogate mother: 'This is the 'gift of family' to the couple, I want to help them

to become parents'. Like the intended parents, they de-emphasise those aspects of surrogacy that represent a departure from traditional beliefs about motherhood, family and reproduction. A surrogate mother put it like this: 'The baby isn't mine. I'm only carrying the baby'. Another surrogate said: 'Parents are the ones who raise the child. I got that from my parents, who adopted children. I don't think of the baby as mine; it is the parents, the ones who raise the child, that are important'. In this way, inconsistencies between the traditional female role of wife and mother and the new 'persona' as surrogate can be avoided. However, it seems to be a Catch 22 situation: on the one hand, surrogates say that they are motivated by their 'love of children, pregnancy and family and that their desire to help others' encourages them to become surrogates. On the other hand, to give one's child away after one has given birth seems to reveal the opposite, and can be interpreted as a rather 'unmotherly' thing to do (Ragoné 1994:136).

Baslington (2002:57) proposes that some surrogate mothers appear to learn not to become attached to the unborn baby. If such feelings were to arise, they would counteract this by re-directing their emotions towards the couple. They would in some way focus on and bond with the couple, and not the baby, to the extent that most of them would regard a problem in the relationship with the couple as 'the worst part' of the surrogacy arrangement (2002:66). In thinking of surrogacy as a 'job with payment' influenced some surrogates not to think of the baby as their own (2002:69). Baslington asserts that the concept of maternal instinct is both a 'natural phenomenon with biological antecedents' and 'socially constructed, having cultural, social and ideological factors' (2002:69).

In her research, Schwartz (2003:163) found that surrogate mothers are psychologically stable women who, with various motives, are willing, even anxious, to gestate a fertilised egg, give birth and surrender the baby. They are able to compartmentalise their role in the surrogacy arrangement, and are willing to experience physical and psychological stresses beyond the normal strains that go hand in hand with pregnancy. Motives range from finding pregnancy enjoyable (more than childrearing), altruism, fulfilling the need to do something good and in the process gain a sense of self-worth, or the wish to repair a previous negative

experience, such as an abortion or giving a baby up for adoption (Schwartz 2003:164).

Strathern (2005:294) says reproductive technologies point to the relationship between technology and biology, reflecting the two components of maternity highlighted in surrogacy: the social motherhood of the commissioning mother and the biological motherhood of the genetic mother. It must not be forgotten, either, that the social mother could also be the genetic mother. Reproductive technologies assist the biological processes or make up for natural impairment, in the same way that the woman who acts on behalf of another's motherhood is a surrogate for her capacity to bear a child. Each person's role in the surrogate process is, in itself, incomplete and needs the actions of the other role players to complete the total social process. Technological intervention attends to only one part of the whole developmental sequence. The Law, theologians and ethicists have repeatedly asked the question pertaining the identity of the 'real' mother in the surrogacy process. Strathern posits that the surrogate mother is like a mother, yet not the 'real' mother, as she assists the real mother to overcome a particular impairment. That is the role she plays as an informed and willing substitute right from the start. She carries the child under her heart for nine months and both her biological and emotional processes nurture and envelop the child. But if there were no 'real' mother to receive and raise the child, the surrogate's actions would be meaningless. The real mother is not only created by biology, but is also socially constructed in communal processes.

Ragoné points out that in surrogacy the 'gift of life' theme has often been repeated in the context of blood and organ donation. She found the same theme in surrogate motherhood, and sees it as an attempt by participants and society to 'retard, at least symbolically, the trend towards the commodification of life' (2005:210). Surrogate mothers would often conceptualise the children they are producing or gestating as 'gifts' or 'the gift of life', which is so highly prized because of the importance of biogenetic relatedness in family kinship ideology. Family and kinship are underscored by the inviolability of the blood tie, and the emotional value of surrogacy, even if some form of material payment is involved,

creates language where words like pricelessness, indebtedness and gifting find a home.

In an ideal world, a surrogate child could have the privilege and opportunity of having a relationship with both mothers, even if one is more of a 'real' mother than the other in certain respects. Some surrogacy agencies require 'an open relationship' between the commissioning parents and surrogate mother, meaning that the surrogate should be allowed to have unrestricted contact with the child and the commissioning couple. Although parents involved in surrogate arrangements often resolve initially to maintain continuous contact, in most cases this is not realised. The parents might, after a while, see the surrogate as an intruder, fearing she could reclaim the child, or else they simply feel that her presence complicates the family situation. The surrogate, from her side, might feel that she has played her part and would like to move on with her life without having to be confronted with the intimate family dynamics (Schwartz 2005:165).

Who is the real mother, then? One answer lies in the Biblical story of King Solomon and the two mothers who came to him with a story of pain and loss, accusing each other of lying (1 Kings 3:16-28). They lived in the same house, and had given birth at more or less the same time to baby boys. One of the mothers accidentally lay on her child in the night and killed him. Before the King, both claimed to be the mother of the living son. Solomon showed that the wisdom of God was in him, when he ordered the child to be cut in half so that the mothers could share the child. The real mother was aghast. She decided to stand aside, willing to surrender her child to the other mother in order to save his life. The mother who in reality already had lost her child was eager for the slaying to take place. Solomon decided that the mother who stood aside because she loved the child was actually the real mother.

4.3 Historical surrogacy: Sarah and Hagar

Kirkman and Kirkman (2002:136) point out that, historically speaking, surrogate motherhood has not been controversial, as is depicted in the Biblical story of Sarah and Hagar. Rather, it is surrogacy and its numerous possibilities in the context of reproductive technology that is such a great cause for public concern.

Reproductive technology makes it possible for a mother to carry a child for her daughter, a daughter to carry a child for her mother, and a sister to carry another sister's child. Surrogacy arrangements vary, and it is believed that many informal arrangements have taken place between those who want to become parents and those who are willing to aid them. Artificial insemination (AI) is a widely used method for surrogacy arrangements. It is not new and is certainly not high-tech, because it can be performed without medical assistance with the use of a plastic straw or even a simple turkey baster (Ciccarelli et al 2005:21). Artificial insemination as an assisted reproduction technique is also a relatively easy, painless procedure. In essence, the female is treated with hormone tablets to cause ovulation at a specific time after administration, while the male is asked for a sperm sample on Day 13 or 14 of her menstrual cycle, about two hours before the scheduled insemination takes place in the gynaecologist's consulting rooms. The semen is specially prepared by the laboratory to 'induce capacitation and acrosomal reaction within the sperm', which is then mechanically deposited into the uterine cavity using a syringe connected to a soft Teflon catheter (Van Zyl 2005:26).

The notion of surrogacy arrangements is clearly not altogether novel and has been documented from Biblical times (Edelman 2004:125). Genesis introduces Abram's wife, Sarai, as a barren woman without children of her own, who, in an ancient surrogacy move, asks her husband to sleep with her servant Hagar in the hope that she, Sarai, will acquire a child through such means. The child Ishmael is born from that union, but it is plain that she later regretted her arrangement between Hagar and her husband.

In the Biblical context, a name is much more than a label or designation that sets one person apart from another, since the meaning of a name somehow represented the nature of the person (Lockyer 1986:744). The change of a name can also be of great importance in the Bible. Abram's name was changed to Abraham in connection with his new calling to be a 'father of many nations' (Genesis 17:5) and Sarai's name was changed to Sarah, meaning princess (Genesis 17:15). God also told Abraham that his son is going to be called Isaac, reflecting the 'laugther' of his mother at his birth (Genesis 21:6). The names

Abram and Abraham, and Sarai and Sarah will, in the following text, be used intermittently, according to their different names at different times in their narrative.

Sarah (the social/commissioning mother) twice drove Ishmael and his biological mother away into the desert. The first occasion took place after her long-awaited son, Isaac, was born. The second occurred after an incident involving Ishmael and Isaac at, or after, a celebratory feast for the latter on the day he was weaned. The Bible says: 'Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking Isaac' (Genesis 21:9). Sarah is adamant that the son of the slave woman will not inherit with Isaac, 'the child of the miraculous laughter' (Genesis 21:10). Williams (in Russell 2006:188) says there is a real possibility that she may be replaced and left out of the family if Ishmael is to inherit first place as head of the patriarchal household. This is a marriage of three, and competition for power is a serious matter. Sarah's reality is that she has one son, while Abraham, her husband, has two. God sees Abraham's distress when it becomes plain that Sarah wants to separate the brothers Ishmael and Isaac, and He acknowledges his 'double sonship': there will be a double line of descendants, and there will be a double blessing (McKinlay 2005:161).

According to Washofsky (2000:239), Jewish tradition would seem to offer surrogacy precedents of the kind where the surrogate is the biological mother of the child. The stories of Sarah, Rachel and Leah show them offering their maidservants to their husbands. The children conceived from such a union are regarded as the legal offspring of the husband and his wife. However, Washofsky points out that, after bearing the children, the maidservants became the concubines of Abraham and Jacob, and then enjoyed a legal status common in ancient Near Eastern Society. Therefore, Washofsky stresses, the issue of surrogacy is seen as a 'new and unprecedented phenomenon' (2000:238) within the context of artificial insemination and in vitro fertilisation, better comparable with medical technique than with a social and legal arrangement.

Bailey (2002:37) maintains that the postmodern age has emphasised the idea that reading a text is influenced by the 'social location' of the readers. As far as the Biblical story of Sarah and Hagar is concerned, the status, culture and place in

history of women affect which of the two they identify with and what they make of it. She found in her study that Jewish women typically identify with Sarah, and that African-American women normally look to Hagar as their ancestor, although there is significant diversity in their reading of the text, and sharing social location does not necessarily lead to a similar interpretation of the text. Hagar is interpreted amidst the whole range of identities from victim to survivor, from the 'blessed mother and child' (Bailey 2002:43) to 'someone with a pathetic sense of herself' who 'does not even have the strength to define herself' (2002:41), and therefore goes back to her former abusive situation under the authority of Sarah.

McKinley (2005:159) makes it clear that, as a reader, she attempts to meet 'the Sarah and Hagar of the text', but, at the same time, Sarah and Hagar meet her, as a person with multiple interests in them, someone who tries to bring the ancient text into meaningful dialogue with her own postmodern world by interpreting and confronting it. She identifies with the task, quoting Teresa de Lauretis in explaining a feminist reading: 'to seek out contradictions, heterogeneity, ruptures in the fabric of representation so thinly stretched - if powerful - to contain excess, division, difference, resistance; to open up critical spaces in the seamless narrative space constructed by…dominant discourses' (McKinley 2005:160).

Mieke Bal (in Rulon-Miller 1998:68) feels that 'textual problems that generate confusion, gaps and silences inevitably provide rich opportunities for interpretation'. However, she maintains that traditional Biblical criticism often participates in the repression of women. Hagar's multiple identities include those of a 'homeless woman, an abused woman, and a surrogate mother for Abraham and Sarah (Rulon-Miller 1998:62). In her feminist reading, Rulon-Miller sees Hagar as a marginal female character, representative of the allure of Egypt's 'natural religion, fertility rites, cyclic thinking and sacred prostitution' (1998:64). The Israelites had difficulty in isolating them from the attractiveness of the Egyptian fertility and female cults. When God called Abraham to follow him, He also called him to choose monotheism, to choose faith, and to trust Him.

As mentioned earlier, Rabbinic Midrash Halakha deals with the legal portions in the Bible whereas Midrash Haggadah deals with the non-legal sections of the

Biblical text. Debate on Hagar and Sarah occurs primarily in texts that belong to the second category. Rabbinic literature, according to Reinhartz and Walfish (2006:105), is a genre that lies 'between pure commentary and original creative composition', and is often prompted by 'linguistic, theological, narrative or homiletic peculiarities, problems or issues' emerging from the Biblical text. An important characteristic of Midrash Haggadah is the belief that the text cannot be reduced to one single 'correct' meaning and instead is subject to multiple interpretations (called polysemy). The authors, however, point out that rabbinic Midrash tends to favour the Israelite matriarch when it comes to resolving the moral issues at stake in the story of Sarah and Hagar. Concerning the status between them, Sarah's position is clearly superior. One midrashic explanation by R. Simeon b. Yohai, from the 5th century, sees Hagar as the daughter of Pharaoh who gave her as slave to the household of Abraham, in acknowledgment of God's intervention on Sarah's behalf when she was taken into Pharaoh's household (Genesis 12:14-19). Other Midrashim propose Hagar's Egyptian origins as an unchanged idolater. While under Abraham's influence, she apparently honoured the God of Israel, but when banished to the desert she reverted to idol worship and immediately the water ran out. A Midrash from a 10th century collection of homilies on Genesis, *Aggadat Bereshit*, draws a crude comparison 'between Hagar and a blob of donkey fat that has accidentally fallen into rose oil' (Reinhartz & Walfish 2006:106), and understands her fertility as owing to her coming from a sexually promiscuous people, and not from God's blessing. Ezekiel 23:20 describes how Israel lusts after the Egyptians, and in drawing on that passage the connection between idolatry, sexual looseness and Hagar's luck in falling pregnant is made.

Rabbinic literature underscores fertility as a sign of status, and God is seen as the One who controls female fertility. Apparently there is a link between fertility and divine favour (Reinhartz & Walfish 2006:108). Sarah's eventual conception of Isaac is seen as a miracle. God has 'transformed her from a dry, barren, old woman to a goddess-like fertile mother' (2006:109) with enough milk to breastfeed other children in the market (Genesis 21:7).

God promises Abraham that he will be 'exceedingly fruitful' (Genesis 17:6) 'like the dust of the earth' (Genesis 13:16), and his descendants will be as countless as the stars in the heavens (Genesis 15:5). Set against the narrator's description, this creates spectacular tension: 'But Sarah was barren; she had no child' (Genesis 11:30) and 'Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children' (Genesis 16:1). Within the context of ancient patriarchy, Sarai's most important function is to bear a son, so to be the barren wife of the man destined to be the founding father of the chosen people of God must be truly awful. Sarah understands that it is Yahweh who closed her womb (Genesis 16:2) and it is also Yahweh who has accomplished her impregnation: 'The Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for her as He had promised' (Genesis 21:1). God made the unbelievable happen. He brought 'laughter' to her. He echoed her incredible laughing into the promised child of laughter (Isaac), and 'made everyone who hears…laugh' (Genesis 21:6). Whether they are laughing with her or at her is not quite clear (McKinlay 2005:161).

Van Pelt Campbell (2006:282) does not interpret Sarai's surrogacy plan to deal with her infertility as immoral, but rather as a lack of faith in God. It was a devised plan that caused more problems in the end than it solved: both she and Hagar showed mutual disrespect that led to bitterness, conflict and separation. Van Pelt Campbell points out that even the use of a morally-accepted method of addressing infertility (and that could include adopting children from other countries, the use of frozen embryos and surrogate childbearing), should not be undertaken 'apart from faith in the Lord' (2006:282). Using her creative imagination, Jenny Diski writes in her novel *Only human: a comedy* (in McKinlay 2005:163) that Sarai discovered that 'playing God at his own game gave her all God's disadvantages. She could manipulate the world, but she could not participate in it. The world swelled with the life she had willed into being, and mocked her for being unable to indulge in her achievement with any of her senses but that of sight' (2000:180).

In all probability, it is precisely because Sarai assumes that infertility lies with her (and from the hand of God), not with Abram, that she proposes a fertility technique to her husband. After all, he is the one who received the promise of a great number of descendants from God, not she. The fertility strategy of offering her

handmaid to her husband is intended to help Sarah 'obtain children by [Hagar]' (Genesis 16:2) or to 'be built up through her'. Her actions can be interpreted as both generous and desperate. Reis (2000:78) points out that, in the cases of Sarah, Rachel and even Leah, they wanted their handmaids to bear children with their husbands in order for their own fertility to increase. Apparently, in sharing one's 'sexual marital prerogatives' as 'unselfish support of procreation' there is the benefit of gaining God's favour, and hopefully being blessed with a child of one's own (Reis 2000:78). In Leah's words, after she had borne her fifth son (Genesis 30:18): 'God has given me my hire (rent/pay), because I have given my maid to my husband: and she called his name Issachar (hired). Leah is 'paid' with a son of her own, not the son of her handmaid. Sarah, Rachel and Leah needed birthing mothers and it appears that these primary wives controlled the secondary wives' admission to their husbands' beds. Sarai clearly has authority in sexual matters: she proposes the fertility plan and dominates Hagar, who is never referred to as Abram's wife. Once pregnant, it appears that these handmaids lose their 'copulation privileges' (Reis 2000:79). It also seems that the matriarchs did not intend to adopt any of their handmaids' children. In Sarah's case, at least, she did not have many maternal feelings for them, otherwise she would not have banished Ishmael at the age of seventeen. The children of the handmaids were, like their mothers, regarded as property.

Wenham (1994:7) explains that, if it was a serious matter for a man in the ancient world to be childless, for a woman it was catastrophic, a sign of failure. It must have been a near unbearable condition. Polygamy was used as a way of overcoming childlessness, although wealthier wives preferred the practice of surrogate motherhood. In the case of a mistress allowing her husband to have sexual intercourse with her maid, she could feel that the child born was her own, and she could exert some control over it. If her husband had simply taken a second wife, the situation would have been less controllable. This practice is 'attested throughout the ancient Orient from the third to the first millennium BC, from Babylon to Egypt' (Wenham 1994:7). In the light of the social customs of the ancient Near East, Wenham regards Sarai's fertility proposal as 'the normal human response to the problem of childlessness in the ancient world'. However

God indicated in Genesis 15:4 that something 'abnormal', something out of the ordinary would happen, and that she should wait on Him (1994:7).

Sarah's powerful authority over Hagar as a 'woman of the dominant culture' (McKinlay 2005:166) made it possible for her to present her slave to Abraham as a hopeful solution to their infertility dilemma. Hagar is given to Abraham because of the potential of her womb; she is intended as a birth mother. At the same time, Hagar is also a sexual gift. Voiceless in the matter, Hagar can merely offer a 'look' to Sarah after she became pregnant, which made her mistress feel wronged, jealous and hurt (Genesis 16:5). It also escalates the bad blood between them.

Abraham willingly fulfils his wife's surrogacy plan with his seed, but is impotent when it comes to protecting his firstborn and his mother. It appears that power shifts continuously take place between Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and their sons. Hagar came from Egypt to serve Sarah, who apparently served the Pharaoh (Genesis 12). Abraham is trapped between reason and passion in either preserving or offering his sons, whether to the knife or the desert. Ultimately, the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar is about faith. Abraham realises that keeping the faith is an ironic taskmaster. Faith is a difficult endeavour, as it is not a reasonable act that fits neatly into life's normalities and perceptions. Brueggemann (1982:618) points out that the narrative of the promised child moves around the question: 'Is anything impossible for Yahweh' (Genesis 18:14)? This question 'contains the most radical assertion of ancestral faith' and challenges the epistemology, world-view and definition of reality of Abraham and Sarah (1982:618), and indeed the believing community that continues the tradition of faith. The question of what is possible for God embodies also the substance of faith (whether God stands distinct from the structures of reality), and it asks about the kind of narrow methodology involved when interpretations tend to 'contain, close and circumscribe' (Brueggeman 1982:619) God, reality and possibilities. Brueggemann believes the question of Yahweh's possibilities invites a new option, a gift, so to speak, where thinking 'outside the conventional definitions of reality' in terms of 'asymmetry and disproportion' shatters old understandings (1982:619). He quotes Ricoeur, who says of this 'shattering': 'This is a turning point, because it

is again a destruction, but a destruction of what destroys, a deconstruction of the assurances of modern man' (1982:619).

In the end, Sarah and Hagar both tasted the wilderness, albeit in different ways. Sarah's barrenness drove her to a place of loneliness, despair and grief, even in the presence of God himself, armed with His promise, and even when in the arms of Abraham. Her barrenness, stark as the desert sand, made her hopeful, jealous, angry, cynical, brutal, fearful and possessive. Hagar, driven into the wilderness, at the same time by her own choice, by Sarah and by Abraham's order, eventually became 'an occupier of the wilderness, the biblical Other space' (McKinlay 2005:160). The wilderness in which both Sarah and Hagar live means that both live in a place for the dispatched and the excluded, yet both have God's promise of a divine and lasting blessing. McKinley quotes bell hooks, who maintains that this in itself makes it possible to experience the wilderness in a different way: it becomes a site of creativity and power, an inclusive space where it is possible to recover oneself; where it enables a radical perspective from which to see, create and imagine alternatives.

Father Abraham, the man born in Ur of Chaldea, believed there is only one God, and was willing to sacrifice his son because his faith upheld him. He was father to a multitude of nations, patriarch and spiritual ancestor of three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, with about 15 million Jews, 2 billion Christians and 1,2 billion Muslims (Szulc 2001:96). But in the foreground of his narrative stand two mothers, Sarah and Hagar, who carried his seed in their wombs, and who, even today, draw us to their breasts and nurse us with the hope and anguish of their mother's milk, for indeed the promise has come true. Abraham's children are, figuratively speaking, as numerous as the stars in the heavens, they are seen as a blessing, and they themselves are blessed, but, as descendents of Ishmael and Isaac, they do not always see eye to eye (McKinlay 2005:159). The story of Sarah, Hagar and their children is also a story of struggle, not only against each other but against the patriarchal belief that their main source of identity lies in their ability to bear an heir to carry on the lineage of the family. They compete with each other to gain power in the validation of their motherhood through Abraham and God. Fertility is not the only vehicle for their female identity, but it is certainly a sign

of divine approval (Russell 2006:188). Sarah and Hagar look upon the children with both hope and anguish, because they have not only carried Abraham's seed as father, but have also left the seed of conflict and struggle as a legacy to their children (Russell 2006:185).

4.4 Stan and Sena: (story) makers of a family

From the Biblical story of surrogacy, the researcher introduces the surrogacy story of Stan and Sena. The following version of their narrative, a compilation of all the conversations, is written in an unconventional, weaving pattern, capturing the most important perspectives and experiences of their lives as a couple who have confronted and overcame infertility. The constructed description was influenced by a number of things, *inter alia,* the way in which they chose to share their story, the routes they took when reflecting, the conversation style of the researcher, and the relationship between them and the researcher. The account is based on three face-to-face conversations, some phone conversations and e-mail correspondence.

The researcher initially made contact with them when they were living overseas, and the first interview took place while they were on holiday in South Africa. However, she had to follow them to their next working destination in yet another country to converse further with them. The discussions and reflecting took place over an eighteen-month period. This included introducing them to the thoughts, suggestions and questions of the reflecting team. As with all the couples that took part in the research, those on the reflecting team did not personally meet the other members or any of the four couples. The only communication between them was via the researcher. The reflecting team was asked to write down their thoughts on each of these three conversations, including the questions they proposed the researcher should ask the co-researchers. They were encouraged to comment on the researcher's motives, line of thought and responses as well.

In addition to taping the conversations, the researcher took notes of the telephone exchanges, and kept a journal in which she wrote down her thoughts and experiences during the research process. She stayed within the parameters of narrative research, using an unstructured, open, informal conversational style.

Initially the researcher asked Stan and Sena to describe their experiences and difficulties in falling pregnant. Certain themes came to the fore, which were then developed further, for example, how the childlessness and attempts to fall pregnant strained their relationship, including creating sexual difficulties, and the different ways in which they, as individuals, experienced the reality of struggling to have children. Another theme was the perplexity of why they had to battle with infertility, and the way in which they related it to God's possible role in their dilemma. A strong theme was their mainly negative relationship with their surrogate, and their later feelings about the fact that they had chosen that route. All four of the co-researcher couples were, to some degree, interested in the story of the author, although it never came even close to dominating the conversations.

Stan, a private and introverted man, chose to be physically present at only the first interview, although now and then he would share his thoughts through his wife after receiving the reported conversation by e-mail. He also chose not to be present at the birth of the triplets, because 'it's another woman who lies there', as well as the fact that he does not like blood. At one point after the babies were born, he expressed his conviction that enough had been said and that they ought to leave the long and arduous journey to overcome their childlessness, behind them. All of that is in the past, he said. In fact, long before the research commenced they had already decided not to tell any new acquaintances that their children had been born from a surrogate, as 'people don't have to know and many don't understand'. For that reason, especially, I felt very privileged to be allowed into their lives. He admitted that he was sometimes plagued by the fact that they 'had to do what they did to get their children'.

The words in the account are Stan's and Sena's, and the comments of the reflecting team are their own as well. As researcher, I preferred to compose the printed text in a weaving pattern, using different columns for different voices. In doing so, I have tried not to privilege any one voice above another (Fox 1996:331). However, while the co-researchers were involved in the process as subjective hearers/participants/story tellers of research I have left out some parts of the conversations and included others in the following documented version. I did this for a number of reasons: I took into account what the co-researchers were

comfortable with, what I as subjective researcher, personally dealing with infertility, preferred to present, what we (me, Stan and Sena) thought the reader would be interested in, and what we felt needed to be heard because it is not often said. This version is one way in which all of us researchers could tell the story, and it is one way of presenting it. Stan and Sena were not prepared for me to talk to 'their surrogate'. I respected that, but realised later that I did two things to compensate for the fact that I felt she hadn't been allowed a personal voice. I sometimes inadvertently asked questions that would challenge Stan and Sena to reconsider their understanding of her behaviour, and I have covered in greater depth the role and position of Hagar (the surrogate) than I did for Sarah (the commissioning mother) earlier in this chapter.

This version is one of many ways in which the story could have been told. Although the researchers tried to tell a coherent narrative: the 'true story', the truth is that it is still in the making. When the ink that carries the voices of Stan and Sena dries up on the last page, keep in mind that theirs is a narrative ending without end (Trible 2006:54).

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Sena – commissioning mom

All these years that we kept on trying…it became a lifestyle. And every time you learn to cope with it. We combined Stan's annual leave with a visit to Cape Town to have an in vitro, and tried to have a holiday at the same time. I think I had thirteen in fifteen years.

Stan – commissioning dad

Well, your fertility technology is just racing on, so you never know what is going to happen.

Sena – commissioning mom

It all started a long, long time ago when I was 26, I think. For the first 2 years nothing happened, so of course the gynae said something must be wrong. So for a year they did biopsies and hormone tests on me and there was nothing wrong. And then they did the sperm test. They said, if you want to have children you will have to see a specialist. Stan wasn't that keen to start just yet.

Ilse – researcher

It's amazing how science has progressed.

Stan – commissioning dad

Yes. *(The babies start to wake up, crying in the next room)* Sorry, I'll just have to

check on them. We have 2 girls in there.

Sena – commissioning mom

All they had was GIFT then. GIFT and ZIFT. So either putting the egg and the sperm together and either taking out from the fallopian tubes and putting back, or taking out there and put it back vaginally. It was quite bad in those days - you know that you will have a full anaesthetic twice.

Ilse – researcher

(This is so technical. She is so very aware of the process of conception.)

Sena – commissioning mom

This is what happened to us. When they first started us they said, well, you should do about four and if you fail then you should just accept it, you're not going to have any kids.

Ilse – researcher

Nobody can say you
two give up easily.

Stan – commissioning dad

(Comes back with two babies. Hands one to Sena.)
No, no not at all.

Ilse – researcher

They're gorgeous.
(And they're factory made!)

Sena – commissioning mom

And when we got to number four, they said, now we've got ICSI. Start counting again. And that is how it went. They would say: now we have a new growth medium; now the embryo can survive for five days outside the body before they have to put it back…

Ilse – researcher

It sounds like a science project.

Sena – commissioning mom

The goal was to have children. The emotional side was a lot worse than the physical side. In the beginning you're still full of hope. Towards the end it got harder.

Ilse – researcher

Hope propels you.

Sena – commissioning mom

So then we just carried on and on and on. I flew to South Africa again but, I said to the gynae, this time is going to be the last time. And he said, well, I got the surrogacy programme started, and I've got three surrogates waiting for couples to sign them up.

Stan – commissioning dad

It didn't take us long to decide.

Sena – commissioning mom

The gynae had them screened. Hepatitis, Aids, diabetes, any genetic stuff. They were all over thirty. Actually the

surrogates were all rather too old. With the first surrogate we had three IVFs, and with the one that was successful, also three. The third IVF with the second surrogate was successful.

Ilse – researcher

I can imagine that they have a lot of reasons why they are doing it.

Stan – commissioning dad

The main reason is money, contrary to what they might tell you. When it's family it's different, but when it's an external surrogate, it's money.

Sena – commissioning mom

Until our surrogate actually got pregnant, she would try to convince us how it was always on her mind to do something good for people. But the moment she got pregnant and even after the birth, there were the financial demands, my

stove is broken, my washing machine is broken…

Stan – commissioning dad

Yes, that was besides the contract we had. The huge medical expenses; the lump sum we gave her.

Sena – commissioning mom

There was that emotional, look-what -I-have-done-for-you. I suppose she thought she had reason, because there were three, you see.

Ilse – researcher

Well, lending out your body for nine months, going through all those emotional highs and lows. Can it really only be the money…

Sena – commissioning mom

She was a nurse as well, and I liked that. She's got three children, and she has been

divorced three times. I don't think she gets any money from any of her husbands.

Ilse – researcher

How did you feel about not carrying them yourself? About seeing another woman growing with your babies?

Sena – commissioning mom

I sometimes think, I've missed out. But I came to it easy. I was sitting overseas while she was pregnant, I didn't have to look at her. It's been such a long road, in the end it didn't really matter.

Ilse – researcher

How would it have been more difficult if you were in South Africa?

Sena – commissioning mom

Because she would feel, and I would feel that we now have to forge a huge friendship. You

don't just make friends like that.

Ilse – researcher

There's an emotional story within this story.

Stan – commissioning dad

Yes, it's a financial transaction.

Sena – commissioning mom

Life was just getting too monotonous. Only him and me on holiday and everywhere, for twenty-two years. Sometimes I think we would have gotten so bored with each other that we would have separated. We really wanted children – we wanted all the stages of life. Not in the beginning, but in the end, this struggle made us actually stronger.

Ilse – researcher

You are now in a new life pattern. Sena: before and after the babies.

Sena – commissioning mom

I studied, I had two businesses, but it feels good to be a mother. I've waited for so long, I appreciate them. The girls keep me very busy. I have no desire to work now. They eat vegetables and fruit, no tea or coffee or sweets. We agree on the discipline. We are strict. Stan thinks I'm doing well with them. *(laugh)* We've changed so much. His heart wasn't in this at the start. He was against it, but he went ahead. Well, all he had to do was to give his sperm.

Ilse - researcher

Didn't he feel disempowered, with the gynae trying to get you pregnant? Last time, Stan said to me, he is not so sure that he would do it all over again.

Sena – commissioning mom

It was because, back then, he only got 2 hours sleep per night, and he saw the girls seldom because of his long

hours. It's much better now with the new job, he is absolutely mad about them. They're older now, and they speak. When he walks through the door, they go bananas, they scream: Dada, Dada, Dada!

Yes, he became worried, after the third or fourth time that the treatment was not working. And he went to a psychiatrist because he couldn't get it up, it's all in the brain, you know. Erectile dysfuntion. All the men on fertility programmes get these problems. A Catch 22. You can't get your wife pregnant, and now you can't even satisfy your partner. He went through those cycles a few times. Even if the one person doesn't blame the other, he still blames himself.

Ilse – researcher

How do you see God's presence in all of this?

Sena – commissioning mom

At the end, when it started to look hopeless, I thought: is it because of something I did to God?… *(long silence)*…but there are no answers for these things. I even thought my life was too easy with Stan - money, holidays, jewellery, we were happy- it is just all too good. Everything was so easy, maybe now…The one thing that is not going to be is children, I thought.

Ilse – researcher

It would be interesting to one day tell your children how they came into this life.

Sena – commissioning mom

(laugh) I think it will be easier for us, than parents of adopted children. We wouldn't have to say somebody gave them away, because it's just that she carried them.

We don't even tell anybody now about the surrogacy. There's no reason to keep on telling the story, they just

assume it happened the usual way. Our friends and family knew about the in vitro's, but not the ones at work. From Stan's family, there was hardly any pressure – his brother and sister are childless.

Ilse – researcher

Would you say you and Stan experienced things differently?

Sena – commissioning mom

Yes, two years have passed, and it still worries him that we did what we had to do to have children. For me it doesn't matter. The children are here now.

He doesn't want to keep on talking about it any more. He says: that's finished now, that's history.

Ilse – researcher

What do your children mean to you? What have you discovered in yourself?

Sena – commissioning mom

Let me tell you a story. Last year before we went on holiday, there was a dove on our stoep. He ended up there because his wing was injured. I gave him food and water. Even as we went in and out of the house he wouldn't fly away. Then we had to leave for the holidays. I told the staff to leave him alone, because they always eat the birds. The gardener told me he flew away a week after we left. His wing healed. I felt like that dove.

Ilse – researcher

As you look into the future, what do you want for your children?

Sena – commissioning mom

I want them to be happy, I suppose. Just happy and healthy.

If we weren't successful I would have had to change my lifestyle. I never fitted in, not

with those with children and not with those without. Stan worked all the time. I couldn't work, I just tagged along. For fifteen years I was trying to get pregnant and going wherever my husband was going, whichever country, whichever city.

Falling pregnant is so easy for other women.

You know, the surrogate was supposed to say it's her own children, and she's going to give them up for adoption, because of the medical aid issues and because I was going to be present at the birth. But in the end everybody knew: she told all the sisters and the doctors she's a surrogate. And she's doing it for the love of it, that she's receiving no payment. She loved all the attention. They thought she was a saint, and that we exploit her.

I visited her every second day in the hospital in the month before the caesarean. She had to lie down. It's procedure

when it's triplets, they monitor all the time. She said the whole experience changed her, that it enriched her life. She even wondered if I wouldn't give her one of the babies, but her material wasn't used. She was only the incubator. We were so desperate, at one point we even tried donor sperm, but it didn't work. Our surrogate had two personalities. She was so lovey- dovey, but in the end it was all about the money. It left a bad taste in my mouth.

One of Stan's aunts (the one whose husband is a minister) at one stage said, we ought to accept that we can't have children. The Lord has something else in store for us. My father said the same: That we should leave it now. But when must you stop trying if you want it so badly?

We flew the children in from where we lived then for the baptism when they were nine months old. We wanted to consecrate them to God.

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In this narrative of Stan and Sena, some voices were more articulate than others. Some were merely hinted at, or wondered about, such as God's perspective. Some were spoken for, like the surrogate, and some, like Stan, deliberately chose to stand in the background. Be that as it may, the 'multiple interactions of perspectives' (Fox 1996:351) made up a complex tale of desire, benevolence, hope, joy, desperation and loss. For Stan and Sena, the birth of the triplets ended a desperate, but courageous struggle to define themselves as full participants in the adult phases of life. This, however, brings new challenges: going from a situation of having no children, to a place of almost having too many. One member of the reflecting team, the psychologist, remarked that the same dedication and goal-orientated efforts that had previously been needed to achieve a pregnancy were now needed for planning the triplets' eating, sleeping and play schedule. Even something as simple as going to a restaurant would be stressful and tiring. He was interested in how the arrival of the children had changed the couple's identities and relationship.

The social worker on the reflecting team, who was involved in writing a manual on 'marriage preparation and marriage enrichment' for a government Department, confessed that, unfortunately, little attention had been given to the childless family in their manual. She commented that the childless family also goes through the stages of 'family life cycles', not directly, but indirectly through their friends', peers' or siblings' children. The only difference is that the family goes through these cycles without having children. It is sometimes assumed that because people have no children, they have fewer marital problems, as the family structure is less complicated. This overlooks the pain and stress that childlessness can bring.

The embryologist on the reflecting team was curious as to why Stan had had so little contact with his children during the first year of their lives. Was he trying to construct identities for them apart from the surrogate's presence in their lives?

I found the feedback of the reflecting team very helpful in formulating questions for Stan and Sena. It was also interesting to observe how different members of the team addressed and highlighted different aspects of their story. The team

consisted of a nurse, an embryologist, a social worker, a psychologist, a painter, a literary critic, a lesbian theologian, a gay business couple and a black biochemist.

4.5 Voices of nuance: Science's Lady Wisdom, Mother God and Alice, an IVF child.

To bring their ending to a place of no ending, three more voices are introduced to add further colour and shading to the contours of Stan and Sena's account: the voice of a scientist who proposes that Wisdom should be given her proper place in the worlds of biology and ethics, the voice of a female theologian who calls out to God and the Church to let her (God) be known by her motherliness, not only his fatherliness, and lastly, the voice of Alice Kirkman, 13 years old, who came into this world as an IVF baby, and places her experience in perspective.

First, then, scientist, Celia Deanne-Drummond (2001:xvi) argues for an attempt to start a genuine conversation between theology and science on the following grounds:

- Science does show a religious dimension, although it needs to be carefully theologically critiqued.
- Many of the methods of modern theology inadvertently draw on the insights of science, as science continually shapes culture, including all forms of knowledge.
- There are various forms of interconnection and informing between science and other forms of knowledge. The values of science both feed off and influence culture.
- More social-scientific research should be undertaken from the perspective of both science and theology in order to develop further points of interest.

In acknowledging these influences of science on theology and vice versa, creative conversation can take place, including careful listening in order to enhance mutual understanding and clearer vision, instead of the too frequent rejection and hostility that take place between the disciplines.

Deanne-Drummond proposes the Biblical tradition of Wisdom and the notion of Wisdom as discernment, according to Thomas Aquinas, to act as a resource for reflection (2001:88). Proverbs 8:22-36 says clearly that Wisdom was present even before the beginning of creation: 'Wisdom was inaugurated and ordained from everlasting, from the beginning, before the earth ever existed' (Proverbs 8:23). The idea of Wisdom is at the core of life and of human experience; it takes a plural perspective on the complex and diverse world and is seen as a female attribute of God. Proverbs 9 gives a description of how Wisdom has built her house with seven pillars, has set her table and has invited all who lack understanding to come eat of her food and drink her wine in order to attain insight and humility.

Wisdom in the Bible has a human, social and cosmic face. Human Wisdom acts in humbleness, being only too aware of its limitations. In its broadest sense it allows for both the goodness of the creation, and the particular human, social and environmental consequences of human action (2001:91). In other words, 'Wisdom is helpful in not denying reason or science their place, but it places them in a wider context of social justice, prudence and temperance' (Deanne-Drummond 2001:143). The cosmic face of Wisdom refers to understanding the human and naturalistic environment as a whole, and not dualistically. In terms of the cosmic face of Wisdom, in the New Testament the Logos or Christ are clustered together. When defining divine Wisdom in terms of the Christ, this also becomes a definition of the Church.

Thomas Aquinas argues that Wisdom as discernment in practical life is possible only through the gift of the Holy Spirit, since love (in the form of faith, hope and charity) is then added to counterbalance the failings of sin. His idea of practical wisdom, apparently in line with Aristotle's thinking on phronesis (to take counsel, to judge discoveries and to act), makes it possible to discern God's wisdom in different areas of life, and to act as co-creator with God in ordering the universe as a community. If the opposite of Wisdom is Folly, and if even the Wisdom of God is sometimes interpreted as Folly, wise choices in science are indeed crucially important. How far and on what terms should man and woman be allowed to become co-creators with God in engineering crops, animals and humans (Deane-Drummond 2001:93)? It seems that Lady Wisdom could help to lead the way in

finding greater insight and good judgment when it comes to the challenges concerning biotechnogoly.

Second is the voice of Sallie McFague, theologian who experiments in a heuristic, imaginative way with the model of God as mother. She regards this particular model of 'the God who is on the side of life and its fulfilment' (1996:329) as one that stands alongside other pictures or imaginings of God in Scripture and tradition. However, she feels that modelling God in the image of a mother is particularly fitting for the time in which we are currently living. The imaginative picture of the relationship between (Mother) God and the world underscores the radical and intimate interrelatedness and interdependence of all life; the need for the just sharing of life's basic necessities; the intrinsic worth of all species; and the moving away from dualistic hierarchies (1996:329).

Using the metaphor of God as Mother means that the patriarchal model becomes de-centred, as subsequently do such dualisms as male/female, spirit/flesh, heterosexual/homosexual. The Mother model also serves to re-contextualise the paternal model. Paternal love from a mother or father is probably the most powerful and intimate way of giving love, it is a precious and vulnerable gift of your genes and nurturing to your child, a gift that s/he in turn can pass on to the next generation.

McFague investigates three basic features of the maternal model: giving life, nurturing the life after it has come into existence and fervently wishing for the created to grow and flourish. As far as the first feature in concerned, McFague says the model of God as Mother, physically in labour, evokes images of gestation, giving birth and nursing. To imagine coming forth from the womb of our mother ('being bodied forth from the divine being') is a powerful expression that we 'live and move and have our being' in God, and that we are interdependent and interrelated with the rest of the universe (McFague 1996:327). This strong image of God as Mother stands in contrast with the frequently-favoured Judeo-Christian image of God as an artistic intellectual who creates by the act of speaking the Word: a creator who stands slightly apart from his creation. Secondly, the model of Mother God expresses the most basic responsibility of parents, namely to feed

their young. Food imagery abounds in the Bible. However the focus is more often on a theology of receiving spiritual food from God, rather than seeing God as a parent who feeds all creatures. Lastly, the Mother God model, embodying the birth metaphor, blends well with the contemporary ecological context, where the earth's resources have to be managed well and distributed fairly. The Mother (parent) loves all her children equally, and becomes sad and angry when some dismiss the intrinsic worth of others, or try to grab the best for themselves. The universe is seen as 'bodied forth from the womb of God', so to damage the earth and its creatures is to injure the embodied God.

At the same time, McFague cautions against the pitfalls of simply establishing a 'new hierarchal dualism with a maternal model of God', or sentimentalising maternal imagery as if all mothers were, as a matter of course, loving and nurturing. Instead, it should be acknowledged that such maternal qualities are socially constructed. The third pitfall would be the failure to realise how utterly oppressive maternal language can be to all human beings when it relegates us always to the role of children. It poses particular problems for women, suggesting that only those who have mothered children are true or fulfilled women. This model of Mother God should therefore be seen as only one of many possible female and male models for speaking of God (McFague 1996:325).

The third voice invited to bring an open ending to the story of Stan and Sena is that of Alice Kirkman, who came into this world in 1988 as an IVF baby. Dubbed 'Alice in Wonderland' by Australian newspapers, she was conceived with her mother's egg and donor sperm, and gestated by her aunt. The researcher decided to include her voice as a representative of sorts for Stan and Sena's children, who, at the age of two, are far too young to realise how special they are, not only because they are triplets, but also because they were conceived with the intense medical procedures that constitute in vitro fertilisation, and were borne by a gestational surrogate mother.

At the time she was interviewed Alice was a normal 13 year old, who 'just happens to have been born by means of IVF surrogacy'. Asked what it is like to be born as a result of a sperm donation, her reply is that she has known this since she was

very young, and that it doesn't bother her. The man who was her mother's husband before her birth, Sev, discovered that he could not have children, and suggested taking the route of sperm donation. Alice regards Sev as her father, as he plays the role of father in her life and regards her as his daughter. Although she knows the identity of her biological father, they have no contact, in order to protect his privacy.

Asked whether children should be allowed to be born through IVF surrogacy, she replied that it is becoming more and more common, and that both conventional and unconventional families (same sex parents, single parents and IVF children) should be allowed to exist in peace.

In response to Dick, the school bully's taunts of 'test-tube kid, test-tube kid', she was initially hurt. (By the way, she has known Dick since their kindergarten years.) Then she realised that he did not even know that IVF does not mean 'test tube' but refers to an embryo cultivated in glass, and secondly, that (at her age) it's less embarrassing to know you've been conceived in a Petri dish than as a result of your parents having sex!

This chapter told and reflected upon the story of Stan and Sena, and placed an emphasis on the discourse of surrogacy. The next chapter introduces Hester and Florence and their experiences concerning secondary infertility and mutual embracement.

CHAPTER 5

HARVEST SONG OF HESTER AND FLORENCE: LOSING INFANTS, INHERITING A CHILD

In this chapter the following issues will be considered in the course of Hester's narrative: infertility in the African context, secondary infertility, mutual embracement, issues of death, and African feminist theology.

5.1 Telling a poem, reciting infertility

Hester's story of her 'childlessness' was told during three conversations, with Florence taking part in the last one. (The inverted commas are used ironically, since Hester gave birth to twins and has an adopted daughter. However, she has no living biological child and is therefore not regarded as a 'real' mother by her community.) The conversations were transcribed from an audiotape onto 60 pages of verbatim text, and then condensed into a four and a half page poem, using Hester and Florence's own words.

The researcher is indebted to the approach by social scientist Laurel Richardson (1992:126), who's interview with a woman called, Louisa May, resulted in its being written in poetic form. Richardson had a number of reasons for presenting the interview in poetic form. First, she wanted a diversion from the dull, dry sociological writing of paraphrasing, case studies or simply quoting the interviewees' words. Secondly, she argued that by presenting Louisa's language to shape the poem she de-centred herself as the expert sociologist, and reached a sensitive, ethical solution to the issues of 'authority/authorship/appropriation' whereby she felt she could use her 'skills and resources in the service of others less beneficially situated' (1992:131). She inevitably interpreted Louisa May's words, life and experiences, but presenting them in a certain pattern that meticulously reflected the speaker's tone, diction and meaning, and using only Louisa May's words, she tried to do so with subjective integrity. Thirdly, Richardson liked the idea of finding a union between the sociological and the poetic because this is an important part of how she prefers to express herself as a sociologist and an individual. What she found, in the end, was that in writing about

Louisa May, she also rewrote her own self. As a narrative researcher I could identify with Richardson's thinking, and in telling Hester and Florence's story, I was inspired to make use of poetic representation in the same way.

The poem uses Hester and Florence's own words and the researcher tried to convey the nature and mood by making use of poetic devices such as repetition, pauses, foregrounding of words and emotions, 'free verse' and dramatic progression. The fact that poetry by nature lends itself in greater measure to multiple and open readings than does conventional prose or traditional narrative research writing, and is a concise way of telling a story, influenced my decision to tell Hester and Florence's story in the form of a poem.

Todorov (1981:4) describes the aim of poetic representation as an attempt to 'name the text that was examined', (or, in this instance, to name the conversation/interview with Hester and Florence.) The act of 'naming' leads to a determination to make the text itself speak: 'It is a fidelity to the object, to the other, and consequently an effacement of the subject –as well as its drama, which is to be forever incapable of realising *the* meaning, but only a meaning, subject to historical and psychological contingencies' (1981:4).

It is a kind of interpretation, where interpreting 'for and in itself is impossible' (Todorov 1981:4) even if you want to remain faithful to the subject, and where projecting it but upon itself is inevitable. Todorov adds, that, when it comes to the process of reading, the reader will never read the text twice in the identical manner. The process of reading is an act of tracing the presented written text: the reader adds and suppresses, looks for what he wants to find or avoids what he does not want to find there.

In the same vein, Derrida (in Kearney 1894:125) says that deconstruction is at the same time extremely modest and extremely ambitious, ambitious, because it puts itself on the same level as literary texts (a form of literature, that can be read like other texts), and modest, because it admits that it is only one interpretation amongst others. In the following poetic representation/text of Hester's story, the philosophy of deconstruction teaches the reader to focus on the text as language,

as the production of meaning through difference and dissemination, and to investigate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of how texts are usually read. However, Hester and her story, are not imprisoned in the language, as if deconstruction were a strategy of non-sense, or as if she did not exist beyond language. It is through the reference of language that the 'other' as well as the 'other of language' is searched out. 'Deconstruction gives pleasure in that it gives desire' (Kearney 1984:126). Hester's story functions as a 'search for presence and fulfilment'; it is a 'search for that which remains absent and other than oneself' (1984:126). Critchley (1999:3) points out that, deconstruction, beyond its literary and philosophical appropriations, brings ethical questions to the fore, as a third wave. He explains, in terms of the work of Derrida and Levinas that 'the pattern of reading produced in the deconstruction of texts, has an ethical structure', in fact that deconstruction 'is ethical' (1999:2), and points to the concepts of double reading and closure to substantiate it.

5.2 Hester's helplessness

Hester's multiple life stories are mainly lived out in Setswana, her mother tongue and Florence's. However, she speaks Afrikaans very well, and because I do not speak Setswana, the three conversations were conducted respectively in Afrikaans and English. Hester preferred to speak in Afrikaans, and Florence in English. However, I had to translate 'Hester's poem' from Afrikaans into English for the language requirements of the research text. Unfortunately, this means that Hester's words were, for the second time, repositioned away from her original thought processes and intended meanings: from Setswana to Afrikaans to English. Hester's battle to express herself adequately in Afrikaans and then to have it translated again in a language that she did not understand was only one of many ways in which her helplessness was brought to light. When discussing the poem with her I had to translate it back into Afrikaans so that she could reflect on it. Afrikaans is Hester's fourth language, Setswana, Sepedi and Sesotho being the first three. I have taken pains to ensure that Hester's exact words were used, and checked and re-checked it with her, regardless which language it was translated in.

Hester's helplessness shows itself in her near illiteracy, her low economic status, and her lack of any skills other than domestic capabilities, but mostly by her not being the mother of biological children. Two husbands have left her. Her first husband took another wife because Hester had failed to fall pregnant again after they lost their twins. The second husband left her after a seventeen-year marriage because she never conceived and couldn't give birth to his children. According to Hester both of these men remained childless. She categorically refuses to marry her current partner, not because she would be his second wife, but because she fears he would ultimately divorce her over the issue of children. Even though he claims it doesn't bother him, Hester feels that after *lebola* had been paid, there would inevitably be pressure from him and his family to become pregnant, despite the current assurances. Unfortunately he was not prepared to participate in the research. Like the voices of the other two men in Hester's life, his will not be heard in the telling of her story. It is a loss to this research that not one of her 'husbands' was prepared to become a co-researcher. That is why I invited Florence, Hester's adopted daughter, and her granddaughter Thandi, to join us.

5.3 Research narrative

After I had done some reading on the issue of infertility in the African community, I became interested in hearing a more detailed story from someone who had experienced the problem first hand. I also shared some of the literary information with a group of about forty black women working as volunteers in their communities, with whom I meet every second week. As community workers they address mainly HIV/AIDS-related issues when visiting households, but they encounter other social and religious concerns like poverty, employment and the will of God in people's lives. They told me that to be childless in the black community is a problematic position to be in. It is more or less guaranteed that someone without biological children will be taunted, marginalised, blamed and avoided. Some of the women in the group admitted that they themselves had personally taken part in such hurtful behaviour to childless women, but, interestingly, not childless men. To the question, why one would conduct oneself in such a negative way to a woman who dearly wants to become a mother, and is already suffering because of her childlessness, someone answered that it is a way of keeping her (and her infertility problem) at arms length.

It seems that there is little sympathy for the black childless couple in the African community, particularly for the female who is generally seen to be the cause of the problem. One woman in the group explained that if her brother and his wife proved to be childless, she and her other family members would automatically assume that the problem lay with his wife, and they would go as far as encouraging him to leave her and find a new wife. One of the other women in the same group had no children, and she shared with me (in private) that she was pointed at and pushed aside by other women in the community, including family members, even to some extent, by those in the volunteer group. She said she was lucky to have a good husband, who cared about her more than he cared about having children with her. Sometimes he even did the cooking. However, she occasionally wondered if he had a child or children with another woman.

This research on infertility would be the poorer if the story of a black couple were not included. The voices of black women have historically and culturally been silenced, and those from third world countries are often disadvantaged three-fold: by racism, sexism and class differences (Bons-Storm 1992:134). As far as the South African context is concerned, Sunette Pienaar (2003:60) mentions a number of disadvantages. In addition to the 'burden of triple oppression' carried by black women, the past apartheid policies disempowered them economically and socially, the patriarchal system permeates church and religion as well as family structure, and women are both physiologically and socially more vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS than are their male counterparts. Hester's willingness to tell her story on secondary infertility gave voice to her own painful experiences and to others in her community suffering the same fate. It also gave voice to Infertility itself, a taboo topic in the African context. Discussing the theme of infertility challenges not only the couple and their bedroom life, but also their parents' inherent personhood, which is thought of as unacceptable (Gabobonwe 2004:67).

I was contemplating a possible choice out of three black women I had approached to act as co-researchers, and was asking Hester, a friend's domestic worker for her opinion, when she reminded me that she had already told me that she too bore the burden of infertility. I vaguely remembered her sharing that story with me a

number of years ago when I first met her. Prompted by curiosity and courtesy I had asked her about her husband, children and family. But I had apparently not taken in what she said. She reminded me that her daughter, whom I have encountered during the three years Hester has been working for my friend, is not actually her 'blood child', but her brother's daughter and that she, Hester, had lost her own two babies in infancy. I was unsure whether I should include her in the research, rather than one of the other black women I had already approached. The three other potential co-researchers were at a greater physical and emotional distance from me, and my personal experience of infertility. I was not planning to share very much about my own situation, but I thought that including Hester, my friend's domestic worker, would potentially put me in an awkward position. With hindsight I now realise that this was only one of many instances when the power imbalances between Hester and me played out.

I wanted to give Hester an opportunity to share her story as a black woman suffering from infertility, and I genuinely wanted to understand more about it. We were two very different women, wanting the same thing: a biological child. Hester's willingness to take part in the research had an enlightening influence on our relationship, but also on my perception of myself as a white, South African woman who had lived a life filled with supreme advantages and benefits. Once more I realised that I had participated in patterns of privilege that use stereotypes of difference to sideline and oppress my black sisters (Russell 2006:196). One of the comments by the psychologist on the reflecting team was that I tend to speak to Hester in a paternalistic way, and that he did not believe she quite understood 'what the 'miesies' was busy with'. The concept of research, and the associated rationale are far removed from Hester's world. However, the fact that I 'wanted to hear her story about her children', and shared with her my own pain and hopes, empowered her to a great extent.

5.4 The story behind the poem

Hester is a Setswana speaking woman, 45 years old, attractive and slender. Her creativity is revealed in her love for sewing, and her colourful clothes, but in subtle ways as well, like arranging the Carrol Boyes bowls and containers on the kitchen counter. During the week she lives in a room on the property of her employer, but

she also owns a brick house in Rooifontein. She comes from a close-knit family of seven children. Hester and one of her sisters, Rosie, are childless. Although they never had the luxury of sophisticated medical examinations to at least ascertain the reason or extent of their infertility, their niece, fortunately, had the financial means to undergo IVF procedures to combat her childlessness.

Hester told me that as a teenager of about fifteen, she realised that some women can't have children and she was afraid that she might be one of them. Fortunately, at the age of nineteen she gave birth to her and Tommie's twins in the hospital at Hammanskraal. Although they were born prematurely at seven months, they were sent home shortly after the birth. The girl was called Nyane, meaning small, and the boy was called Moss, short for Moses.

The 'tiny one' died when she was only a week old, and Moss passed away at nine months. Just like that. He went to sleep, and never woke up. A few years later, Tommie left her for another woman, because she failed to conceive again. Hester told me that to this day Tommie lives nearby and she knows for a fact that he has never again fathered children. He once even suggested that the two of them get together again to see whether the Lord would grant them another child, but Hester says it's too late now.

On Good Friday every year for the last twenty-seven years, Hester and her mother visit the babies' graves. They arrive at seven in the morning carrying water, food, candles and matches. First they clean the area around the two graves, and then they have something to eat. For the rest of the day they speak to and 'question' the children on various matters. Hester assures them that she still loves them very much, and that her heart has broken many times over. She and her mother also ask them why they went away, why they just left their poor mother on her own. At the end of the day, and as the conclusion of this solemn ritual, mother and daughter light a candle for each of the two babies on their respective graves, and leave it burning as they depart. Hester says her father is also heartbroken over her loss and often wonders why it happened.

Then, seven years after the death of her twins, and while she was married to Samuel her second husband, another tragedy engulfed the family. One day her brother Piet had an argument with his wife because, as usual, she had used their food money to gamble at the casino. He was so angry that he hit her on the head with a brick. Bleeding and unconscious, she fell to the ground. Fearing the consequences of what he had done, Piet ran away and hanged himself in a room in his parents' house. The family discovered the dead woman in her house, with her daughter Florence trying to drink from her dead mother's breast. Florence's younger brother was asleep in the next room. The tragedy offered one compensation: Hester and Rosie, the two childless sisters had each inherited a child. Hester got the nine-month old Florence, and Rosie, got her two-year old brother. Ironically for Hester, Florence came into her life at the same age at which Moss had departed.

Florence, the inherited daughter, the substitute child, once again made a mother of Hester. And Florence the orphan, found in Hester a replacement for the mother she had lost. They love each other, but theirs is a bittersweet union. Members of the community continually remind them that they are not 'really' mother and daughter, and that their being together is only second best. 'Your parents are dead', they would say to Florence. 'And you can't have children', they would accuse Hester. 'So you are not a mother and child', they conclude firmly. It is indeed true that Hester never officially adopted Florence. It is, however, a matter of mutual embracement, resulting in them having a mother-daughter relationship.

History repeated itself, when Florence, at nineteen, gave birth to a girl. Hester said that, instead of concentrating on her schoolwork, Florence had started messing around with the neighbour and became pregnant. But, 'we loved each other very much', Florence assures her mother. When she fell pregnant, the man refused to accept that the baby was his, and shamelessly married someone else. Although Hester loves the little girl, and is proud that she is now a grandmother, she is worried about the extra financial burden and disappointed that Florence didn't use her opportunities to obtain a matric certificate. Hester knows from experience that being illiterate robs you of your potential and power. Florence no longer lives in Hester's house in Rooifontein, because she is afraid to be on her own. (Hester

herself goes there only once or twice a month, staying the rest of the time in her room in the city.) Florence has now joined her nieces living with their grandmother a few blocks away.

In Hester's narrative there is a dark, undercurrent of unspeakable grief and hurt. It is as if she were pregnant with a 'heaviness of pain and sadness', a 'something that doesn't want to come out', she says. It never releases its grip on her heart and it waits for her at the break of every day. If she is unfortunate enough to wake up during the night, she cannot sleep again, because this horrendous ache will not allow her to rest. Many, many times she has prayed that God will lift this burden from her, but it has lodged itself within her. 'The thing that doesn't want to come out' keeps her in a pregnant state of such pain that she is always close to tears. Part of her wounded state is that she cannot share her painful story openly in her community, and find understanding, care and empathy. Alone, she bears in her body the infection of childlessness, like a decomposed infant. Hester says she is both a poor woman because of her losses, and a blessed woman because she received children through other women: Florence from her sister-in-law, and Thandi, her granddaughter from Florence. She finds hope and strength in her faith, but cannot understand why God does not reverse her fate, or why He allowed the babies to desert her in the first place.

The poetic representation makes use of Hester and Florence's own words. Referring to Hester as 'i', instead of 'I', refers to her feelings of a non-person in the context of not having 'real' children.

5.5 Hester's poem: 'the thing that doesn't want to come out'

in Rooifontein my house stands empty
dirty alone
nobody there to care for
only me eating my money
even if your little house is nice
it's a trouble thing to be without a child

my heart is very sore very very sore
it makes me scream inside
sometimes i cry - oo hoooo - like a wolf
poor me *gaana ngwana*
i'm a poor woman
(my mother's heart also cries with me
my father always says why why why)

when i was nineteen the twins came too early
i took them home to Hammanskraal
Nyane lived one week she was very cold in the morning
he got to nine months Moss
i loved him
from then on this thing is heavy
this thing

this thing that doesn't want to come out
it is big trouble
it talks to me every day
it holds me dead tight

what shall i say?
we must have children we must
it's just how it is
the *Morena* was good he gave
Florence to me when she was a small *mosetsanyana*
a bad thing happened
her *ma* and *pa* had a fight
killed each other over the devil money
her pa said where's the money?
the casino swallowed it!
her *ma* said

she fell
he didn't meant to hit her that hard
hanged himself with the rope then

my empty *sesi* Rosie she got the little *moshimanyana*
we were so happy
now we had children
we didn't sign the adoption papers
always we cry together about the children we hold each other
why our young *sesie* Willemina has four children why?
and she's the youngest of all of us
we always cry me and Rosie

the *sangoma* threw the bones
if it sits like this it means so if it sits like that it means so
she said the time is not right the *muti* is working i must wait six months
the baby will come
but it didn't help she took my money

Samuel said i must sleep with his brother to make a new child
but no i didn't want to
it's better this way i didn't like that man
the family wasn't angry
you don't have to really

this world is not a place to stay in
it is too hard for me
Samuel left me we were together seventeen years
'uh huh you can't make children' he left me
it wasn't right to run off just like that

why must he go away after he promised me where can i run to?
it's a lot of trouble this thing
the *Morena* knows some can have children some not
we pray in the church holding hands in the air
going up and up
you have you have you have not
you have not you have you have not you have not
we think maybe if we say something else the *Morena* will give
the others throw their children away at the river
yes they put them in the dustbin
and the toilet did you know the toilet

i think who is going to look after me when i'm old?
the others don't want me to send their child
to the shop to make the tea
they say i must do it myself
i think many stories
i must buy the baby at the hospital
they have the ones there without mothers
(i'm laughing at myself now but my heart stays sore)

every day i ask the *Morena* all day every day
why don't you give me one?
only one please i'm asking you for one only
i can't hear him i don't know why
the *Morena* speaks to me but i don't understand
i'm old now it's too late

i mustn't feel like this
my heart pulls me down grabs me like a fist
it's not only me
too many women without children
all of us are pushed outside in this world
it doesn't help to cry every day

what will i do to become strong?
i have Florence she's my daughter i know
i have Florence she's my daughter

she wants to be a nurse but she didn't get matric
when her baby came we called her Thandi
Florence is crying because the father left her
married someone else but he is still the neighbour
she sees them together he and the other woman
she cries a lot Thandi cries too
that other woman swears at them
Thandi's nose is small like her father's

Hester is my mother I love her too much
she taught me to cook
I'm shy and big boned I like to smile
my mother makes us chicken and pap
we are good friends she helps me
I want to get a job I didn't like school
the easy school maths told me not to take all the money
for the clothes in truworths
I must go back to grade 11
but now it is difficult
I want more babies

Florence is my daughter i love her
and Thandi
these ones are my little children
there's this thing in me that does not want to come out

Florence is my daughter i love her
and Thandi and Moss and Nyane these ones are my little children
there's this heavy thing that i carry inside

it makes me pregnant with rivers of crying
from that time it speaks to me everyday
my heart is very very sick

i pray that God will take it away from me
will you pray with me that he will make me to get strong?
this world is full of trouble
(i can't help crying)

5.6 Secondary infertility

Hester suffers from what is known as secondary infertility. 'It is the inability to conceive a pregnancy or carry a pregnancy to term following the birth of one or more children' according to Simons (1995:2). It means that a woman has had at least one live child. Secondary infertility occurs among individuals and couples who previously had little or no problem in conceiving, as well as among those with recurring infertility difficulties. It is regarded not only as a medical diagnosis, but also as a social and emotional crisis. Secondary infertility, 'a condition defined as the inability to have another child after conceiving and giving birth at least once', also applies to those who have three or four children but, while still in their reproductive years, cannot conceive again and are thus unable to have the additional children they desire to complete their preferred family circle (Van Regenmorter & Van Regenmorter 2004:128).

Although it is even more common than primary infertility, it is a hidden form of infertility. Many couples suffering from secondary infertility assume they are fertile because they have created at least one child. They also tend to think that they do not know anyone else with the same problem, because people keep silent about it. Secondary infertility is an unrecognised loss, and consequently, there is little or no support from friends and family. There are two possible reasons for this. First, because there is at least one child, those around the couple feel that they should just get on with their lives and make the best of a less than perfect situation. In the next place, secondary infertility is an unfamiliar loss, and communities lack proper language to give adequate support. Unused to addressing such a difficult loss with acknowledgments, ceremonies, rituals and understanding, society prefers to

ignore it. Even pregnancy loss, which is often physically noticeable, does not elicit much support because it is regarded as a private and personal matter. Interestingly, those diagnosed with primary infertility normally experience greater empathy from their church, and social or other communities because they are the worst off on the continuum of childlessness. Those with primary infertility are often the first to react with anger if people suffering from secondary infertility 'make an issue' of their battle to have more children. Infertility always comes as a shock, because having children is typically taken for granted. During the past decades couples have become acustomed to the idea of reproductive choice as a process that can be controlled, as if the only questions were: How many children do I want? and: How would I prefer to space the siblings (Simons 1995:13)?

In patriarchal societies failure to produce a son, although one is the parent of a number of daughters would be tantamount to barrenness of a kind. In some African cultures a husband would say he has had no children until there was a male child (O'Donovan 1996:295). In societies for whom it is important to have a great brood of children, women who have only one or two children, because of secondary infertility, relegate themselves to the category of infertile women. While having no child is the least desirable position to be in, at the same time, 'having only one is like having none' (Gijsels, Mgalla & Wambura 2001:211).

In northern Tanzania custom forces a woman to leave her children behind if she divorces her husband. In cases where a woman has only one child, this arrangement is obviously heartbreaking. Should a woman with only one child, lose her husband because of death or divorce, her chances of marrying again would be slim, as she would be considered as practically childless, and incapable of producing off-spring (2001:212).

Secondary infertility has been described as a misunderstood pain. Those directly affected by secondary infertility and those merely taking note of it, find it difficult to understand. Parents tend to think they cannot be infertile if they have at least one child and often postpone seeking medical intervention. They feel guilty about wanting more children in case it implies that the one (or those) they have is not good enough, and they experience difficulty in explaining to their only child (or

children) that there will be no new brother or sister. They are in two worlds simultaneously: the infertile group and the parent club. They can count on little empathy, especially from those suffering from primary infertility. The general feeling is that they should be grateful for the child/children they have and just forget about wanting more, or 'just stop being so anxious' and they'll conceive again (Van Regenmorter & Van Regenmorter 2004:131).

5.7 Issues of death

In Chapters 7 and 8 the notion and stages of grief are discussed in considerable detail. This chapter pays attention to some of the issues surrrounding death that Hester mentioned in her story. Hester has twice endured the heart breaking experience of seeing and holding the body of her dead child, and after nearly thirty years it remains extremely hard for her to believe or accept that her babies have died. To this day, she sometimes feels that she will discover them in their grandmother's arms as soon as she walks into the room where they died. Laetitia Slabber (1987:25) concurs, saying that she often experienced her deceased daughter's presence, but the child constantly eluded her. She felt that if she could only turn her head quickly enough in the direction of the presence, she would be able to see her. She was so real and so close, but always out of reach.

The dead occupy a different place. They demand attention and treatment in their need to be removed by burial or cremation to another place where their unusual nature can be accommodated, says Davies (2005:48). The experience of death's strangeness lies rooted in its stillness. The dead are too still for the comfort of the living, who, even when asleep, display signs of life. The inertness of death prompts beliefs that will make sense of it and rites for coping with it.

The Van Regenmorters (2004:119) says there are some common threads that weave themselves into the stories of people who have endured infant death. Feelings of emptiness, isolation and distance persist in grieving parents. Hester experiences a dual world, one space where children and happiness exists together, and another space where childlessness and suffering co-exist.

Spiritual doubt and confusion seem to be an inescapable response on the part of those looking for answers that could bring meaning and healing. The question: 'What is God trying to say to me?' unleashes a host of incomplete answers, but at the same time holds the immanent possibility of bringing some peace and acceptance. In one sense, death helps to explain life itself and give meaning to it. Most humans have a strong sense of discontent with life. They are aware that their existence is flawed and lacking in completeness (Davies 2005:9). Death is a way of being removed from life's misery and disappointments, sicknesses and flaws.

Parents burdened with infant death, feel a continuing sense of loss. Because babies are seen as symbols of new generations and regeneration, and elicit strong protective feelings from most adults, Death's collision with Life is at no time more tragic than when witnessed in the deceased body of an infant. Gabobonwe (2004:59) describes barrenness as a chronic grief. The future itself seems to be lost, with the family as a whole trapped between hope and failure. In the case of infant death there is the same feeling of loss concerning the future of the child. Hester, like many others in her position, 'keeps track' of her children, and thinks about how old they would have been at this or that stage, or what her life would have been like if they had still been alive. The parents' relationship with the child is interrupted and will not be played out through the years as had been planned and assumed. The child can never really be laid to rest because the momentum of the parents' love keeps him alive, and they take him with them on their life's journey (Stetson 1999:154).

Davies (2005:10) points out, that, for those left behind, the sense that life (how ever short) is a passage into death, and acts as a 'transcending journey' to a continuous life hereafter, helps to construct a process of 'moving from one level of knowing to another'. Ordinary life, when touched by death's irreversible shift, gives way to despair, but also to the prospect of embracing mystery and awe. This 'different knowing' that reaches into a mysterious realm beyond the familiar, where confident knowing is actually impossible, is suffused with a sense of hope. One of the possibilities of this mysterious, mystical realm that lies in the hereafter, beyond this painful and limited existence, is the hope that the dead can become 'new'. Hope holds out the expectation and anticipation that things are not as they seem,

and that in future, death will somehow, miraculously, benefit life. The irony is that death constructs a prime context in which human hope faces such a brutal crisis that it can completely dissolve and die. The paradox of death is that it brings a profound sense of loss of purpose, yet at the same time highlights the extraodinary nature of life.

Rituals for the dead are described as complex processes of mourning, composed of metaphors, symbols and actions (Imber-Black 2004:340). They are multi-functional: marking the loss of a member of the family, affirming the life of the person who has died and facilitating the expression of grief in ways that are consistent with the culture's values. Ritual speak in a symbolic way of the meaning of death and the enduring nature of life, and point to a way of making sense of the loss while also finding the strength to continue with life. The funeral rite itself serves to give an expressive platform for communal and individual lamentation, but at the same time holds the mourners close to the heart. Amidst the great sadness in an inconsolable mother's heart for her dead child, there are the sorrowful hearts and the physical touch of the others at the funeral to stop her from going mad with grief. Operating on multiple levels, mourning rituals facilitates the language of grief: anger, despair, hurt, shock, blame and confusion. This marks relationship change and enables an entire community to heal (Imber-Black 2004:341).

Hester and her mother's visit to the gravesite of Moss and Nyane every Good Friday, is an opportunity for wailing and lamentation, the counting of their very real losses. However, it is the unique capacity of ritual to hold contradictions that makes them enormously powerful to the 'life task of grieving and moving on' (Imber-Black 2004:356). In talking to the children, by expressing their love and concern for the babies they also reaffirm the hope that their lives are continuing in some mysterious way beyond the grave. The yearly ritual of going to the cemetery marks the passage of time, and allows for the expression of their pain and loss in an open and unrestricted way, designed to promote interpersonal connectedness with each other and the deceased (Van Gennep, in Imber-Black 2004:341). By sharing a meal and spending the whole day with the babies, from early in the morning till late afternoon, they affirm their loss and show respect to the deceased.

As Hester and her mother share news from their lives with the children, they transcend death, and hope re-manifests itself. Imber-Black says the dimensions of time (the day) and space (the graves) in the ritual draw the distinction between the 'time to mourn' and the 'time to re-enter life' (2004:356). The symbolic action of meeting the children and eating and speaking to them, connect Hester and her mother with the familiar (that which is now in the past, and never will be again) and provide a pathway to the unfamiliar (life without the children on this earth as well as the hopeful reunion when they join them in death).

5.7 Infertility in the African context

When referring to the 'African' context one should take care to keep 'the rich diversity of modes of being in Africa' in mind, and not fall into the trap of thinking Africa refers to a homogeneous society. The word 'Africa' points to 'a philosophical concept that describes the complexity and diversity of different cultural, local and contextual settings as related to a state of being and mind' (Louw 2007:13). Africa also embodies the 'spirit' or soul of its people's humanness, and refers to a hermeneutical paradigm that differs from the analytical approach stemming from Hellenism and Western thinking. Louw (2007:13) cautions against either a stigmatised description of Africa as backward, or a romanticised view of people living in perfect '*ubuntu* understanding' with each other. In a way, he says, Africa is not Africa anymore, despite its strong traditional beliefs. Even Africa has been influenced by technology, globalisation and commercialisation, embedded in the philosophical mode of postmodernism. Africa embodies different perspectives, while radical changes have taken place within the different African contexts in which people live. Colonialism, foreign religions, western technology and education, contact with west and east and various internal changes have challenged social and religious understandings (Kasenene 1994:138). Even if some cultural ideas are deeply entrenched, some are loosening and are more inclined to reconsider traditional meanings. This could hold some hope for greater societal acceptance and possible healing for a childless person like Hester.

As far as the African individual is concerned, being healthy means being in the right relationship with the environment. It signifies that the societal order and

systemic, spiritual and religious equilibrium are in harmony. Illness (including infertility) in this context is both a sociological phenomenon (as it affects the whole community) and a religious concept (Louw 2007:25). Without the positive integration of the sick person into the community, lacking the therapeutic role of the close relatives, and without the engagement of other channelling agents, like divine healers, order and harmony cannot be restored. Traditional healers are most often 'chosen' or 'elected' by by a spirit associated with a shrine and a healing community (Lartey 1994:39). The healers make contact with the spiritual world and then, by way of diagnosis and rituals help to reinstate the damaged spiritual chain of protection occasioned by someone's wrong behaviour. It is understood that such wrong behaviour led to the anger of the ancestors and spiritual powers who subsequently wrought havoc on the person and the community.

Berinyuu (in Louw 2007:26) says illness immediately provokes suspicion. The question of what sin the person has committed, thereby bringing about misfortune or death, begs an answer. Illness is connected not so much to viruses or infections in the body, as to the question of who disturbed the societal order and why. The mystical query of 'why' rather than 'how' is important. The question is not so much what illness has assailed the person, as who sent the illness and for what reason. The heart of African traditional medicine is the restoration of harmonious relationships throughout the whole cosmos, through ritual, symbolic suggestion and both herbal and psychological therapeutic interventions (Lartey 1994:41). The cornerstone of African life is an integrated community that takes up the role of defining one's identity in all respects. The *ubuntu* principle of 'a person is a person through others' underscores that what you do and what happens to you has an impact on the rest (Motsei 2007:21). Being infertile in the traditional African context does not leave room for 'purely medical reasons' or 'unexplained causes'. It leads to an immediate reflection on someone's presumed faulty conduct. The community to which they belong takes seriously its right to scrutinise their life and hold them responsible.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, in most parts of Africa motherhood is seen as almost sacred, 'a religious duty', and a way to prove you are a 'full and faithful person'

(Oduyoye 1999:113). As if the pain of being childless were not enough, the childless state of infertility itself turns one into a shameful curse with the potential to alienate from community life those who desperately need support. Infertility is a curse to those afflicted by it, and it is believed that it blights the community itself, undermining the survival of the clan and preventing ancestors from being born again into earthly life (Mathekga 2001:37). A woman's body is *inter alia* seen as a vehicle for the reincarnation of her ancestors (Oduyoye 1999:105). O'Donovan (1996:295) points out that much of the emotional pain of childlessness in African life has to do with traditional values concerning children. Many of these values do not reflect Christian ideas, and, although some people might describe themselves as adhering to the Christian faith, they hold fast to traditional beliefs and practices that often seem to contradict Christian principles and ethics. However, given the African philosophical view of the integrated whole, such apparent contradictions are non-existent for someone like Hester.

Mercy Oduyoye (1999:105), herself a childless woman living in West Africa, reflects that her tribe, the Akan of Ghana, views the power of procreation as one of the seven signs of human wellness. Fruitfulness of plant, human and animal life is not only what one prays for, but also the focus in the here and now, necessary for a good quality of life on earth. The deep-rooted belief that children are one's security in old age underscores the social and psychological satisfaction of parenthood (Setsiba 2002:46). Infertility in a family member does not bode well, as it is thought of as bringing disharmony for the rest of the group in future. In addition, living in the preferred abundant fullness aptly points to the hopeful expectations of the life after this one. In some cultures, the eternal life is traditionally viewed as an endless continuation of the person's family line. Seen like this, the ability to have children takes on religious significance. Because the Bible speaks of children as a gift from God, the community assumes the opposite also to be true: childlessness demonstrates the curse of the Lord on such a couple. Even a husband and wife with strong Christian beliefs might become bitter and angry towards God because they are influenced by the community's interpretation of their situation (O'Donovan 1996:296).

Even if death could be seen as the bridge from here to a blissful eternity, within African tradition death remains the enemy of life. Death is not viewed as a benevolent carrier from this life to the next, but rather as a spiteful snatcher of life, that must always be resisted. Childlessness signifies death for the entire system. An infertile woman, despite her good qualities, may be described as 'the dead end of human life' (Setsiba 2002:46). Children perpetuate the life cycle in which the unborn, the young, the old and the dead are seen as united in a cycle of mortality-immortality. Births, weddings and funerals are regarded as important rites of passage demonstrating vital transitions in the reproductive cycle. From being a respected elder, one is promoted to the position of venerated ancestor: one's grave stands as an important symbol of the continuation of the family (Gijsels et al 2001:210). When fertility is structured within such a context, it is no wonder that dying without children is an unbearable prospect for many.

Children are regarded as a gift to the whole community, and, in a sense, parents are seen as mere custodians. A saying from the Asante people, who are a mother-centred clan, declares that a child belongs to the mother, but only until it is born when it becomes a community responsibility (Oduyoye 1996:129) Africans never escape moral responsibility for members of their extended families, which often includes financial responsibility. However, despite the understanding that every woman, whether or not she has biological (or womb) children, is to take up the role of mothering all other children in the community, practically speaking, it is not that simple and a childless woman's status is severely diminished.

One of the most painful markers of infertility is that an infertile woman 'does not have a child to send' (Oduyoye 1999:110). It is a widely understood cultural concept that underscores your place in the domestic cycle. Having a child to send, means that someone is dependant on you, you can ask services from this person and in the process enhance your status. The family will frantically try to find cures to ensure that all their members become parents, because it reflects badly on their wellness if they do not. That includes consulting traditional healers as Hester has done in her quest to become fertile. Mercy Oduyoye describes the unpleasant brew of herbs she was given to drink, and likens its taste to the 'bitterness that is expected to go with childlessness' (1999:111), bitterness that could be made

sweeter if there was more support, understanding and acceptance from the community.

In a study on the views of the black South African community on infertility (Mabasa 2000:62), this was found to be a severe stigma. The reported gender differences between male and female infertility were stigmas in themselves. The general belief was that it is more common in women than men, and, in fact, infertility should be seen as a woman's problem. The thinking in the African culture is that as long as a man is potent he is not sterile. The comparison is made between a woman taking in the seed that grows to a baby, and the fertile soil that germinates the seed of maize and develops root. Traditional healers would often confirm that the infertility problem lies with the woman in the infertile couple system, whether infertility tests had been carried out or not. In African patrilineal society, infertility is seen to be the women's fault and is thus not a problem of the couple (Mathekga 2001:37). This belief persists to some extent in most cultures, despite common sense and the fact that statistics indicate that 45 percent of all infertility is due to the male factor (Van Regenmorter & Van Regenmorter 2004:15). However, in matrilineal kinship structures, like that of the Macua people in Mozambique, the situation is reversed. There the men are regularly considered to be the cause of infertility, and the woman and her family often decide to divorce (Mabasa 2000:70).

A woman who cannot conceive is considered to cause 'loss' to her husband, since marriage means that the husband's family receives her productive and reproductive capacities. An infertile woman is thought to be deficient, and if she is returned to her family, the bridewealth (l*obola*) must be returned (Gijsels et al 2001:219). In the Ndebele and Shona societies marriage is structured according to the *lobola* system, literally meaning, 'child price', and this payment is supposed to ensure paternal immortality through a man's children, specifically sons (Mbuwayesango 1997:28). In the Ndebele system, l*obola* is paid only when the woman falls pregnant. In Shona society, a wife's status is significantly increased after bearing her first child by the practice of *kugadza mapfihwa*, when she is given her own cooking place. Prior to becoming a mother, she herself is regarded as a child who is told what to cook by her mother and mother-in-law.

Mabasa's (2000:70) study found that African men in patrilineal societies in South Africa were, as a matter of course, protected to such an extent that their infertility was kept secret. Instead, the guilt, blame and shame would be heaped on his wife or partner. Such a woman is usually laughed at and negatively labelled in the community. However, Mabasa feels that in 'protecting' the infertile men, their shame is actually worsened rather than lessened. Not being able to own up to their problem, or to speak about it, makes for a very lonely burden to carry. Some men even pretend that they do not want children. It is thought that an infertile man is not really a man and that if it is known that he cannot produce children, he will lose power over his wife, and his standing in society will be severely diminished. This is one of the reasons why his wife is willing to act as an accomplice in deflecting the blame away from him (Gijsels et al 2001:215).

One way of showing disrespect to an infertile woman (or an apparantly infertile woman) is to address her by her first name until old age. Even if this is done without malice she is always reminded of her inadequate identity in the community. In some African traditions, if you have a child you are called by the name of that child (Mabasa 2000:68). Oduyoye (1999:113) explains that in the Akan culture of Ghana people are not simply called by their first names, for instance 'Mercy', but their names are always linked to those of other people, preferably their children. Instead of being called 'Mercy' she would be called (if she had a child with the name of Ade), 'Mama Ade'. Her husband would also forfeit his name, and be called 'Baba Ade' (father of Ade). Infertile women are also excluded from important social events and ceremonies. For instance, they are not permitted to take part in child-naming rituals, as names are chosen by women who are already mothers (Mbiti 1989:116). During a funeral procession to the cemetery a song is sung asking whether this person had children or not, which serves as a reminder that even in death the child issue cannot be avoided, no matter what else the person has achieved or stood for. Among the Asante group, burial rituals for childless persons are enacted in a way that attempts to ensure that they are not reincarnated. Furthermore, some do not name children after childless ancestors or call on the latter. As Oduyoye says, a childless person is in an inauspicious state, not to be encouraged and not to be celebrated (1999:113).

Like HIV/AIDS, the most hurtful aspect of infertility is the stigma associated with it, particularly in the African context. The silence surrounding it, and the subsequent misinterpretations that arise have much to do with deeply embedded cultural and religious understandings of what it means to be a sexual human being. As long as discriminatory language and powerful, exclusive metaphors are allowed to name, curse, blame and explain infertility, stigma will breed itself over and over again. Stigma, according to Goffman (1963:5), is 'an undesired differentness'. Such an individual possesses a trait that attracts attention, turning away those s/he meets despite any other positive attributes. Like the stigma surrounding the HIV/AIDS problem, that associated with childlessness did not arise in a social vacuum, and can only fully be understood in relation to power and domination, gender and social inequality (Ackermann 2006:228). Stigma not only pits male interests against female interests in the context of power, but often puts females in competition with each other to gain some of the residual power. It is a controlling instrument used by individuals and communities to retain the status quo of traditional views, despite the presence of other scientific, religious or social views. In the wake of the stigmatising process, the views of those afflicted by it, are scarcely heard. In fact, Goffman says, the 'normals' in society believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. The question of whether the stigma has been brought about by physical deformities, called the 'abominations of the body', or blemishes of character (addiction, imprisonment, unemployment) or the tribal stigma of race, nation and religion, does not matter. The 'normals' construct a stigma-theory. It amounts to an ideology used to explain the person's inferiority and to account for the danger the person represents. Specific stigma terms are used in daily discourse as a source of metaphor, and a wide range of additional imperfections are added on the basis of the original (Goffman 1963:5).

5.8 African feminist theology

Radford Ruether (2000:65) maintains that feminist theology serves as a remedial act to a theology distorted by patriarchy. It is an attempt to fashion a holistic theology whereby women will be regarded as full members of the human and Christian communities, and both men and women will be released from the ideas of sexist ideology and practice. Clearly theology's task should be the same for both genders, but because the Christian Church, for most of its two thousand-year

history, has kept women from the ordained ministry, the study of theology and the public roles of theologian and preacher, feminist theology has currently a very specific task and vocation to fulfil. If feminist theologians feel they speak from the margins, attempting to reconstruct and re-define male-dominated theological discourses, this applies in equal measure when it comes to African feminist theologians. As feminist theology in general has been discussed in Chapter 3, some of the aims and dreams of African feminist theology will be addressed in this chapter.

As a prominent African feminist theologian, Mercy Oduyoye of Ghana, is intimately involved in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), created in the 1970's as a networking forum for liberation theologians from Latin America, Africa and Asia. At that time the male liberation theologians at EATWOT demonstrated considerable resistance to feminist issues, arguing that feminism was a 'First World issue', a diversion from the 'class struggle' and alien to Third World cultures (Radford Ruether 2000:72). However, the feminists remained steadfast in their conviction that they needed to be heard as women expressing their experiences of oppression in the Church, unprompted in their self-articulation by powerful males in the Church hierarchy. As Third World theologians 'forming a sisterhood of resistance to all forms of oppression, but at the same time seeking creative partnership with the men of the association', they made it clear that neither First World women nor Third World men would be allowed to one-sidedly prescribe the meaning of feminism to them (Radford Ruether 2000:73). After the fall of Communism, the definition of 'Third World' was adapted to include theologians from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific.

A number of distinctive issues reflect the similarities among Third World women, despite enormous differences in ecclesial, social, cultural and historical contexts. They received their Christianity mainly from Western European and North American missionaries, and have therefore been educated in those respective Catholic or Protestant cultures. Their ancestors became Christians by being diverted from their indigenous cultures and religions, by missionaries who negated their native beliefs as wicked and idolatrous. Issues of sexism and patriarchy

compound the similar problems of Third World women with socioeconomic and cultural colonialism, and its offshoots in the form of neocolonial dependency and exploitation. One of the biggest concerns is the suffering of women specific to their societies, in terms of exploitation and violence. Third World theologians question the ways in which male Christian theologians have appropriated certain aspects of indigenous culture into religion, and in the process have overlooked and justified the oppressive aspects of these cultures in terms of women's dignity and self-worth. Third World women theologians therefore choose to explore both their traditional, indigenous heritage and liberating Biblical traditions in search of positive, usable messages and descriptions for women's emancipation in their societies (Radford Ruether 2000:77).

Early Christian missionaries largely perceived Africa as a godless and irreligious continent, but the truth is that Africans are deeply religious and culturally creative (Hinga 1995:115). The Western world's polarisation of the spiritual and physical worlds collided with the African worldview of an intimate relationship between the two. The fact that Christianity overemphasised the physical causes of disease undermined the validity of the African cultural and cosmological outlooks. Christianity demanded that Africa abandon her traditional Africanness' (Hinga 1995:117), which led to an uneasy relationship between the two. Hinga writes about how some independent churches in Africa found ways of making Christianity their own. By blending the Christian message into their cultural and socio-political context they employ their own symbolism, cosmology and worldview to discover and praise the just and liberating God who was 'misrepresented and misused' by the interpretations of Western missionaries and imperialists (1995:123). Far from being an aberration of Christianity, a theology of correction serves to critique the Christian Church in Africa as a religion fostering oppression and subjugation of some people by others (Hinga 1995:123). There is a need to explore and correct both western, so-called 'superior species' oppression, and male sexist-related 'superior' oppression.

As a South African feminist theologian, Denise Ackermann, is adamant that a hermeneutic of healing must be at the heart of a feminist theology of praxis (1998:80). Meaningful healing resists the attempt to address merely the individual

pursuit of personal healing, but rather recognises the interlocking of social, political and religious forces and the challenge to bring healing on the multiple levels of people's lives.

The cry for healing is especially urgent when it comes to the needs of women and children in the African context. Ackermann (1998:84) argues that a feminist theology of healing praxis should start by admitting that the despairing quality of human suffering stands directly in relation to the resilient longing for human wholeness. Secondly, if stigma has the potential to breed silence, such a meaningful healing praxis must generate stories of hushed women living in various contexts. Furthermore, women from different cultures, religious traditions and social locations must take hands in a collaborative effort to listen to and support each other. Such an effort should create a platform from which questions of difference between and accountability to each other can be aired and translated into action. Fourthly, she sees a feminist theology of praxis as embodied practical theology, meaning that 'all perceived reality and all knowledge is mediated through our bodies' (Ackermann 1998:87). Our sense of self is, to a great extent, linked to our physical selves, which in turn determines our views of the social, physical and religious planes of our existence. The power to both love and harm begins in our bodies. Amazingly, others' narratives of hurt can evoke bodily pain in ourselves with such force that we are willing to use our bodies in becoming transformative agents of healing and justice along side those who are suffering. Acts of ethically imaginative praxis, for instance poetry, art, drama, ritual, ceremony and song, can bring creative and effective healing. They are daring ways to articulate, listen and respond to injury and disappointment. This hopefully and inventively dares wholeness and healing to come forth. With the aid of human agency in a shared commitment, hope and healing become more than a dare, and turn into the 'living out of hope'. Finally, Ackermann cautions that a feminist theology of praxis requires stamina because of the enormity of the task. The search for healing involves a certain kind of vulnerability, as honest self-reflection, and the courage to oppose unfairness and short sightedness are required (Ackermann 1998:89).

Fulata Moyo (2006:244), Malawian theologian, echoes the call for healing. She proposes a narrative theology of eschatological hope as healing in the context of

her painful story of loss as a wife who nursed her sick husband, and then, as a widow, tried to make sense of the multiple meanings of health. In her search for healing she became convinced that it is in sharing our stories from the heart that the journey towards healing can start: the act of telling is in itself therapeutic. Telling invites other's to add their voices and perspectives in a chorus that enriches all and contributes to creative theologies of life and wholeness, even in the face of loss and death. She comes to the conclusion that her husbands' death, despite fervent prayers demonstrating faith and trust, cannot be interpreted as God's betrayal of her and those who believed that He would grant physical healing. Additionally, she refuses to feel guilty about her husband's death, as if she had lacked sufficient faith in her pleas to God to spare his life. Instead, she comes to the conclusion that she ought to extend her concept of healing to include the possibility that God actually brought healing and wellness to her loved one by using illness to bring him into His eternal presence. This does not ever mean that death should be excused or welcomed. Rather, death should be opposed by life's powers of transformation. But there is hope in death, she realises. She describes 'eschatological hope as a midwife of new beginnings': hope encourages the search for new meanings within the complexities of life, including death (Moyo 2006:250). God as divine midwife enables birth to a vision of hope in us, and carries us on her back in the realisation of that hope.

If African theology is about reflecting what Christians in Africa understand God to be about, then women's theology ensures the inclusion of women's expression of faith in response to experiences. The main thrust of women's theology is to make a concerted effort to open the door for the voices of 'men and women, lay and ordained, teachers and preachers, poets and sculptors'. Secondly, this theology takes life as a whole into consideration: everything that makes for fullness of life and well-being, the possession of powers, attributes, and abilities that lead to a celebration of life (Oduyoye 2001:34). This particular theology also acknowledges that Africans live in a spiritual universe where religion and culture are mutually dependent (2001:23). African women's theology is constructed from its own context and reflects its own priorities and perspectives.

Biblical interpretation takes into account cultural hermeneutics, enabling women to look at the Bible through an African lens and reject interpretations that are harmful to women, the vulnerable and the voiceless (Oduyoye 2001:12). Cultural hermeneutics demands a delicate act: it implies the ability to critique traditional cultural practices, rather than blindly accepting tradition, norms and rituals as unchangeable. At the same time cultural elements that are 'life-affirming' and in tune with the gospel of fullness of life, like harmony and integrity, can be retained and developed.

Mary Getui (2001:184) adds her concern about the way in which many theologians hermeneutically (mis)use the Bible in a literalist approach, thereby ignoring adjustment and application for the African context. The remedy for such an imbalance would be to use the Bible with consistent critical and contextual discernment regarding the African situation. She argues for a vibrant and honest dialogue between African cultures and religions on the one hand and the Bible on the other. African women's theology bears the marks of poverty, exploitation, violence, colonisation and racism, all of which elicit a hermeneutic of liberation. The stories circulating in the women's theology are from the Bible, Africa's history and culture, and personal experiences, weaving theology, ethics and spirituality in a potent mix to reach a place where commitment, advocacy and transforming praxis is the logical progression (Getui 2001:16). It makes it personal and contextual, and therefore, powerful.

The 'Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians' (also known as the Circle), was initiated in 1989 by Mercy Oduyoye to encourage gender sensitive research and writing by women on African religions and culture. It also created a supportive space for African feminist theologians to develop creative practical theologies that grew out of their specific experiences and needs. Oduyoye, guilty of the ultimate failure of childlessness, raised her voice as an African theologian in the Circle to propose a theology of procreation that responds to the challenge and disgrace of barrenness. She laments the fact that Christianity apparently lacks stories from which the childless can draw strength (Oduyoye 1999:115). Or are these stories purposely ignored and undeveloped because the Church fails to appreciate the diverse ways in which men and women can live fruitful lives despite childlessness?

She answers: 'It is for the church to acknowledge and raises up the diversity of God's gifts and to celebrate all the ways of bringing forth life' (Oduyoye 1999:119). Such a theology and eschatology of procreation speaks to both those who reproduce themselves biologically and those who do not. Such a theology is gracious and mature enough to embrace different forms of fruitfulness, biological and beyond. It is a theology that teaches the church and traditional culture to understand and respect the unique 'state of life' of the childless that refuses to further blame and shame the infertile into a context of death.

Daisy Nwachuku (1994:81) concurs, emphasising the thought that in African traditional religion the seed of truth must be planted, that Jesus Christ can give healing to an infertile couple, without necessarily removing their barrennes. The strong belief in African religion, which supports the idea that God must be appeased and that he rewards the evil with punishment and curses (such as infertility), stands in the way of accepting God's healing, whether in body, soul or mind in less than perfect life circumstances. She points out that the Christian God (unseen and untouchable) contrasts sharply with the reality of symbols of ancestral gods where the infertile woman actually handles the objects of sacrifice as a point of contact. Healing services for infertile couples should therefore involve such symbols and rituals as the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, and bread and wine in using Holy Communion (Nwachuku 1994:82). The meaning of the water of baptism should be stressed: God cleanses us from sin, and invites us into the family of believers.

Oduyoye explains how her liberation, from the label of useless, shameful woman, which she received from her church and the African community, took place while she was visiting the island of Crete. She (once again) prayed to God, as Hannah did in the temple, to allow her to 'join in the command to increase and multiply', when He dealt with her directly: and 'God was saying a clear no to my offer' (Oduyoye 1999:118). But it was not the kind of refusal that indicated she was not worthy of becoming a mother. Her acceptance of God's answer through His grace, allowed her to feel free and fertile, sure that something precious would be born of this experience. She laid her life on the altar before God to consume what was not necessary for her journey, she says. Then she arose like Hannah, and, although

her promise did not include a child, she was nonetheless 'pregnant with the expectation of great things to come to me from God' (1999:118). She realised that children are God's gift to creatures who need to survive through procreation. However, in Mercy's life the creative command spells out to (1999:118):

> Increase in humanity.
> Multiply the likeness to God for which you have the potential.
> Multiply the fullness of humanity that is found in Christ.
> Fill the earth with the glory of God.
> Increase in creativity.
> Bring into being that which God can look upon and pronounce 'good',
> even 'very good.

5.9 Hester imagining Hannah in the temple

Hester habitually looks for care and sanctuary amongst her Church community. She attends services three times a week and feels that the congregation as a whole is more understanding and supportive that those outside her religious circle. The pastor sometimes meets with those women of his flock who have reproductive difficulties, and together they pray and seek solace from God. Hester often used to pray in Church and beg God to grant her at least one child. Like Hannah in the temple, she speaks from her own painful experience of loss and despair. Hannah, who lived in the first Temple era, was the wife of Elkana, a Levite of the Kohathite branch of the priesthood (Lockyer 1986:458). She was heartbroken, ridiculed by Elkana's second wife, Peninnah, who bore him several children. Although Hannah was childless, Elkana loved her and spoiled her with a double portion of sacrificial meat on the days of sacrifice. He was distressed by her grief and wanted to know whether he, as her husband, was perhaps worth more than ten sons. Provoked by Peninnah's taunts she wept and refused to eat. In the familiar temple scene, Hannah (meaning, the gracious one), rose and prayed silently before the Lord, with only her lips moving. She vowed that if she were to give birth to a son, she would dedicate him to the Lord's service. Lacking insight, Eli accused her of making a drunken spectacle of herself. But Hannah assured him that because of her great complaint and bitter provocation, she was pouring out her soul before the Lord. 'I am a woman of sorrowful spirit' (1 Samuel 1:15), she said. When God granted her prayer she was faithful to her word and sacrificed Samuel, after he

had been weaned, to the temple 'to remain there as long as he lives' (1 Samuel 1:21).

Leila Berner (2000:37) describes Hannah's prayer, as the first instance in the Jewish tradition of 'personal prayer'. Speaking in a direct and intimate way with God, Eli found this form of religious devotion so unusual that he mistook her pleading for intoxication. Berner points out that communication with God, is motivated by different social contexts, and the scope for religious expression should be broadened. In the light of women's very specific needs in the religious tradition, Berner, a Jewish feminist, argues that Jewish tradition, should rise to the challenge that feminism lays at it door. She proposes that adequate space within the tradition must be carved out to acknowledge and accommodate a uniquely female experience of the Divine. She further recommends that different forms and formats must be created and knitted into Jewish tradition in order to accommodate various modes of spiritual expression. The 'normative' tradition should be evaluated and reflected upon. Its language should be flexible enough to be redefined and reconstituted to become relevant to both male and female perceptions of reality, and both male and female experiences of spirituality and religious life (Berner 2000:42).

At the time when Hannah lived, men and women still worshipped together in the Temple, before the Talmudic era (4th to 6th centuries CE) when segregation was the norm. She set an example by speaking with God in her own way. She expressed herself to God by pouring out her heart and defended herself boldly against Eli. In her beautiful, thanksgiving psalm for her son Hannah declares: 'My heart exalts…my mouth is no longer silent, for it is opened widely before my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation' (1 Samuel 2:1). Instead of a great chorus of Jewish Hannahs imitating one of their spiritual mothers during the ensuing centuries, a silence has descended. Incredibly, speaking from the 21st century, Judith Plaskow advises that Jewish women and men need to listen to the great silence around women's voices in order to bring healing to the Jewish tradition. 'Hear the silence', she says. She predicts that, in confronting this silence, disturbing questions will come to the fore that might be the thrust for fa -reaching change. 'What in the tradition is ours? What can we claim that has not also

wounded us? What would have been different had the great silence been filled (in Berner 2000:43)? These questions resonate with the aims and dreams of African feminist theologians.

5.10 Hester as the Other

'Hester as the Other, different, shunned to the periphery, existing on the margins of power'. That, of Hester's many identities, is prominent in the context of her story as the mother of an adopted daughter. She is the Other amongst those who have the ability to procreate. Especially within the African tradition, she is reminded of her incapacity by the unfair naming of her humanness in terms of a devalued identity. She is the Other also in terms of her own bodily self. In Serene Jones's words, 'the self is figured as having thwarted agency - thwarted capacity for self-creation. While the self may still possess the body, the body refuses to yield what the self desires' (2001:237). Her body denies her its natural inclination to bring forth new life; it declines to answer her call for motherhood and is experienced as a place where death dwells. She desperately wants to leave the barren desert behind, but, alas, she lives in the desert; she is the desert. In addition, she experiences herself as the Other who fell out of favour in the religious circle of God's presence, believing her unanswered prayers for 'only one child' proved Divine disregard.

In the context of researcher and co-researcher I also experience Hester as the Other. In nearly every respect, it seems that I stand in a powerful, privileged place in relation to her, as one of the members of the reflecting team remarked. I stopped myself in time from prescribing to Hester how to redefine her maternal self, her spiritual image, her identity as full human being. Hannah inspired both Hester and Mercy Oduyoye to pray and to seek understanding for their infertility in the Temple. Mercy chose a life-giving theology, which empowered her to become a Mother, Ma and Auntie to a worldwide brood, and at the same time to choose to 'come home to myself as a woman without biological progeny' (Oduyoye 1999:106).

I was tempted to recommend to Hester that she become another Mercy in her thinking and actions. In the process I would have reduced her experiences yet again and denied her power to construct her story in the way she prefers.

This chapter has emphasised secondary infertility and mutual embracement within the context of a traditional African worldview, and African feminist theology. The next chapter will introduce the narrative of Helga and James in terms of experiencing miscarriage and choosing childlessness.

CHAPTER 6

HARVEST SONG OF SAMUEL AND TIENIE: THE MAKING OF A GAY FAMILY

In a short introduction, the narrator will set the scene for this particular research narrative. Then the lead actors, Samuel and Tienie (a homosexual couple, and the parents of two adopted daughters), will take centre stage in sharing parts of their story. Tienie's responses have been scripted in greater detail than Samuel's, perhaps because he expressed their story in a more elaborate, amusing and animated fashion. Some of the supporting actors on Samuel and Tienie's Harvest Song stage also play their roles in the life drama from childlessness to parenthood. Samuel and Tienie share their experiences of being gay in a mostly straight world of adoption and parenthood, the Dutch Reformed Church's response to homosexuality, God's presence in their lives and their desire to be accepted and respected by society as 'normal people', as 'just ordinary persons'. Then related issues emerging from their story will be touched on. This chapter does not claim to be an exhaustive account of Samuel and Tienie's story or of the issues associated with it. It merely offers a glimpse. It could be compared with a selection of edited film scenes, or isolated acts in a play.

6.1 The opening act

Berg (1998) describes dramaturgy as a theoretical perspective involving the elements and language of theatre, stagecraft and stage management, and illustrates the research method of the interview in terms of the language of dramaturgy. Drama is seen as a mode of symbolic action 'in which some individuals act for others who watch symbolically' (1998:59). Between these two groups, the actors and the audience, a social performance takes place. In the dramaturgical approach, the interviewer makes use of the constructed relationship of the interviewer and subject to draw the subject into conversation. He makes a distinction between 'the interviewer's role' and 'the roles an interviewer may perform' (1998:75). The interviewer's role is located within a certain epistemological and methodological point of departure, for instance, the 'role' of the social constructionist narrative researcher. At the same time, within that role, a certain leeway exists, a repertoire of possible interpretations. The different accents

the interviewer/researcher could adopt would depend on the expectations of the subjects, and the specific circumstances of a subject in a particular context. For instance, although this researcher had research conversations with four different groups of co-researchers, on the same research theme, with the same methodological approach, she played a different role each time. The roles were never preplanned, but flowed from the conscious and reflective manner of the researcher whenever she approached the conversation with the co-researchers. Berg (1998:81) says sending and receiving messages between the interviewer and interviewee, by both verbal and non-verbal channels of communication, constitutes in part a conscious, social performance. He describes the interviewer's role as one of multiple identities: actor, director and choreographer. In terms of the actor's role, Berg proposes the 'performance of your lines, routines and movements. This involves being aware of line cues, in order not to interrupt the interviewee'. The second identity in this performance drama involves the interviewer as director. Staying conscious of and reflecting on how you and your interviewee/ co-researcher perform your lines helps you to remain within the framework of the methodology of the approach at hand. The interviewer as choreographer (a role the interviewee plays as well) is able to respond in a thoughtful manner, without giving over to 'spontaneous intuition or innate insight', in a self-conscious social performance. Awareness and reflection throughout the interviewing process means that both participants are able to choreograph their script and movements in response to each other's performance. Berg points out that within the dramaturgical framework interviewing should not be seen as phony, manipulative acting, but as an attempt to keep the research on track, within the outline of the methodology.

Awareness of the language spoken in the interview helps to convey respect and ask about meaning. Becker and Geer (in Berg 1998:68) express this as follows:

> Although we speak one language and share in many ways in one culture, we cannot assume that we understand precisely what another person, speaking as a member of such a group, means by any particular word. …we often do not understand that we do not understand and are thus likely to make errors in interpreting what is said to us.

A friend to whom I mentioned my research on infertility introduced me to Samuel and Tienie. I told her that, in view of the current debate on homosexuality in the Reformed Churches and other religious communities, I would be very interested in hearing how a same-sex couple experienced and addressed their desire for parenthood. For some reason, it took a lot of courage for me to invite them to take part in the research, because I had assumed they would want their exceptional family arrangement to remain private. I was therefore immensely gratified when they agreed to become co-researchers. It was interesting that they, more than any of the other groups of co-researchers, wanted their story to be heard. More than once they said that although the research invaded their lives to a certain extent it gave them a chance to speak from the heart about their point of view, and to get a word in on behalf of other gay parents. They hoped people would conclude from their story that there are more similarities than differences between gay and heterosexual parents, and that gays can indeed be responsible, fine parents. One of their major themes is that they see themselves as 'normal', not deviant, sick or dangerous. They would welcome it if heterosexuals, society, and in particular the Church, could regard them as ordinary people who have the right to be themselves. They experience the presence of God in every aspect of their lives: past, present and future.

They were astounded that a single aspect of their humanness, namely their sexual orientation, could overshadow so many of their other ordinary, irritating, good, interesting, unique, boring, unpleasant, desirable and shared human attributes. When Tienie said that, it reminded me of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. In Act III, scene i, on a street in Venice, the Jew, Shylock complains to Salerio, the friend of Antonio and Bassanio, Shylock's debtors, that the Christians hate him because he is a Jew. Shylock argues bitterly that he is a human being, no less so than the Christians:

> Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?

The 16th century Venetian Christians, like those of the rest of Europe, rejected, despised and marginalised the Jews. Samuel and Tienie claim that, likewise, Christians (and others) in their milieu reject and despise gays on account of their homosexuality. Their humanness, their value in God's eyes, their contributions to their communities and the general similarities between them and heterosexuals are ignored. At times, people highlight Samuel and Tienie's sexuality out of all proportion to the integrated wholeness of their being, making statements that seem to them to be justifiable and proper: 'You will burn in hell,' 'You are sick and perverse,' 'You will bring God's wrath on us all.'

The word 'homophobic' refers to those who feel antagonistic towards homosexuals, who have certain 'fears' about their way of life. Such feelings specifically include the conviction that the social order and key institutions in society are under threat (Freeman 1996:313). According to Lev (2004:120), homophobia is alive and well, and is a force to be reckoned with. However, the big surprise is the 'internalized homophobia' that gay and lesbian parents often encounter from other LGBTs (lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders). Homophobia does not always come from 'outside'. The 'inside' is also manifested when rejections and judgments are spelled out by LGBTs that having children is selfish and unfair to those children (Lev 2004:124).

Both Tienie and Samuel came from big, child-centred families, with seven and six siblings respectively. They had formed a monogamous, loving, long-standing relationship with each other lasting more than twenty years, and wanted children to complete their union as a family. The opportunity to adopt children is stated in the constitution of 1996, which prohibits unfair discrimination against, *inter alia,* sexual orientation. Although the best interests of a child are always paramount, homosexuals and single parents are at least on an equal footing with heterosexual couples. In other words, to be homosexual does not disqualify someone from adopting a child. Given their desire to parent and to experience the love and needs of children, Samuel and Tienie set out to adopt.

It was a difficult journey during which they had to battle discrimination and homophobia from those implementing the adoption system. They fought against

unfair judgments from family, and even other gays and lesbians in their circle of friends on their ability to raise children. However, believing that God would honour their genuine desire to give a home to a child who otherwise would be worse off, it was only a matter of time before they had two daughters under their roof and in their hearts.

As researcher/narrator, I had three discussions with Tienie and Samuel, attended their daughters' birthday parties and other social functions, and was invited to a Church service. I am documenting this research by shining the spotlight on each of the actors taking part in this story: Samuel and Tienie, the parents of Anri and Katryn, 'Ma Maria' (their black 'mother', who has worked for Samuel and Tienie for the past seventeen years), and her two children, Petrus and Sarie (godchildren of Samuel and Tienie, and 'siblings' of the little girls). Then there is the supporting cast: Grandma Viola, and the aunties, friends and godfathers of the girls and the reflecting team.

As researcher/narrator, let me say at the outset: it is a tremendous loss for the reader not to have had the visual and audio 'real life' experience with this family that I had. Their story begs to be told in a rowdy, fearless, poignant film that would elicit tears and laughter in equal measure. The discussions were in Afrikaans, their mother tongue. They have the knack of expressing themselves in the most colourful, humorous, vivid language, which I found impossible to represent in English in a way that even remotely does them justice. At certain points in the next section, when Samuel and Tienie perform their lines, I have taken the liberty of adding a few sentences in Afrikaans, for the benefit of those readers who are familiar with the language. The words are conveyed exactly as they delivered them.

In Act II, scene vii, lines 139-143 of Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It*, Jaques addresses Duke Senior, saying:

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts,

> His acts being seven ages.

It seemed to me that Samuel and Tienie inadvertently play out their roles not only on the one stage of life, like the rest of us, but also on the stage of the 'out of the ordinary' homosexual minority, the Other Kind, the gay parents. These are roles on a stage within a stage. Being gay makes them the odd ones, the others, the 'other-wise' ones. As gay parents, they have to contend with stares, looks of confusion and disgust, and gossiping behind their backs as they visit places, and attend functions or social gatherings in public spaces. Samuel and Tienie doesn't mind being watched and reviewed from their position on the stage of life, as long as they can live authentic lives. They would often improvise comments to members of the audience from their stage position. Denzin (1992:27) says that life is never lived realistically.

> It is lived through the subject's eye, and that eye, like a camera's, is always reflexive, nonlinear, subjective, filled with flashbacks, after-images, dream sequences, faces merging into one another, masks dropping, and new masks being put on. In this world called reality, where we are forced to react, and life leaks in everywhere, we have nothing to hold on to but our own beings.

Samuel and Tienie's stories, their lives, and their worlds are bursting with richness, paradoxes, opposites, contradictions and mirth. They defy typecasting in every respect. They do not seem like the familiar (granted, it's only one of many), stereotypical profiles of homosexual men: professed female lovers, with effeminate, self-conscious manners, fashionable clothes, bodies well-conditioned from gym workouts, and a tendency to slight hysteria over mundane matters. I myself have a number of gay friends and family members, and knew full well that gays cannot be tagged in a predictable way, so I wondered why I even entertained that mental image before I visited them for the first time. I certainly hadn't expected what I got when I saw these two, who could easily pass for weather-beaten, rough, mampoer-drinking Free State farmers. I was impressed by the natural, spontaneous way in which they just loved their daughters to bits. Why was I impressed with that, I asked myself. Would that question have occurred to me if I had been interviewing straight fathers with adopted daughters? Did I think gay men were unable to fulfil the role of fatherhood? Sitting in the car after the first conversation I had with them, and laughing at myself, my head spinning, I said to

God: 'What happened here tonight? I'm speechless. All my preconceived ideas (that I thought I didn't have) were turned on their heads.' I felt blessed, entertained, amazed, confused and infused with lightness and thankfulness and concern. And, yes, let me say it, touched by the overwhelming presence of love that filled every nook and cranny of their household.

It is with Denzin's words on useful cultural studies that I want to conclude before I stand back to give centre stage to the actors. Denzin says that, in the human disciplines, the model of interpretation with the capacity to make a difference is the one that is not directed to the study of origins, centres, laws and structures, but one that treats the 'personal as political' (1992:23). One of its aims is to link personal troubles with public issues, which Denzin sets within a radical and plural democracy that acknowledges personal issues as the site of struggle. This interpretive model also aims at giving a voice to the voiceless, by deconstructing popular culture texts that reproduce stereotypes of the powerless. Further, it supports pluralism and cultural diversity, underscoring a radical, non-violent pluralism in which no one is repressed and all are liberated. Denzin refers to Derrida's description of such an interpretative approach that is the opposite of the study of origins and centres mentioned above. Derrida explains that human beings are never fully present to themselves or others, except through a process of deferral and delay. Language itself, being a process, is never fixed in its meanings or representations, and cannot capture experience fully. It can only be conferred in texts such as interviews, life stories, and films, themselves indirect representations of what they are trying to represent. This approach to interpretation examines how textual practices, including theory and research, reify subjects, structures and social experience. Denzin seeks to deconstruct these practices in order to disclose how politically repressive ideas are kept in place when in fact they are out of touch with the social world as it is lived and experienced (Denzin 1992:23).

Samuel and Tienie's personally lived experiences are negatively linked, on many different levels, to the politics of socio-cultural understandings and acceptable behaviour in a heterosexual context. As gays *per se* and gay parents in particular, they constantly collide with dominant discourses about family, sexuality and parenting.

Over then to the lead actors: Dada, Pappa, the daughters (Anri and Katryn), Ma Maria, the siblings (Petrus and Sarie). Then the supporting actors will have their turn: Ouma Viola, the aunties and other females, the godfathers and the reflecting team.

6.2 Performing the text

6.2.1 The lead actors/ co-narrators

The Dada: Tienie

Coming from a very poor family, Tienie had to start work when very young, forfeiting the chance to complete high school. To this day he believes that very hard work is one of the keys to becoming a decent person. He and Samuel have loved each other and worked together in their very successful business for the past twenty years. Having enjoyed their freedom and travelled extensively, they increasingly felt something was missing. They had an immense longing to become parents, and the offspring of their many brothers and sisters have always been a special part of their lives. At one point, one of Tienie's sisters and her children stayed with them for a few months, but, like most couples, Samuel and Tienie wanted their own brood. There was an occasion, many years ago, when they wanted a baby so badly that they attempted to buy one, which fortunately did not transpire. Eventually they adopted their children through the proper channels, the Department of Welfare.

On the theme of parenthood, Tienie describes himself as a soft-hearted, highly emotional person, and, while they are both quite strict with the children, Samuel is less so. There is no question that they are the children's fathers, and not their best friends. Their motto is, more or less, abundant love within the confines of discipline. *'Nee, ons het disipline, ons het lyne.'* Tienie explains that they have decided that their daughters will call them Dada and Pappa to minimise confusion for all of them. 'We can't both come running when they call: Pappa!'

Tienie is concerned that Anri and Katryn might one day hold it against them for having had to 'grow up in a house with two men', so they go out of their way to include women in their lives. They are uncomfortable with the lesbian women who

are aggressive and unfeminine, and the dykes who try to be masculine, and want to prove they can also achieve what men achieve. *'Dis hulle wat die mansbroeke dra en die manshorlosies, en die 'square cut' hare. Ek hou nie daarvan nie. Ek sal nie my kinders blootstel aan so iets nie.'*

He regards parenthood as 'the most amazing experience'. It has filled both their lives and made Tienie a more grateful human being. His wish for his daughters is that they will grow up contented, be accepted, and have happiness deep in their hearts. But, alas, he doesn't want them to grow up too soon. He's not even thinking about their marriages and careers. The last thing he wants is for them to become lesbians, he says, because they would have a very hard time.

On the issue of adoption Tienie says he initially wanted to adopt baby boys, because he was worried about his ability to handle the 'girl stuff' like menstrual periods. However, when the girls became available for adoption he reconsidered his point of view. He reminded himself that Samuel was not in the least intimidated by any such issue, and finds it easy to discuss things like that. Ma Maria is more than capable of handling women's issues, and there is a swarm of women in the family clan, as well as friends who could help if necessary. They also realised that society might frown if they had adopted boys, in the face of the community's persistent perception that gay men are, at heart, paedophiles.

Tienie brought up the point that Welfare and other such organisations allow biological parents too many rights, too much time and too many chances to pull themselves together to take proper responsibility for their children. Parents refuse to sign off their children. In the meantime the children stay in foster care, places of safety and orphanages, where they grow older every year. *'Nou sit daai kind in pleegsorg tot hy vyf of ses jaar oud is – agt jaar. Nou's daai boompie gegroei. Nou hoe buig jy hom?'* Eventually, when they become available for adoption they are no longer appealing and cute enough, it's difficult to find adoptive parents, and the opportunity is lost to have had a wonderful childhood in a loving, adoptive home. The focus on blood ties is very strong, too strong, and in spite of abusive neglect of their children, parents still have the upper hand.

On answering complex questions from Anri and Katryn, Tienie says they are taking difficult questions in their stride as they go along, and that the only way to be fair to all involved is to be totally honest. They had a taste of what lay ahead when the social worker gave them 'homework': 'What will you tell your child if she wants to know why she doesn't have a mother?' This is a tricky question because Samuel and Tienie will have to defend the biological mother's choice and explain their homosexuality. They wrestled, prayed, talked to their minister, talked to their child psychologist friend, and came up with the next answer. Some children only have a mother, some only a father, some have both a father and mother, and you have two fathers who love you very much, Pappa and Dada, who will look after you always. They explained to the girls that their respective mothers, although they loved them very much, couldn't look after them because of all kinds of difficulties. As the girls get older they will fill in the picture more and more. Tienie sees the mothers as two heroines, and will be grateful to them forever. *'Want om jou kind weg te gee moet jy sterk wees, jy moet nie flou wees nie.'*

Tienie doesn't want to give his children the 'wrong' answer, but what is the right one? He has armed himself with Biblical wisdom, common sense, professional advice and conversations with his life partner to help him make sense of the complexities of life, and their particular multifaceted situation. He understands only too well that his daughters will have a tough time amongst their friends, in school, and in the community, because they come from a very unusual family, some will even say, a queer family.

On the theme of God's presence, Tienie believes God created him and Samuel exactly as they are, and that neither of them chose to be gay. After years of sincere prayer to God to grant them children, they received Anri and Katryn from His hands. *'Want regtig, dat ons hulle gekry het, was God se genade'.* Strangely, the children even look like Samuel and Tienie, and their two mothers, and they can prove it with photos. *'Kyk hierdie foto. Dis vreeslik. Dis identies, hoor. Kyk, tot daai oortjies.'*

Having the children baptised and undertaking to teach them in the ways of the Lord demonstrates a natural expression of their love for and gratitude to God the

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Equally important for Tienie and Samuel is to instil in their daughters the second commandment, to love and respect your neighbour without being biased in terms of race, class, gender, disabilities, or sexual orientation, and above all to be grateful, even for the hard times. They and their daughters have a living relationship with God. *'En Hy hoor my as ek met Hom praat, Hy antwoord my dan.'*

The children attend alternately a gay, predominantly white, church and a black Christian church, and they are enrolled in a Christian school with both able and disabled children in the same classroom. Tienie's experiences of marginalisation and stigmatisation on account of being gay taught him how important it is for children to learn tolerance. People are diverse and unique, but, in essence, they are just ordinary, with similar needs, dreams, fears and hopes.

On the issue of the Christian Church, Tienie says that although they have found a home in a so-called gay church, they and other gays grew up in the Dutch Reformed Church and deeply desire to return to their roots. They want to revisit the place where their parents first taught them to have faith when they were little. However, at present, they find it impossible to go back because they don't feel completely welcome. Tienie wants to know that in the House of the Lord he is acceptable in the eyes of God and accepted as a human being, despite 'being what he is'.

God's grace is available to all of us, he says. No one is faultless. There are no big and small sins, so heterosexual Christians should refrain from judgment. Their sexual sins are often hidden under a cloak of normalcy. The Bible condemns divorce, and even covertness, as sin. Some holy people treat gays like outcasts in the name of love, as if they had special favour with God. In the mean time, we all fall short. *'Verstaan jy, en nou wil die kerk vir ons sê ons gaan hel toe'.* Tienie is quick to point out that there are indeed Christians, ministers and churches that are not guilty of these cold, heartless judgments.

Society in general, and even some family members, see their gay relatives as black sheep and 'washouts', thereby joining the church in their chorus of criticism.

This often spurs gay people on to prove their value and competencies and become extra successful in their careers. *'En nou wil ek vir jou iets vertel…daar is nie 'n arm moffie nie. In die skool het julle my 'n sissie genoem, in die army het julle my 'n mofgat genoem, ek sal jull wys wat ek van my lewe maak.'*

Having his own children now, he is struggling with God about parents who abuse their children. He cannot understand how God could allow it. He is angry that the Bible was and is still interpreted by learned people in influential theological positions to reflect their personal ideas and support their political beliefs. The good of apartheid and the evil of homosexuality were both 'proved' by the Word of God.

Being 'normal' and wanting to be treated in a normal manner is a theme that Tienie came back to time and again. He calls the gay congregation just a 'normal church'. The women in his daughters' lives are 'ordinary and normal', consisting of both straight and lesbian females. He says, lesbianism doesn't make you extraordinary, and neither does being straight make you normal or plain. He points out that some straight women should never have children because they don't really want to be mothers. Their pregnancies either just happened because they were sexually active, or they fell pregnant because they thought it was the best thing to do next in their marriages. Maybe they simply could not be good mothers, even if they tried their best. Often their husbands look after the children's needs. However, this does not make their arrangement abnormal. He says some gay fathers, like him and Samuel, incline towards 'motherhood' in the sense that they are caring, protective and kind to their children. Granted, the mothering aspect of parenting appeals to them, but, after all, both genders have similar characteristics, including the ability to satisfy the growing child's needs in terms of disciplining, mothering, educating and giving spiritual guidance. Tienie thanked me, saying I had acknowledged and treated them as a normal family. I tried to put myself in his shoes when he said that. It must be hard to be in a position where you have to either hide your 'true' self, or keep on defending it to others, considering that your self permeates every part of your existence.

On being gay, Tienie says the bad old days of apartheid meant not only partition between races, but separation and harassment for homosexual relationships. *'Die*

wet is nou die dag eers af. As jy twee mans in 'n bed gekry het, kon die polisie hulle doodgeskiet het op die 'spot'. Die wet het gesê 'n man mag vrouensklere aantrek, maar as hy vrouensonderklere aantrek dan moet hulle hom in hegtenis neem.' Although homosexual relationships were not against the law, the dominant perception was that it was an offence. The prejudices and victimisation by the police and others were fomented by the aversion of the general community.

Gays had to operate as an underground movement, Tienie says, meeting each other in clubs hidden in alleys. They had people on the lookout for the police, who often raided the clubs just to get in some good 'gay-bashing'. '*En snuffel die polisie hierdie goed (klubs) nou uit, dan gryp jy maar 'n lesbian en dans met haar.'* They often had to flee and hide from aggressive gay-bashers who assaulted them to reaffirm their heterosexuality and impress each other. Those really were the bad old days, say Tienie and Samuel.

They respect other people enough not to offend them with inappropriate behaviour in public, because being gay is 'out of the ordinary' in the wider context. *'Ons was nog nooit vir enigiemand 'n verleentheid nie. Ons hang nie aan mekaar in die openbaar nie; ons lek mekaar nie.'* But at the same time, he says, it should be applicable to all people, gay or straight, since it is only decent to be considerate to others. '*Jy gaan ook nie jou man so soen voor jou ouma nie.'*

The Pappa: Samuel

He is the one who fought really hard to be taken seriously as a potential adoptive parent, with the right to a healthy, normal child from the Welfare. He attends the school functions of their black godchildren in his capacity of their father and guardian. Samuel and Tienie are proud to be involved in an organisation that helps sexually-molested orphaned girls to find their feet again by receiving therapy and learning skills like self defense, cooking and flower arranging. Among the presents they gave these orphaned children were new clothes, 'with the tags still on'. *''n Splinternuwe stelletjie klere met die 'tags' nog aan, want wanneer laas het hulle nog ooit iets nuuts gekry? Hulle het geblink soos bottles.'*

Samuel is a fighter with a heart of gold, who was 'dirt' poor as a child. He believes in giving to others, because God asks it of him, because others have less than he does, and because it always pays dividends one way or another. He believes God sent them the children to love and to cherish for safekeeping. The children have made him, a go-getter, much more relaxed. *'Ek sê nou makliker, laat Gods water oor Gods akker loop.'*

Their daughters were adopted according to different adoption models, the one as an open adoption and the other as a closed adoption. In short, open adoption means that the adoptive parents know the identities of the birth parents (or mother) and that contact can be maintained between the two families by means of letters, phone contact or actually spending time together. Closed adoption (also called confidential adoption) means the adoptive families have little or no information about the birth parents and vice versa. This process protects the adoptive parents from any legal repercussions or unwanted social contact (Lev 2004:65). At one point, Anri's closed adoption was changed to an open adoption to be more accommodating to the birth mother. However, when they experienced unacceptable interference and other difficulties with the original family, Samuel and Tienie decided to revert to the closed adoption to protect their daughter. Samuel describes that particular adoption now, as 'very, very closed'.

The daughters: Anri (5 and a half years) and Katryn (3 years)

Anri talks and sings all day long like a beautiful little bird. Both girls are very grateful for even the smallest thing they receive. Katryn is an angel who needs only to learn to fly. They are sometimes naughty, but also cute, as little girls tend to be. They pray at bedtime and at the table, giving thanks for their food. They have already learnt negotiating skills. '*Dankie Jesus, vir die lekker kos, maar sê vir Pappa en Dada ek is nie regtig honger nie.'*

The 'mother': Ma Maria

Ma Maria is a woman of many talents and identities. Depending on who does the describing, she could be seen as little more than the *'ousie'* (indispensable, but without identity) tending to the necessary but mundane tasks of cleaning, washing, ironing and generally 'keeping everything together' in the household. However,

Samuel and Tienie's political sensitivities have not allowed them (even seventeen years ago when Maria started working there) the arrogance and disrespect to relegate her to such a lowly status. Long before the arrival of their adopted daughters, she was the mother in the household. She mothers her own biological children, who have been living there since birth, and in a sense she is also mothering Samuel and Tienie. Her opinion counts, her personality fills the rooms and her womanliness is a perfect balance to Samuel and Tienie's manliness. In terms of her role and daily presence, she is, in a very real sense, mother, or Ma Maria to Anri and Katryn.

The siblings: Petrus and Sarie

Petrus and Sarie are the biological children of Ma Maria, and the three of them live in a flat next to the main house. At the same time they have 'full visitation rights' in the main house. Tienie and Samuel are their guardians, but, even more, they fulfil the role of father(s) to them, seeing that their own father does not live with them. They join the family on outings and holidays, simply because they have been part of the family since birth. Both are now in their teens. Because their mother speaks Afrikaans fluently, and it is the language spoken in the house, they have been enrolled at Afrikaans schools since Grade 1. They are also active members of the Voortrekker Movement, and enjoy the camps, culture and traditions. They are, to all intents and purposes, liberated, in light of the apartheid legacy, from the negative (though understandable) perceptions many black South African children have of white people in general, and Afrikaners in particular. They are in many respects the older brother and sister of the adopted daughters. They were sharing in the home culture, the parents, the house, the identity and the financial benefits long before the daughters were even born. The age gap is, of course, quite large, with the younger ones respectively three years and five and a half years old.

Samuel and Tienie decided against adopting black children, because Sarie and Petrus are their godchildren. They felt it would be unfair to them, because the officially adopted children would inevitably be handled a little differently, even spoiled more. Samuel and Tienie have an axe to grind with the adoption agencies who, were willing, even eager, to place black, HIV+, or otherwise sick children with gays. It was as if gays, by way of their 'abnormal status', ought to stand at the end

of the queue, and just be grateful for the 'left overs' of the adoption system, who themselves are 'seen as abnormal' or at least, less than perfect in certain respects. Tienie told me about Samuel's birthday party, which had been celebrated a few days previously with gay friends and their children. About ten of the fourteen adopted children there were HIV+, because 'they couldn't get healthy children to adopt'. *'Jy weet, gay mense kan more swart kinders kry, veral as hulle siek is, en dit maak my die bliksem in.'*

6.2.2 The supporting actors

The grandma: Ouma Viola

Ouma Viola is not the biological mother of either Samuel or Tienie. Their own mothers have passed away. She is, however, old enough to be a mother to them, and, although there are no blood ties, it is as if she were their grandmother. According to Samuel and Tienie, having strong, feminine, heterosexual women in their lives brings balance to their daughters' perceptions of the diversity amongst gender. As a woman in her late sixties, she herself defies stereotyping, with her tall, full figure, blond hair, business skills and creative talents. As she is such a significant presence in their lives, the girls often visit her at home, go on trips and holidays with her, and in general just learn 'how to be a woman', and, I suppose, 'how not to be a woman', as well. Ouma Viola and one of her own daughters are very close to the girls, and they do lots of 'girly things' together, especially during a weekend visit. Hair, make-up, nails, jewellery and dressing up are high on the agenda. A favourite thing for Anri and Katryn is to run with naked, white powered bodies through the house after bath time, shrieking and screeching at the tops of their voices before getting into their pyjamas.

The aunties and female figures

A large number of different women have a feminine influence on the girls. They are young and not-so-young, straight, lesbian, analytical and creative women. I was invited by Tienie and Samuel to become more intimately involved in the girls' lives, which I appreciated.

The godfathers

Anri and Katryn's godfathers are 'just perfect', because, while they do not want children themselves, they dote on their 'goddaughters' and admire Samuel and Tienie for being good parents. With time-tested values, the godfathers are men of integrity who feel privileged to be part of such a happy family.

The reflecting team

Someone on the reflecting team remarked that, in her opinion, children identify more with role than with gender. She thinks children tend to find value in the relationship with those close to them, and are not so 'hung up' on the functions of their significant others. Of course, if you teach them that different sexes have strict boundaries that cannot or should not be crossed, they will accept that philosophy (at least initially) as gospel. However, these days it is commonly accepted that the lines between the sexes concerning their roles, functions, abilities have blurred.

The reflecting team wondered about the presence of females in the children's lives, and whether growing up in a gay family is 'fair' to them. The lesbian minister found Tienie's criticisms of dykes upsetting, and pointed out that he was guilty of stigmatising those lesbians – something that he hates being done to himself. The embryologist said she respected the level of maturity that the gay parents showed in terms of their personal values and conduct to straight people. She came to the conclusion that the idea of having some 'ultimate reality' is elusive: we all seek and strive for a reality that makes sense to us in our particular context. She wondered how the girls' adolescence would affect the relationship between fathers and daughters. How would they handle the boyfriends, for instance?

6.3 Reflecting notes for the narrator and actors

6.3.1 Adoption

A great deal of research has been done on the social and psychological dynamics that are part of the adoption experience. Smith and Miroff, a social worker and an attorney, who are themselves adoptive parents (1987:x), refer to the fact that adoptive parents and their children find themselves in a very special situation in that they become a family through a legal rather than a biological birth process. All families share certain commonalities in terms of the joys, insecurities and fears

around parenting, the ups and downs of child development stages and peer group influences, to name but a few things. However, when it comes to adoptive families, the concerns of the so-called adoption triangle, consisting of the adoptive parents, the child and the birth parents, means that their experiences are different from those of other families. Although the element of adoption in a family should not be denied or over-emphasised, the middle ground is that it should be acknowledged and, at appropriate times, openly discussed (Smith & Miroff 1987:177).

From the perspective of adoptive parenthood, the authors believe that the unique task is feeling that the child really belongs to them, unconditionally, even exclusively. This 'belongingness', is also referred to as a sense of entitlement and has to develop not only from the parents to the child, but also from the child to the parents, as well as among all siblings involved. (This is more challenging in cases when the child is older, no longer an infant.) In the case of biological parents, the feeling amongst family members that 'we belong to each other' is much less complicated. Blood ties are strong, and are usually cemented by the pregnancy and birth process of the child into the family, as well as the fact that family members often look and sound alike. Children frequently display certain inborn characteristics and traits of their parents and grandparents. As the child grows up, family members comment on these characteristics as a matter of course, strengthening the bonds between the members, and inculcating a robust feeling of identity in a specific family.

When it comes to adoption, though, the development of a sense of entitlement can be complicated by a number of issues. Firstly, the adoptive parents are constantly aware that the child was born of another set of parents. With the research on Samuel and Tienie's adopted daughters in mind, I interviewed Linda, adoptive mother of Carinne, to find out how the adoptive issue evinces itself when the child grows older. Carinne is 16 years old. Linda also has one biological son. She told me her adopted daughter's body, which in childhood was round and curvaceous, not streamlined and angular like her own, her husband's and her son's, used to be a daily reminder that Carinne came from a different clan. These physical differences evoked repeated imaginary pictures of what Carinne's biological mother looked and sounded like, and what she thought. Linda felt that her

daughter's family of origin was constantly speaking from the wings, reminding the adoptive family that they, the original family, were the foundation in her child's life. Carinne's personality also differed noticeably from the others'. Linda, the adoptive mother, said she often wondered why the birth mother had given this child away, and she would try to imagine what had happened. She had ambivalent feelings: she felt at once appreciative and anxious about the 'real' mother - appreciative, even indebted, because without her role as biological mother and her brave (or heartless) decision to give up her baby for adoption, Carinne would never have been a part of Linda's life. She saw the child as a gift, at the same time feeling that she had a legitimate claim on Carinne because she had chosen her and cared for her in the day-to-day sense. Thinking of that, she would then see herself as the 'real' mother.

At the same time she felt anxious, because she harboured the fear that she (and her husband) might 'lose' the child to the 'real mother' and her biological family after she and Carinne had met on her eighteenth birthday. She feared that she would be sidelined because 'blood is thicker than water', or because her daughter might compare her unfavourably with her birth mother. Lest Linda should sound a little unstable and childish, let me come to her defense. She has a highly responsible job in the medical profession, is extremely level-headed and mature. She is the kind of person who is capable of giving reflective and imaginative counsel to herself and to others. Linda was, however, surprised by her volatile, emotional reactions when it came to certain issues surrounding the birth mother and especially the anticipated meeting between her and Carinne. She feels strongly that her adopted daughter belongs to her. Linda also told me she would sometimes imagine herself in the shoes of the birth mother, and would experience something of the longing and worried concern she was sure the other one must feel about her child.

The birth mother twice requested photos and information on the girl through the adoption agency that had acted as mediator. After these requests, with which Linda complied, she felt an invisible, unbreakable bond between them founded on their love for and interest in 'their' daughter.

Linda also experienced anxiety about the possible reverse scenario. Instead of dreading the possibility of the biological mother trying to reclaim the girl (if and when their future meeting took place), Linda feared the potential situation in which the biological mother might not want to meet her child after the child had requested it. Another cause for fear, according to this adoptive mother, was that Carinne and her birth mother might experience mutual disappointment during and after the expected meeting. She did not want her daughter to feel disenchanted and disillusioned after encountering the mother she had dreamed of for so many years. It would be a real let down if one or both felt they could not relate to the other in a meaningful way. Linda was also concerned about the possibility of the relationship starting on a good footing, but souring after a while. My involvement and discussions with Linda made it clear to me that the adoptive experience is fraught with emotional highs and lows.

The second challenge in developing a sense of entitlement is that adoptive parents have to handle their child's questions about being adopted from an early age. Smith and Miroff (1987:176) suggest that a policy of direct, honest communication leads to acceptance and a strong sense of identity within the adoptive family structure. The authors state that there is a direct relationship between the child's sense of belonging in the family and the parents' acceptance of their own status as adoptive parents. They mention the interesting situation when adoptive parents who have struggled with infertility sometimes feel ambivalent about their adopted child. Although they dearly wanted to and subsequently did adopt, the child is nevertheless a symbol of their biological inability to reproduce. Appropriate counselling from the adoption agency is not only vital before adoption, but should also be encouraged up to the time the child reaches adulthood. It could also be in the form of support groups for adoptive families.

Open communication addresses and places in perspective the themes of loss experienced by all parties in the adoption triangle (Smith & Miroff 1987:178). For the birth parents, it is the loss of their child as well as the lack of information about their child's health, development, personality, looks and well-being that is at stake. The adoptive parents, depending on their circumstances, express their perceived

losses in unique ways. If they are unable to have the biological children they dearly want, it could be seen as a life-long lacuna in their situation even though they love and appreciate their adopted children. They could also sometimes feel sad that the adopted child is not their biological child.

Some infertile adoptive parents manage, to a great extent, to overcome their desire for biological offspring. An adoptive mother of two sons, let's call her Anke, told me that although she has never had children of her own she thinks the process of falling pregnant and giving birth is somewhat over-rated. Those things are not essential to becoming a mother. She feels her boys were lent to her for a time to care for and learn from, in the same way that birth children are 'lent' to their biological parents. She experiences the dual situation in which one of her sons is subject to an open adoption policy and the other to a closed adoption policy. She does not necessarily prefer one to the other, she says, and feels that both arrangements have strengths and weaknesses. She does feel particularly blessed in her relationship with the birth mother in the open adoption arrangement. She and the birth mother give each other much-needed support. They discuss the problems and joys concerning 'their son' on a regular basis, usually telephonically. She says there is no defensiveness or competition between them, only a sense of gratitude and sharing. The birth mother and son communicate only by text messages on their cell phones, and have done so for many years. Both have decided to postpone their reunion at least to his eighteenth birthday. Anke says the arrangement works well for them. She herself feels she has an ally and friend in the birth mother, someone who is emotionally mature and genuinely has their son's best interests at heart. (The child was adopted shortly after birth.) The fact that there is respect, honesty, humour and humility, as well as boundaries, provides a framework of gratitude for all involved. The boy, aged thirteen, feels he is an integral part of the adoptive family. At the same time he knows that he originated from a different family. (His grandmother on his birth mother's side often visits him and takes him on outings.) He is also familiar with the reasons why he was given up for adoption, and knows that his biological mother loves him, but chooses to stay in the background for the first eighteen years of his life. The fact that his brother is also adopted, and that the thorny emotional issues are handled

in such an easy-going, mature and stress-free manner has gone a long way to his accepting his special situation as a normal part of his life.

This brings us to the third side of the adoption triangle, the adoptee. The loss here involves not knowing and not growing up with birth parents and the extended family, being in the dark about the circumstances of their adoption and the depressing feelings of having been unwanted or rejected by those who should have granted them a place in their lives (Smith & Miroff 1987:179). Telling the adoptive story, if done in an appropriate and sensitive way, and taking the age and questions of the child into account, can become a healing experience.

Filis Casey (2004), lawyer and founder of the first international adoption agency in Massachusetts over thirty years ago, says many classic misconceptions about adoption still exist. They include the idea that families formed through adoption are second best, that parents who adopt a child from another race or culture are saints, and that most adopted children have emotional problems (Casey & Casey 2004:xiii). Filis's daughter was internationally and trans-racially adopted at the age of three. It meant, amongst other things, that she found a family who wanted her, but she had to learn a new language and has accepted her name change from Francis Catalina Cuartas to Marissa Catalina Casey. She said she continually questioned her identity over the years: not knowing her medical history, craving to know if her mother shared the same green eyes, wondering about the 'secrets' of her birth-experience and the reasons she ended up in the orphanage. She used to be bitter and angry that her path was fraught with detours and missing signposts. Now, at twenty, she's beginning to realise that 'there isn't a family dynamic more true or real than any other, and that family is what you make it' (Casey & Casey 2004:9).

There is, of course, great diversity when it comes to adoptive families. Some consist of only adoptive relationships, while other parents have both biological and adoptive children. During the past few years, interracial adoptions have become more and more common in South Africa. In some instances there are extended family relations between adoptive parents and children, for example, when someone adopts her/his daughter's, son's or sibling's children. The distinction

between open and closed adoptions has already been described in the previous section.

Adoptive parents have to face the possibility that their child might want to meet his/her biological parents. Even adoptive parents who are accepting and encouraging about this aspect are taken aback by their emotional reactions when contact is made between the child and biological parent(s). This scenario could complicate the development of a sense of entitlement towards the child.

6.3.2 Lesbian and gay parenting, parents of gays and straight spouses

Lesbian and gay parenting

In fourteenth century Europe, the common punishment for homosexuality was burning at the stake. By the time of the American Revolution, thanks to Thomas Jefferson's liberal proposals, the death penalty had been replaced with castration (Baca Zinn & Eitzen 1993:415). Gays and lesbians in South Africa now have the legal right to get married and to adopt children. Although much has changed in terms of the law, they still undergo oppression. Gays continue to experience both ideological oppression, in which their behaviours stigmatise them as immoral, and occupational oppression (covertly, as this is illegal) in which jobs, advancement or income are restricted or denied (1993:416).

Feminist research has pointed out that, although motherhood is socially constructed as fulfilling and vital for all women, many groups of women are devalued as unsuitable and defined as inappropriate mothers. This includes older, disabled, teenage, and working mothers. Although this feminist research has examined the ideologies underpinning the construction of appropriate and inappropriate categories, it has often failed to address the experiences of marginalisation undergone by lesbian mothers and gay fathers (Clarke 2001:555). She identifies six common arguments frequently used in opposition to lesbian and gay parenting. These arguments are designed to maintain the heterosexist status quo. In using these arguments, Clarke says, opponents of lesbian and gay parenting place the responsibility for their views on God, nature, children's developmental needs or society. At the same time, they express their concern for children's welfare, thereby sidestepping the responsibility of answering for their

prejudiced opinions. These arguments, she says, are endlessly recycled in their proponents' efforts to cling to the notion of the traditional nuclear family, and to perpetuate the stereotypes of gay men as paedophiles, and lesbians as aggressive, masculine and confused about their sexuality, not worthy of being parents.

- 'The Bible tells me that lesbian and gay parenting is sinful.'
- 'Lesbian and gay parenting is unnatural.'
- Lesbian and gay parents are selfish because they ignore the 'best interests' of the child.'
- 'Children in lesbian and gay families lack appropriate role models.'
- 'Children in lesbian and gay families grow up gay and confused.'
- 'The children of lesbian and gay parents get bullied.'

The first argument has the longest history of all, partly, perhaps, because of its simplicity and extreme resistance to change. After all, God's plan cannot be put to any empirical test, and there are numerous Biblical verses that seem to point clearly to God's disapproval of homosexuals. Although the argument is out of step with current scientific, theological and political opinion, it persistently suggests that religion and gay and lesbian rights are fundamentally in conflict with this. The trump card is that God dislikes gays and homosexuality, but that, under certain circumstances (for instance when gays remain celibate) a deal can be struck.

Clarke points out that gay and lesbian parents usually respond to their critics by resorting to a limited number of themes, which are inadequate for deconstructing these persistent anti-gay beliefs: 'Love makes a family', whereby the boundaries of sexuality are transcended, or 'We are just the family next door', which highlights their ordinary character. They draw parallels to heterosexual families, stating that the only difference is that the parents in theirs are of the same sex. In response to arguments about a lack of suitable role models, lesbian and gay parents and their apologists point out that, in their family or support network, there are ample examples of the 'right kind of role models' (Clarke 2001:567).

Arlene Istar Levy says that, for gays and lesbians, the fantasy of building a family is often not as easily attained as had been hoped. Much more than in the case of homosexual partnerships where it is nearly always assumed that both partners would want children, gay partners might not see eye to eye on the issue of children, and some are adamantly opposed to having them. Other problems like financial and emotional stability and addiction can stand in the way of parenthood. Despite the increase in the number of lesbians having children by insemination, pregnancy and birth, many lesbian women are considering parenting in their thirties and forties. Since infertility increases exponentially as women age, attempting to become pregnant later in life means that they could encounter infertility problems (Lev 2004:87). Infertility and pregnancy loss are rarely discussed topics in the lesbian community, and the potential for conflict, competition and blame in a partnership where there are two wombs is tremendous. Some gays and lesbians have children from previous heterosexual relationships. However, other than adoption, there are numerous potential ways of becoming parents. Artificial insemination, donor sperm, donor eggs and surrogate motherhood are possibilities. Sometimes a gay man and a lesbian woman form a partnership to parent a child. It could be asked whether it is morally right to create a baby in such a way. Not all gays and lesbians think there should be no impediments when baby hunger strikes. Some feel it would be more acceptable to adopt an already-existing child who is in need of a family.

Lev points out that same-sex parents who choose to have children together are often without models to parent effectively together. Their childhood models of heterosexuality may not be relevant to the families they are now creating within an alternative family structure, since LGBT people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) can hardly follow the prescribed gender roles of their straight parents (2004:164). Homosexual parents try to implement an egalitarian approach to parenthood, becoming peers in all the decisions and daily tasks, although in practice one of the parents usually spends more time with the children (2004:166). Building support systems is crucial for survival as gay parents, and would include their LGBT families, as well as their families of origin. LGBT people, she says, are bicultural, with one foot in the dominant hetero-normative system and the other in

their unique queer cultures. Although LGBT people have often been pushed out of their families, their relationship with their families of origin and the ancestral thread (birth and adoptive) are critical to their self-definition. These connections should be maintained or reconstructed for the sake of all involved, especially, too, for the children of gay parents (Lev 2004:144).

Parents of gays

Because of the persistent social stigma attached to being gay, closet gays and their parents and families often find it very threatening to tell the truth. Even gays who have come out are likely, in certain situations, to conceal their homosexuality. It is not only the gays and lesbians themselves who find it difficult to 'come out of the closet', but their heterosexual parents as well. Du Plessis (1999:107) reminds parents of gays that their open communication and acceptance of their children affects the family and society in a healing, positive way. Parents who keep their child's homosexuality a secret from friends and family (what will they say?) becomes locked into a place of shame and fear. Anger against the child and self-loathing as a reaction to the homosexuality can keep parents isolated. Weinberg (in Du Plessis 1999:101) says it is a myth that parents are responsible for their children's sexual orientation:

> As a result of propaganda from many sides, millions of parents, on discovering that their child is homosexual, sink under the weight of awful reactions. Believing that they have wrecked the life of their child and loved one, they feel demoralised and ashamed.

Lidia Theron (2005:51), mother of a lesbian daughter, says she and her husband went through a hellish journey before eventually accepting her daughter's sexuality and right to be treated with dignity as a full human being. The critical attitude of their community and church towards gays made it extremely hard for her and her husband to be open about their 'dilemma'. They felt they had 'lost' their child (or at least the one they thought they knew), that she 'did this to them', as if she deliberately chose to be lesbian, that her soul was irredeemable, out of reach of God's grace, and that they, as parents, caused her homosexuality because of their personalities and child-rearing practices. They consequently heaped enormous blame on themselves, experiencing extreme shame and disgrace. In the eyes of

some of their colleagues, friends, family and members of their congregation, they were seen to be failures and their child confused and disgusting. Lidia's daughter says that she nearly lost her faith, because Christians spread the 'truth' that if she continued to live according to her nature and disposition, God would reject her (2005:140).

David Aveline (2006:792) carried out research on parents who retrospectively made sense of their sons' gayness by re-visiting their earlier years. Aveline calls this retrospective making sense a 'selective re-examination of the past and a reinterpretation of its events'. It is a process whereby parents come to terms with what they now know (that their sons are indeed gay) as opposed to what they had originally thought. This process suggests a second-level interpretation of what led them to the original interpretation of the events, traits, or behaviours in question (that their sons are not gay). An interpretation of their stories yielded three broad types of second-level interpretations: revelations *(I never noticed until now, but did I have blinkers on?)*, confirmations *(So, I was right),* and justifications *(How could I have known?).* Many parents attributed their inability to see the early signs of their son's homosexuality for what it was to their church's lack of any reference to homosexuality, to the fact that no-one discussed it in their own growing years and to society's general intolerance of gays, and its broad failure to prepare parents for having gay sons (Aveline 2006:794). Most of them wish they had had the insight and opportunity to accept and support their son's homosexuality, as it is not something that can be changed. With hindsight, they realise that their children had manifested signs of their gayness throughout their lives, sometimes from a very young age, but they themselves had been blind or had pretended to be.

Straight spouses of gays

Amity Pierce Buxton's (2004) *The other side of the closet* is a comprehensive study of what happens to husbands, wives and children when one spouse decides to come out of the closet and discloses his or her same-sex attraction. She writes from her own experience as the spurned wife of a gay husband. She interviewed a thousand straight spouses and children, and countless spouses who, at a particular point in their marriage, had acknowledged their homosexuality to their families. To a great extent she blames the 'domino effect of homophobia' as the

very root of the pressures that make many gay, lesbian and bisexual persons marry in the first place, believing it is 'the right thing to do'. The charade ultimately becomes impossible to maintain, and a shattering experience fraught with pain, confusion, anger and severe loss of self-esteem follows. She says families that eventually undergo a successful transforming process (something that could take many forms, but would include the gay parent's presence in the lives of the children), demands a complete re-evaluation of fixed, traditional viewpoints. Levy points out that all the research that has conducted on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people) coming out of a heterosexual marriage found that children can survive this major upheaval with few setbacks. This is especially the case if those children are stable and well loved. However, issues like internalised homophobia and high levels of shame and stigma will be there (Pierce Buxton 2004:105).

Goldberg's research on adult disclosure practices cited by lesbian, gay and bisexual parents (2007:123) found that reactions amongst the group of adults were quite diverse. Discovering during childhood that one of their parents was gay received a range of reactions, which changed during their life course, highlighting the fact that people have multiple selves that are not always in harmony (Goldberg 2007:124). He found that a number of social influences affected disclosure, especially people's interpretations of their immediate context, for instance the presence or absence of homophobia. It is true that these adults live in a time when matters of gay rights and gay parenting are openly and frequently discussed in the media. It is also true that attitudes to gay rights are becoming more and more tolerant. However, Goldberg found that many participants in his survey disclosed their parents' lesbian, gay or bisexual identities even when the audience was potentially negative. They disclosed in the context of educating others, because they wanted to be authentic and be able to identify potential allies (2007:123).

6.3.3 Christian and ethical views

Du Plessis (1999:48) maintains that neither homo- nor heterosexuality is *per se* moral or immoral. Rather, the morality of a person's life depends on whether it is rooted in the context of a responsible and moral life style. The gender of those in a loving sexual relationship is less important than the kind of relationship maintained

between them. He is amazed at the number of gay people who have 'kept the faith' in the face of persistent discrimination from Christian churches. He quotes Gary Lamont, gay minister, who says that gays should no longer ask the Church to accept them, because they are the Church. Having so many gay members, the Church is, amongst other things, already gay (1999:48).

Die Hervormer, a church paper (2003:4), asks whether, considering current findings in the human sciences, testimonies of gays themselves and exegesis, homosexuality is like so many other things in life, a mystery. Perhaps it is something for which we will never have a final answer, because there are so many explanations for it. The conclusion of the article lists four points on a broard Biblical basis. First, it says that the Bible describes marriage between male and female as the natural and normal way in which God created humans and in which sexuality is played out. Secondly, hermeneutical arguments and exegesis point out that the Bible, if taken in its entirety, condemns homosexuality. Thirdly, the Bible is against all forms of promiscuity, lust and immorality. Lastly, the writer says that the Church cannot and will not close its doors to certain people, because God loves the sinner. A new life in Christ is possible when an individual travels along the road of repentance and forgiveness. The alternative is death. The theme of acceptance for the homosexual, but rejection of his/her active homosexual lifestyle, is prevalent in the Christian Church. Du Toit (1994) points out that the Church has a definite responsibility both to be a social home for gays, and to prevent them from being entangled in all kinds of subcultures. The question is, however: Would homosexuals feel they were in the bosom of their family when the clan expects them to renounce their sexuality, an integral part of their identity, and equate it with sin? Homosexuals argue that, even if they wanted to, it would be impossible to abandon their sexual orientation as if it were simply a bad habit. They maintain that sexuality is in a different category from sins like hate, anger, murder, covetousness and unbelief.

Van Wyk (2004:13) holds that, at this juncture, the Church should acknowledge the necessity of listening seriously and respectfully to what homosexuals are trying to convey about the pain, rejection and loneliness they and their families experience sitting in the pews. He reminds the Church that the gospel grants us

the full privilege of being humble, and that Jesus was far less concerned with the law than he was with recognising opportunities to show compassion. Dreyer (2004:200) argues that Jesus does not include the marginalised in his Church just because they are on the margin, but because the gospel stresses the inclusiveness of God's mercy. All who believe are equal in the eyes of God. Dreyer cautions against the argument 'look to the person rather than the act', because it seems to perpetuate the dualism that undermines the oneness of body, soul and spirit. The question also arises as to whether the Church is more concerned about how a loving relationship between people is physically expressed than the fact that the relationship itself mirrors something of the love of Christ.

Geyser (2002:1675) maintains that the inclusive love of God ought to be the starting point of theological reflection on homosexuality. He focuses on existing exegetical research within the framework of four categories of literature texts in which references to same-sex behaviour are found. These include legal texts, narrative passages, lists or catalogues and creation reports. He proposes that the first thing to be placed on the table when the issue of homosexuality is discussed should be the bias with which texts are read and people judged. Secondly, he is concerned about the way in which the Church conveys God's message, fearing that this goes towards rendering irrelevant the good intentions of love and kindness. He suggests that a certain kind of hermeneutical approach be implemented, whereby not only Scripture is taken into account, but also the texts of those who have had first-hand, lived experiences of the issue. In the latter instance he points out that, in order to reflect sensibly on the issue of homosexuality, other disciplines, such as psychology, medicine and education, should be consulted.

Some theologians are less willing to accommodate the homosexual lifestyle as a valid relationship option within the Church, even if they are long-standing, monogamous relationships. Francis McNutt (2006:40), founding director of Christian Healing Ministries in Jacksonville, says that the Church should repent of its past harshness to homosexuals. However, it cannot accept the gay activist position that the homosexual orientation is genetic and unchangeable, as both scientific evidence and his personal experience as a minister of healing prayer

indicate the opposite. He has seen phenomenal results in the healing of homosexuals. Ervin Lutzer, theologian and minister, agrees, saying God's people should defend marriage as a covenant designed between God, man and woman (2004:51). He sees the current openness and activism of gays as part of a strategy of deception to convince straight people that homosexual unnaturalness is natural. The increase in same-sex marriage is a dangerous threat to the natural order that God intended in marriages, families and society. Lutzer's personal experience is that many gay and lesbian people have been hurt as children, molested or neglected and that their homosexuality is a compulsive act to hide their pain (2004:37). He has personally helped many people through prayer, repentance and the healing power of Jesus to break away from homosexuality, who are now living as heterosexuals.

De Villiers (2006:186) argues for reforming the Christian approach to the contentious issue of morally evaluating homosexuality in general, and the homosexual relationship in particular. He foresees that such an approach would allow Christians to avoid the trap of either blindly opposing homosexuality as an unnuanced, conservative evaluation or uncritically accepting it as an unnuanced progressive agreement. De Villiers points out that the moral evaluations of homosexuality formed by Christians are shaped by four pivotal crossroads: their dominant emotion about homosexuality and their views on the causes of homosexuality; the possibility of being healed of such a tendency; their views on the nature of the authority and role of the Bible in terms of texts about homosexuality in particular and current moral issues in general; and their views on the extent to which traditional Church beliefs on human sexuality are still morally valid today.

It is highly likely that Christians would strongly oppose homosexuality if they had a strong aversion to, even disgust for homosexuals, or if they believed that homosexuality is a learned disposition and therefore curable, either with psychological intervention or with faith healing. The latter alternative means that the homosexual would have to confess his sins and, with the grace of God, turn his back on his old ways. Christians would also strongly oppose homosexuality if they were convinced that all moral Biblical guidelines are literally applicable in

today's society and if they accepted that only in marriage can sexuality be expressed, and that marriage is per definition heterosexual. On the other hand, it is equally likely that Christians would be extremely positive about homosexuality if their views reflected the antithesis of all these beliefs.

De Villiers cautions that neither of these two extremes is helpful or acceptable in finding a solution to the issue of homosexuality in the Church, and that the least acceptable way out of the dilemma would be to simply play it safe and tread the middle path. Rather he proposes that Christians should be guided by the kind of neighbourly love that Jesus showed. That means showing respect for the homosexual and applying the concept of fairness in terms of the ways in which they can express their sexuality as full human beings. Secondly, Christians should be willing to accept scientific, medical and psychological facts relating to homosexuality, even if these do not concur with their own spiritual beliefs. He cautions against the dangers of relativistic and fundamentalist points of view on the authority of the Bible. Christians should not focus blindly on the few Bible texts that seem to condemn homosexuality, and in the process miss the wider picture of the Christian tradition that says sexuality must be expressed in the space of a marriage in which two people adhere to certain values. Could homosexuals who are willing to form lifelong, monogamous relationships, adhering to Christian values, find a space to express their love in a 'marriage' that the Church is willing to acknowledge? Clearly, a culture of discussion and kindness is needed to come closer to fair and sensible answers (De Villiers 2006:197).

6.4 The last act: the making of a happy family

Samuel, Tienie and their daughters are a family. Not a family that expanded in the natural and normal way between a husband and wife, where pregnancy after pregnancy produces their biological children. This family is different. Very different indeed from the notion society used to have of what a family should look like even forty years ago. This is a homosexual partnership. Those words alone have the capacity to disqualify their relationship as not only wrong, but sinful. Now add the following: this is a homosexual partnership that fathers two adopted daughters. It makes them a family. Some people respect their family and are delighted for them.

Some people would not even want to call this a family. They might, perhaps, say that it is not a family - it's just a shame. Others might say to Samuel and Tienie, 'You have such a special, delightful family', but behind their backs fear for the psychological well-being of all involved, including the wellness of a society that allows such relationship units. It is the researcher's opinion that families like theirs are here to stay, whether society and the Church like it or not. Or the school board. Or the neighbours, for that matter.

Samuel and Tienie know something about families. They have learned much from their families of origin. That it is hard to be poor, and hard to be one of many, many children, because you get only a little attention. That you have to share even the little that you have. That you have to put yourself in your family members' shoes. That you have to love and forgive, and laugh at yourself. That you have to work very hard, and that life doesn't owe you anything just because you've arrived on the planet. That God has made you different from the rest of your siblings. That He loves you, and gives you wisdom along the way. That Christ is unfathomable, but good, at the same time a mystery, and one who answers prayers in the form of beautiful, precious, little daughters. They know that families are never quite perfect, even if you have all the right, normal and natural ingredients, like a man and a woman and their biological children who all love each other. They know, they come from such families. Samuel and Tienie understand that family is about a circle of people who choose to live closely together with all their different human foibles, and who care deeply, respectfully and practically about each other, who give each other room to grow, and to make mistakes. They believe above all, in the power of love.

What is a family? Müller (2002:15) proposes the metaphor of storying culture or an interpreting community. It is seen as a group of people who, within a particular context, understand and interpret their lives. The same metaphors, symbols, expressions and narratives inform them. Such a storying culture (family) tells stories about themselves, who they are, where they come from and where they hope to go. Families change, and have changed tremendously over the thousands of years of human history. Müller says, instead of blindly defining or following the ideal family in terms of objective norms of family structures and family models, the

question is rather: Does the storying culture of a particular family facilitate the basic Christian values of love, respect, and care for the others (2002:17)? Müller says the neatly worked-out theological theory of marriage, with the roles of husband and wife mirroring the relationship between Christ and the Church, is miles from the practical reality (2002:37).

Fundamentalism betrays Christianity, says Bruce Bawer. He accuses James Dobson (of *Focus on the Family* fame), Pat Robertson and others of being completely bent on projecting an image of wholesome, happy family life (Bawer 1997:324). They embrace ideal pictures, and pretend that they live in an Andy Hardy movie, where dads are always strong and hardworking, moms always loving and admiring, boys always interested in cars and sports, and girls always sweet and quiet and on their way to become perfect homemakers. Things like adolescent junkies, teenage pregnancies, gay offspring and alcoholic wives do not exist in their Norman Rockwell picture. The trouble is, says Bawer, that fundamentalists connect evil with anything that does not fit the bill of the wholesome family and their designated roles (that barely exist, given the high divorce rate, and the fact that people no longer adhere to stereotypes). He says fundamentalists are aggressively opposed to homosexuality and perpetuate a culture of blame in the Church, holding homosexuals responsible for various social ills. In addition, their mere presence signifies the demise of the good order and offers proof that the end times are near. The answer to homosexuality, according to Dobson, is to simply accept Jesus as your saviour, and he will help you change. The homosexual can have a happy ending: by transforming into a heterosexual s/he can get married and have a family (Bawer 1997:255). Bawer thinks this could be extremely cruel to both parties in the marriage, because, in the end, it means embracing a lie: trying, for the sake of acceptance in heaven and on earth, to be what you are not. He quotes Hans Küng, who says the decisive factor for Christian action, Christian ethics and Christian practice is Jesus as the normative, concrete person, and not the relative unimportance of doctrine.

Samuel and Tienie have made a gay and happy family. They have constructed a family story in which they live out their belief that love – mere love – is really what it is all about. They see Jesus as the one who has utterly transformed their lives,

not only by his death on the cross, but by his gift of granting them children. To them, homosexuality means much more than just experiencing sexual attraction to another person of the same sex; it is to feel the same sense of comfort, rightness and wholeness in a same-sex relationship that a straight person feels in an opposite-sex relationship (Bawer 1997:254).

Although the curtain is beginning to fall on this particular act on the parenthood of Tienie and Samuel, the play is not over.

In Chapter 7 the narratives of Helga and James will be presented. An artistic, bohemian couple, they suffered three miscarriages before deciding to live a childfree marriage.

CHAPTER 7

HARVEST SONG OF HELGA AND JAMES: FROM MISCARRIAGE TO VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS

This chapter presents the narratives of Helga and James on their experiences with infertility and miscarriage. They chose to postpone having children until both had reached thirty, but their pregnancies ended in three miscarriages in eighteen months. After that they consciously decided to stop trying to become pregnant. They now have a childfree marriage, at the same time enjoying the children in their circle of friends and family. The main themes of their discussions with the researcher, during which they revealed their ideas, beliefs and experiences about childlessness, are shared with the reader. These include the dissimilarities in their responses to the miscarriages, the meaning they attach to having a full, rich life and reflections on powerful discourses on parenting. Relevant topics developing from these main themes are included to expand and amplify the story, including ideas on women and blood issues, and the role of ritual in addressing reproductive loss. Westerfield-Tucker's (2002) arguments for using the metaphor of adoption as a primary, preferred figure of speech instead of, or at least alongside, the metaphor of procreation to define fruitfulness in a Biblical context, as well as designing prayers and rituals for use in the experience of infertility will be presented.

7.1 The narrative

Helga and James have been married for twenty years. On the autumn day of their wedding, she wore a grey-white leather wedding dress with a headpiece fashioned out of deep purple roses in full bloom. He wore a striped suit as an English gentleman would. This was a very alternative cocktail of a ceremony and subsequent marriage, but it was a mix of all the right ingredients. Helga and James is a bohemian, imaginative, artistic couple. The researcher found their house to be a treasure trove of complementary and opposite colours, textures, spaces, patterns, pictures and shapes, a house that was forever changing. James would leave for work in the morning, and find on his return in the late afternoon that Helga had painted the stairs a different colour or had added dots to the

triangles on the kitchen cupboards. Even the structure of the house looks like a mockery of Newtonian laws. Helga is a painter, a wonderful creature. She is a combination of weirdness and fluidity, but, at the same time, she seems to be planted in solid earth like a familiar, age-old coral tree. The salt of the earth: what you see is what you get. Truth to tell, she is also magnificent, a tall, olive-skinned Amazon, with thick, wavy, auburn hair, a woman who laughs like a child, and paints like a goddess. Her husband, James, once said to me: 'You know, beautiful people like Helga experience the world differently', as if she belonged to an unusual species. Considering her artistic talents and exquisite uniqueness, I couldn't help thinking it was a shame that her genes would not be passed on. Then I smiled at myself for my typical response: falling for the idea that the strong, the attractive, the talented and the intelligent are more valuable to society, somehow inherently more worthy. James is a professional man, working hard during the day in an eight to five job, but he detached himself long ago from the idea of a fixed outlook. In his free time, he 'potters' around at home. He paints (and abandons his creations after a time, because 'I have to move on, otherwise I will keep on reworking it, ad infinitum'). He makes movies, writes prose, plays his guitar and prepares 'slow' food. He believes in grace and he loves Helga.

7.1.1 Theme 1: responses and resolutions to miscarriage

Helga and James consciously decided to delay starting a family, resisting the wave of baby frenzy that overtook many of their friends and contemporaries shortly after marriage. There were even times when Helga and James more or less resolved not to have children. From the beginning, they never felt they needed to 'make children' to seal their marriage. They never thought their lives as individuals and partners would lack fullness or depth if children were left out of the picture.

At one stage, when they were thirty-something, they decided to try for a baby. At that time Helga was working on her first exhibition. Her body giving her signs that she was possibly pregnant pleased and amused her. It was also an impetus to work even harder to finish her paintings in time. She did not go for a medical check-up to confirm whether she was indeed pregnant. She just sensed it and enjoyed the fact that life was growing inside her. When she miscarried a few

weeks later, it was both a confirmation of the pregnancy and a rude reminder of how fragile new life can be. The miscarriage was a traumatic time for her. She felt exceedingly alone and describes the situation as one in which 'James wasn't emotionally involved; he didn't understand what I was going through'. Although she had not been bent on becoming a mother, by the time she was pregnant she wanted the baby with every cell in her body. After the loss of life, she was perpetually angry.

The second miscarriage took place during the next pregnancy. A few months went by, and then she fell pregnant again. The third spontaneous abortion happened at four months, just when she thought she had had made it through the vulnerable stage. 'Everything was there already, it was a real baby.' James says her body took a hammering. They agree that the main difference in their responses to the miscarriages was the fact that James always missed the sonar showing the heart beat. Helga saw the heart pumping with life. And she 'felt the little heart beating under her own heart'. Being pregnant awakened a primeval force in her that made her want to protect her child, give birth to it; nurture it. She allowed herself to be present in the future of this child.

After experiencing the raw edges of loss they decided that they were simply too old and set in their ways to have children. Even if Helga were to fall pregnant again, and manage to keep the pregnancy, she would have to undergo an amniocentesis test. She did not want to be faced with having to decide on the fate of a less than perfect baby. Neither did Helga feel she could deal with intrusive IVF procedures, and the possibility of multiple births. It would not be fair to have so many children at once, they thought. And how would she cope if she had to abort one or two if she expected triplets or quadruplets. Although she is disappointed and angry, and still grieves over her lost babies, she is now philosophical. This is how it is with children: you can't always choose what you want. James and Helga are now childless by choice.

James is far less affected by the miscarriages and the reality that they will, as a couple, indeed remain childless. He has never felt a strong desire to have children anyway. In his twenties and thirties, he thought it was wonderful not having them.

Now in his forties, he can say it is great. Being childless does not mean loss or a damaged identity. What he values is his freedom and his good relationship with his wife. Joking, he says he can spend all his money on their needs and dreams. He is truly content with his life right now.

Helga dreams a lot and always has done: she is a seasoned dreamer. For instance, she often dreams that she is saving animals in distress, or children who are in trouble. A week before a near tragedy during a family holiday, she dreamt that she rescued her brother's little boy from drowning. And that is exactly the way it happened a few days later. They were on holiday with the extended family at a small seaside resort. The children were playing on a tube in the river, when little John slipped off. She was the first of the adults to react when he started shouting for help. She sprinted across the wooden deck and swam like crazy to pull him out of the water. After the miscarriages she repeatedly dreams that she is giving birth to small, very white tissue-type babies, drenched in blood. They always stay small, she says, like Thumbelina. They are real little Thumbelinas. Helga says she doesn't know what it is like to have a child, but she is holding onto the experience of the love that she felt the very first time she became aware that she was pregnant. She knows how that love simply overwhelmed her. She will never forget it.

7.1.2 Theme 2: Living a fruitful life

Helga and James feel they have been blessed in countless ways. They greatly appreciate the knowledge that God deeply loves them, that they are alive, and that they can pray for and receive wisdom for themselves and others. Wisdom becomes possible when you are taken out of your comfort zone. It is never learnt directly, but always throws you a curved ball. And it often involves hurt, thinks Helga, but is always worthwhile. James is fascinated by the paradox of life and death. It brings wholeness and purpose, and it makes sense. The moment you receive life you are challenged to let go, leave something behind and accept your losses, he says. In short, with your feet planted in Life, you start to die in different ways, for different reasons, which leads to new avenues previously unattainable and unforeseen. Sometimes, surrendering to the deaths rather than having them forced on you, brings greater opportunities for growth, change and hope. James

shared an example of the two of them 'dying to themselves in their marriage' which lead to renewed vigour and a reappraisal of their marriage. He recounts how one day, in her anger and frustration with him, Helga called him from their bedroom, and said: 'Come sit next to me on this marriage bed of ours, and listen how I say to you that I don't think I want to have your children, because you don't do right by me.' James said that fortunately Wisdom took hold of him, in spite of his initial impulse to retaliate. He decided to act with grace and humility, and to really listen to Helga's fury and hurt. That event, which potentially could have irreparably destroyed their union, became, in fact, one of the most life-giving, decisive moments in their relationship, propelling them forward together.

In answer to the question as to why they thought they had been born into this world, Helga jokes that in their case it was not 'to multiply and fill the earth'. She doesn't think she would have been a particularly good mother, but feels rather that she is here to learn to love unconditionally. She wants to become more and more non-judgmental. At the moment, she says, she is still judging those who judge, and she has to release that now.

Being an artist, a painter, she lives closely with her creative drives. She says that without God's inspiration her art would be lifeless, despite her carefully honed techniques. She never specifically paints themes like birth, ripening or fertility. However, her work is alive with being and spirit. Individually and together James and Helga construct their selves and their environment, sometimes laboriously, but usually and purposefully with growth and ripening in mind. For them, to love and care for children is only one of many ways in which to taste life in its fullness. In fact they are concerned about the possible perception that there is only one category of couples 'who can't have children'. There are, in fact, many different groups with different chronicles of infertility. Besides, the various stories seem to mutate as time takes care of them, and they become stories within stories.

James and Helga's story of infertility gave birth to many accounts in different shapes, and most are in full bloom. For instance, they do not perceive their marriage as dry and barren because they are without children. James and Helga's marriage continuously gives birth to seeds of life that the Creator intends for

growth. However, the responsibility for watering those seeds belongs to them. Some of the seeds include: a settled, calm life; an interesting, creative existence; a special identity of two people who are 'one', despite the fact that there is no child factor to hold them together; time and energy to do what interests them. The seeds have also given birth to a language of humour and grace, and a stack of home movies that depicts their love of nature, holidays, families and self-development. One of the seeds gave direction to an old dream from their youth: to travel and see the world. It came to fruition by moving to a European country where they now live and work. They literally have a new life, and enjoy the best that Africa and Europe can offer. They insist that there is no 'mould' into which the infertile fit. They are not depressed or sad because of their childlessness. They have moved on; they have left their disappointments and grief behind. They are happy and childfree, not happy despite being childfree. There is no need to pity them, to think, what choice did they have? They have accepted that this is the way it is. No, it is more than acceptance. They have taken on 'childfreeness'. They carry it within them, and in turn it holds them, bears them and takes them to a particular life they would never have known if they had had children. Helga thinks they will bear the consequences of childlessness for the rest of their lives. She will bear it differently from James, though, because she is the one who saw the heartbeat on the sonar, and she felt the little heart thumping under her own heart. But there again, being childfree suits her.

7.1.3 Theme 3: Reflections on relevant discourses

The discourse that *men should play the role of protector and supporter in the event of their suffering a miscarriage* is very strong. James feels that men are overlooked when it comes to tea and sympathy about their partner's miscarriages. The focus is mainly on the woman. It is her womb, her pregnancy and, to a great extent, her loss. A great deal of attention (rightly) focuses on her, while her husband tries to support her as best he can. While his wife often needs to submerge herself in grief and bewilderment for a long time, the man would like the crying to stop after a reasonable period, and feels he ought to do something about it. Devastated as he is, he tries to take his mind off the matter by planning the next step. Unfortunately, either she herself or other people blame the woman (or her body) for the miscarriage. James points out that male magazines tend to focus on

muscles and sex, not infertility and miscarriages. Men are not prepared. Articles like that are for women's publications. Besides, one can't be prepared for a miscarriage, and when it happens it is alien territory.

James, by choice, stands outside the father-team that so highly prizes sons. He feels the strong discourse that says *a man badly wants a son* is perhaps a little inflated and overrated. However, a son carries the family name, and a youthful adult son literally reflects the aging father in presenting a younger image of himself. James says men are not only hunters, they're also planters. They need to leave their mark in the form of a family because of their drive for immortality and structure. Although he stands outside of that, he can understand that, for a man who wants children (and most do), infertility must be devastating.

The discourse that proclaims, *if you don't want to have children you are selfish, and disobedient to God's plan,* is nonsensical as far as James and Helga are concerned. Does having children prove to society and yourself that you are selfless, or are you simply left with little choice but to care as best you can for your own offspring lest the Welfare admonish you, your conscience and parental instinct torment you, or your children hate you? Helga asks whether 'selfless' to some people could mean to 'literally store' your life and identity in your children's living space. Far more sad and pathetic than some childless person pining for years after an unattainable child are parents who 'become their children's lives, and disappear from their own'.

In reaction to the argument maintaining *that your children will look after you in your old age,* Helga smiled. She said she is quite sure that she will be able to look after herself, or, if she can't, the paid staff in the old age home will happily do so. The sad truth is that some of the elderly living in rooms, homes and retirement villages are not visited and loved by their children. Often ignored, and neglected, their loss is so much greater if the children they do have do not care enough, she said, or when the meaningful relationship the elderly parents wish for is not likewise returned by their children. Helga enjoys and appreciates her large family, parents, cousins, brothers and nieces, and there are precious things in her house that she sentimentally feels her brother's children ought to inherit one day. However,

children are no insurance against loneliness or the realities of old age, although a close-knit family can surely help to make it sweeter, she thinks.

The reflecting team asked a number of interesting questions. They wondered whether James and Helga would have decided to stop trying to fall pregnant if they had not had the choice. In other words, if they had been informed that they were to be involuntarily childless, would that have influenced their responses differently? The couple definitely felt that having a choice, albeit limited, in the matter made them feel less helpless than they would otherwise have done. They knew they could 'keep on trying' if they wanted to, because Helga did at least fall pregnant, unlike some infertile couples who were unable to manage even that.

The team also reflected on the way in which Helga and James managed to shift their focus away from wanting to have biological children to caring for their animals, and acknowledging the importance of children in their lives. Far from being second best, these so-called 'substitutes' for their own children have a new, valued place in the modified structure of their creative lives. They now look differently at the children present in their lives.

As Helga is 'a painter and a dreamer', the reflecting team wanted to know if and how her reproductive losses find expression in her art. She said that she hardly ever, in a deliberate and realistic way, intends to paint anything 'out of her system', no matter what it is. Art is a combination of premeditated and unintentional processes, and she would be forcing a course of action if she tried that.

The researcher was curious as to whether Helga and James wanted to express their emotions about the miscarriages in ritual form. Had they designed their own ways and means of dealing with their losses, or do they perhaps look to their church to offer symbol and ritual that would help them convey their pain and new identity as a childfree couple? They hadn't contemplated any such ritual, they said. However, they saw their emigration to a European country as a new life opening up for them. Symbolically speaking, they could interpret it as a new birth for their marriage. Helga spontaneously gave the researcher a painting. As she was preparing to leave after the second interview, Helga took the painting off the wall.

It depicted a cross, made up of different painted leaves, with a feathery look. Light and unstructured, as if it could float, the two axes are nearly the same length. Right in the middle is a blood-red heart, decorated around the edges with studs. Looking at the painting again today, the researcher wondered if the red heart in the middle had anything to do with the beating heart Helga saw on the sonar. James gave the researcher a copy of a poem that had meant a lot to him during the time of the miscarriages. It is Charl Jooste's '*Detailalmag*', describing the Creator's pleasure in putting small (and humorous) detail on His handiwork, by playing with feathers, fins, beaks and horns of all shapes and sizes. In addition, James added two home movies (or, as he calls them, 'moewies') he had produced as his gift to the researcher. He had specifically chosen one particular movie he said, because, 'it shows how we interact with children'. The movie had been shot on the family holiday when the near-drowning incident took place. Someone on the reflecting team mentioned that Helga's dreams about saving children could mean that she believes she has a lot to give children. Whether they are her own or not, she could be, amongst other things, a mother to them.

In Chapter 9, the chapter on reflection, the researcher will expand on the gifts she received from the rest of the co-researchers.

7.2 Dimensions of meaning

Certain areas of significance that grew out of Helga and James' narratives will be discussed in greater depth.

7.2.1 Women and blood: menstruation and miscarriage

7.2.1.1 Menstruation

In this thesis narrative, the womb is ever present, in its corporal form as the gestational location and carrier of a new human being, or as a mystical sacred sphere representing spiritual power and cyclical reproduction and renewal. It has been called 'a sacred place where life is nurtured at its most vulnerable stages' (Hunt 1984:276). The womb has two faces: the mother and the 'unmother', the protector and the refuser. The womb brings forth life, and, at the same time, is a bleeding organ.

The womb or uterus is shaped like a pear or a fig, with the stalk tilted down into the vagina. The uterus, says, Kitzinger (1983:46), is not just a bag hanging there, it is a living network of muscle fibres which, although not under conscious control, tightens and releases regularly in response to certain stimuli and at special times. This process of ebb and flow, folding and unfolding, opening and closing takes place during the menstrual cycle and probably during orgasm. During pregnancy the uterus regularly contracts as a kind of dress rehearsal for the birth event. The uterus also tightens when the breasts are stimulated, which is why the uterus contracts during breast-feeding, and is toned in the process, so that it returns quickly to its previous shape and size.

Hidden from sight as the uterus is, tucked away in the body's mysterious cavity like a purple sea in the centre of the earth, most women probably have a much better mental picture of what their wombs look like than the literal image of their genital organs. Eve Ensler, author of *The vagina monologues* (described by *Variety* as 'both a work of art and an incisive piece of cultural history, a poem and a polemic, a performance and a balm and a benediction') writes wittily, but movingly about women's experiences of their sexuality. 'In the first place it's not so easy to even find your vagina. Women go weeks, months, sometimes years without looking at it. I interviewed a high-powered businesswoman who told me she was too busy; she didn't have the time. Looking at your vagina she said, is a full day's work. You have to get down there on your back in front of a mirror standing independently, full-length preferred. You've got to get in the perfect position, with the perfect light, which then is shadowed somehow by the mirror and the angle you're at. You get all twisted up. You're arching your head up, killing your back. You're exhausted by then. She said she didn't have the time for that. She was busy' (1998:4). Humorous as it sounds, many women would recognise the irony that although they are cyclically reminded of the functioning of their wombs, which takes up anything from a seventh to a fifth of their adult lives until the menopause, its secrets are carefully concealed, and the female genital organs half veiled by its tilted configuration. No wonder women are called mysterious beings.

From time immemorial, says Germaine Greer (2003:53), the womb has been associated with trouble. Many women die of illnesses of these reproductive organs that they have ignored virtually most of their lives. In the South African context, it is a tragedy that more than 3400 women die every year from cervical cancer (CANSA 2008). Until the twentieth century the pathology of *hysteria* in Europe, as a form of fantasy of the womb, was prevalent. It was believed that the *hysteria* (at first called the *mother*) manifested itself as the wandering womb that rose up into a girl or a woman's throat and choked her. It was generally believed that unmarried women and widows suffer the most from *hysteria*, and that a good husband could fix the problem. Anatomists of that era, adhering to a strange theory of pelvic congestion, believed the womb was 'charged with blood and stale seed from whence arise foul and ill-conditioned damps' (Greer 2003:55). Some doctors believed that the womb was somehow a part of every illness among the female sex.

Some of the other 'terrifying' functions of the womb, for instance childbirth, have been medically researched, understood and brought under control, especially during the twentieth century. The clinical way in which gynaecology and obstetrics rendered the labouring mother a patient who had to lie down and take a passive role, has been criticised by feminists as a way in which mostly male doctors, stripped a woman of her control while giving birth. It isolated her from female support (midwives) during the birth process, even ridiculously separating her from her own infant for hours after the birth, rationing her instinct to breast feed and hold her baby. The conventional half lying or sitting position to give birth is probably the worst in mechanical terms. Making no use of the force of gravity, it leads to a lot of wasted energy. It is, however, the most convenient position for the obstetrician (the Latin *obsto*, means 'I stand in front', and the word 'obstacle' come from the same root) for the use of instruments (Odent 1985:71). The so-called 'natural childbirth movement' offers some modification (Laird 1991:130). Frederick Leboyer's book *Birth without violence* revealed him to be a poet-obstetrician, one who took into account the feelings and emotions, the meanings and atmosphere of the process of birth. In the process, he also enraged many in the medical establishment (Odent 1985:20). However, the need to consider the needs and instincts of mother and baby, and to make childbirth more of a family affair, took

hold. Fathers were allowed into delivery rooms and the value of the parents' touching and speaking to the newborn were dearly recognised. It was not only the mechanics of birthing that received attention, but also the atmosphere, which should be conducive to a good birth experience.

Greer points out that 'the most pervasive and magnificent manifestation of that atavistic fear about the womb is in the common attitude towards menstruation' (2003:56). Society appears to have only three ways of addressing menstruation: the vulgar resentful (*the curse*), the genteel (*I've got my period*, or *I'm indisposed*) and the scientific jargon (*the menses).* Within the Moslem, Hindu and Mosaic faiths, women are regarded as unclean during menstruation, and seclude themselves for a time. This discourse of 'dirtiness' reverberates in the female fear of leaving any trace of staining or odour while menstruating, resulting in a purifying operation of huge proportions. They are constantly advised 'to cleanse, douche, and perfume their private parts, presumably once again as a reminder of their polluting properties' (Laird 1991:134).

Kendrick puts it like this: 'So we bleed. There just isn't any way of getting around it. Women bleed. We bleed in secrecy, for the shame surrounding the monthly flow of blood is still virulent' (1994:145). She maintains that menstruation, the mystery of a woman's bleeding, has been historically shamed to such a degree that the menstrual experience is seen as wrong and indecent. This perception touches women at the heart of their beings. It influences their personal and social identities and dictates how they introduce their daughters, generation after generation, to womanhood. Female embodiment includes menstruation, and the cultural and personal myths and feelings associated with female bleeding are central to the understanding of female psychology and spirituality. Kendrick describes a girl's first menstruation as the start of an embodiment of pretence: we deny that we bleed, or that we are bleeding at this very moment. We pretend not to bleed. Furthermore, menstruation is negatively judged and experienced: the first flow of our menstrual cycles is not properly celebrated within the context of our womanhood. It has a bad name: it causes cramping and discomfort, it could be detected if all traces were not wiped out diligently, and it stands in the way of sexual intercourse. It is used as a tool to devalue and joke about women's position

on something: 'Stay out of her way today, brother, she has 'pms'!' Overall there hangs a weird, shameful silence in the cultural air about one of the most critical aspects of what sets us apart as women.

If the structures of menstrual taboo were to be overthrown, a new understanding of human and divine reality could be reached. Nelson (in Kendrick 1994:149) argues that the way in which people experience their embodiment and sexuality informs the way in which they attempt to live out their faith, and the way in which they understand their humanness and 'participate in the reality of God'. It seems that there is ample room for the God-given event of menstruation to be re-interpreted as a life process in a creative and truthful way to help heal the historical, social, religious, gender injustice towards the bleeding female identity. There are possibilities of replacing the negative images of blood flow that permeate the understandings of female embodiment and spirituality. One striking metaphor of 'passage' is used to describe spirituality, connecting it to their menstruation experience: 'Before all else, women's spirituality depends on an open passage within, a free channel for the flow of life and the creative birthing of a continually renewed self' (1994:149). In addition, the meaning of blood as life and deep sharing are focused on, as well as the fact that in both women's blood and Jesus' blood the creative tension of joy and pain are held together. In using such a hopeful metaphor of passage, the power and sacredness of blood are highlighted and the shameful inconvenience that blood brings is cast away. The likelihood of life, of powerful creativity that menstruation promises, seems to be a reflection of the shed blood of Jesus, birthing and bursting into resurrection power.

Luke 8:43-48 tells the story of a woman who, for twelve years, had suffered from a flow of blood and had spent all her finances upon physicians, but nobody could heal her. She came up behind Jesus in the midst of a crowd and quietly, but hopefully, touched the fringe of His garment, and immediately her blood flow ceased. Jesus perceived that healing power had gone out from him, and he stopped. The trembling woman realised that she had been noticed. Simultaneously afraid and elated, she found the courage to declare in front of everyone present the embarrassing reason she had touched him, a rabbi, and how she had been instantly cured. From the Jewish perspective, this is a very

destructive ailment. She had experienced rejection from her own people and almost certainly, self-repugnance. Jewish Law declared such a person unclean, condemned to a secluded life. Leviticus 15:19-30 refers to the condition of a woman having her 'regular discharge of blood from her body', and the fact that it rendered her unclean, as requiring her to separate herself for seven days because everyone or everything she touched, sat or lay on also became unclean. She was avoided, an outcast. For instance, she wouldn't have been tolerated in the women's section of the synagogue on the Sabbath.

Jewish leaders tended to see a causal relationship between illness and sin. Her condition placed her under suspicion: what sin had she committed? The fact that her illness had lasted twelve years probably made others declare her a hopeless case. Possibly she had a very lonely existence. Kept at a distance, and expelled to the fringes of community life, somewhat like a leper, she was constantly reminded that she was unclean, untouchable and different. If she had a husband, he would not have been allowed even to touch her. For one hundred and forty four months, blood had flowed from her body, weakening her physical strength and devouring her financial and emotional resources. In the light of her suffering, it is remarkable that her faith was still holding out. Equally remarkable for the crowds must have been Jesus' response, because rabbis were not allowed to speak to a woman in public, not even their own wives, daughters or sisters, because it could jeopardise their good name. Some Pharisees, who could not bear even to 'see' a woman walking in the street, would shut their eyes and blindly walk into walls or houses. Women, that species that was not to be laid eyes on, were sometimes referred to as the 'bruised and bleeding Pharisees' (Karssen 1987:80).

But this desperate woman reached out to the Rabbi. Jesus, who has now also become 'unclean' because of her touch, acknowledged her presence, her need and suffering. Instead of scolding her for her presumptuousness, he restored her with the precious words: 'Daughter, your faith has made you well! Go (enter) into peace (untroubled, undisturbed well-being) (Luke 8:48). 'Daughter', he called her. Jesus deliberately renamed her as an unblemished, young girl. Daughter! He reconstructs a pure identity for her as if she was adolescent and pre-menstrual, and at the same time cloaks her with cleanness in her mature womanhood. Jesus

goes against the flow of tradition, rabbinical thinking and society's rebuff. He does not reject her in the least, either because she is a woman, or because she suffers from blood flow. Is she perhaps the only woman mentioned in Scripture who personally took the initiative for her own healing (Karssen 1987:81)? If Jesus judged her, it was according to her faith only. And to Him, that was more than acceptable.

Breaking free from the mantle of secrecy, Ntozake Shanga (in Kendrick 1994:49), an African American poet rejoices as follows:

> I've decided to wear my ovaries on my sleeve
> raise my poems on my milk
> and count my days by the flow of my menses
> The men who were poets were aghast
> they fled the scene in fear of becoming unclean

There is a tenacious belief that menstruation is associated with impurity and uncleanness, and in many societies women undergo elaborate purification rites at certain times, such as after childbirth or menstruation. However, some cultures associate menstruation with power, and their ritual, myth and folklore demonstrate the belief that the menstruating woman is dangerous, emitting a supernatural power (Laird 1991:134). Passages in the Hebrew Bible attest to a mysterious, even sacred power inherent in the blood: 'for the life (the animal soul) is in the blood and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls' (Leviticus 17:11).

In the Western world, the menstruating female is more often defined as 'sick', suffering from a syndrome, unstable and emotional, an unreliable worker and in need of isolation and rest (Laird 1991:135). The onset of menstruation is not regarded as a joyous and powerful rite of passage, but more often than not is accepted as something 'that happens to you'. In no way does it increase a young girl's sense of pride in her own body, enhance her sense of self-worth, or give her a 'symbolic framework within which to find resources for her questions of meaning' (Washburn, in Laird 1991:134). Naomi Wolf (1998:142) points out that in Western society 'becoming a woman' is often met with silence. Instead of older women

teaching the young ones 'the skills of seduction and sexuality, the responsibilities of both preventing and preparing for fecundity, the pleasures of adornment and of caring for our health, the art of balancing work and motherhood, the sacradness of femininity, or to test us rigorously in the skills we would need', there is silence. No trial by fire or water is to be found for such an important rite of passage, instead, girls concoct rituals in line with their vulnerability to the 'tests' of starving and grooming that magazines offer (Wolf 1998:142).

Another major transition in a woman's life is the menopause, also associated with menstruation. Like the latter, it has mainly negative connotations, ranging from hot flushes, through the empty nest syndrome to old age.

In contrast with Western views, the indigenous worldview of the Native American universe sees knowledge as a process of coming-to-knowing, which releases a special kind of power from the interactive relationship with the integrated wholeness of everything and everyone in the material and spiritual world. Life is seen as circular, where sickness and disease give way to healing, and where decay is balanced by renewal. It is a world in flux, not a persistent, unchanged world. Its worldview stresses obligations rather than rights, and ceremonies for renewal rather than destructive labelling. These presumptions help shape a different understanding of menstruation (Peat 1994:113). Thus, within this indigenous community a woman's period is celebrated as a time of great power, and is described as her 'moon'. She will be very careful about touching medicine or sacred objects, not because she would contaminate them, but because she is so powerful that it is believed her own spirit could overwhelm everything with which it came into contact. In this culture, where everything is connected and interrelated, the fertility within her body reflects the waxing and waning of the moon, as well as cycles of power. To the researcher, the powerful, creative likelihood that menstruation brings is a reflection of the shed blood of Jesus, birthing and bursting into resurrection power.

In light of the fact that menstruation, the marker of the onset of fertility, is so poorly reflected and celebrated, it is little wonder that the event of miscarriage continually evokes silence and embarrassment.

7.2.1.2 Miscarriage

Men generally tend to downplay the emotional and spiritual effects of grieving over a miscarriage or infertility (Distelberg & Helmeke 2006:231), but most of them feel that 'they and their wives went through this together'. However, in one sense a husband can never experience a miscarriage in the same way as his wife, because she is the one who carried and then physically lost the foetus (Grossoehme 1995:429). Miscarriage is surprisingly common, with 10 to 20 percent of known pregnancies ending in this loss. It is highly probable that many women become aware of this only after they have had a miscarriage. Many couples complain they were ill prepared for the likelihood of miscarriage, or the signs that such a loss may occur (Seaton 1996:40) and that their doctor should have warned them beforehand. However, the question could be raised as to whether patients might regard their doctors as inappropriate and insensitive. Furthermore, would warnings about the possibility of miscarriage in any real way lessen the shock and disappointment when it occurs? However, James and Kristiansen (1995:59) found that the more women blamed themselves or their doctor, the more severe was their reaction. Fortunately, Helga had a close relationship with her (female) doctor, who gave a great deal of emotional support when she was utterly vulnerable. She clearly felt that James did not understand the pain and turmoil she was going through. Madden (1994) cautions that it should not be assumed that all women are equally devastated by miscarriage, as both research and care provision perspectives have shown. To do that would amount to stereotyping women's reactions to reproductive issues and reduce pregnancy to a 'unidimensional experience that fails to reflect the richness of women's lives' (1994:101).

Miscarriage has profound physical, emotional and spiritual implications. It is described as the loss of a foetus before it has developed sufficiently to survive outside the uterus, occurring in about one out of six pregnancies (Seaton 1996:39). Even as little as twenty years ago, most physicians did not acknowledge the grieving process that followed miscarriage (which they would have done in the case of a stillborn baby), the assumption being that attachment to the foetus (baby) as a separate person does not begin until after quickening (feeling foetal

movement) in the womb (Stack 1984:162). Many women's experience, including Helga's, seems rather to be that the relationship with and attachment to the 'child' begins the moment they find out they are pregnant, irrespective of movement. The child exists in the mother's imagination, as well as in reality, and when a child is lost a dream dies as well. It is incredible but true that attachment to an imagined child often occurs even before the child is conceived (Westerfield-Tucker 1989:13).

Bleeding and expulsion of tissue are all the visible remnants of the expected child. The woman didn't realise that the end of pregnancy must include the delivery of the foetus or placenta (Seaton 1996:39). She was shocked by the intensity and length of time it took the contractions to empty her womb. Her body has lost control and the loss is happening to her, at her, against her (Hunt 1984:271) This, ironically, within the sights and sounds of the maternity wing, stunned her. She panicked and her immense aloneness seemed so much greater. While 'bodying forth' (Dubose 1997:366) her pregnancy was disappearing. In a few days there would be absolutely no sign that she had been the bearer of life. She had mis-carried her infant. She had now become the bearer of death. How could that be? She thought s/he was safe under her heart.

Having miscarried, says Dubose (1997:367) he and his wife were 'missing what would never be lived. Time, space and expectations of new ways of being with our child were in disarray'. He and his wife's bodies refused to let the child go. They tried to bring the vanished one back by seeing the baby in visions and dreams and smells and moments. They had to rebuild their self-in-the-world again, because they now found themselves in a different life world than the one they had inhabited before the miscarriage. They asked themselves repeatedly: Who are we now, now that the little body of bone, blood and tissue is gone?

The body is blamed for the miscarriage (Abboud & Liamputtong 2003:38). What did I do wrong for this to happen? The body feels like 'empty arms', and the woman often feels detached, as if she has unhinged herself from the body that could not or would not carry the pregnancy. It is as though she would like to set herself apart from her unreliable body in the same way that she has now been set

apart and excluded from the 'mother club'. At the same time, she just wants to hold her poor, bleeding, sorrowful body. Helga shared only a little about the actual process of the miscarriages she endured. Experiencing miscarriage rendered her voiceless, which alone spoke volumes. To her, it was simply terrible.

Serene Jones (2001:228) attempts to answer the question of what the body of the woman who has miscarried looks like in the space of God's unfolding grace. And who is this God who holds her body and her hope in the folds of this grace? As a woman and a minister, Jones is interested in women who want to have biological children, but are unable to do so. They see their bodily inability as failure, and they experience profound loss. However, human hope is tenacious, 'always multiple, conflicted, and persistently indeterminate' (Jones 2001:230). Sometimes we are not even aware of its presence, because we think we have given up, but it is still there. These hopeful women include those who suffer from infertility, have had miscarriages or experienced stillbirth. Jones places the value of 'motherhood' and 'production' within powerful cultural assumptions, which assess women's bodies in terms of the 'treasured capacity to give life', thereby 'making' someone a mother in order to fulfil the dominant gendered identity script. This script, though, allows for different forms, thanks to the advances of feminism. Living in a culture that measures a person's value in terms of what they are capable of 'making' or 'producing', to have an 'unproductive body' is tantamount to experiencing that body as a social failure, so that the (false) hopes about the useless body are also a failure.

Jones wants to know what the grief of such women looks like in what she calls the 'drama of reproductive loss'. First, there is the guilt about the unproductive, infertile body, which produced miscarriage or stillbirth. Then there is the sense of a future lost, because the un-co-operative body could not 'make' the future in the form of a child. There is grief at the loss of bodily integrity (the rupturing of the self). The borders marking the body's interior and exterior are not to be trusted: the body is leaking blood into the world, the infant is abandoned in the womb to die or falls out before its time to be safely released. The body's blood now signals death, each new cycle of menstruation an advent announcing the end. The fourth dimension of these women's grief is almost too dreadful to mention; it is an unspeakable grief.

They experience their bodies as deathbeds, their wombs as graves. Death becomes them, it fills them, but cruelly they do not die. Such women often become mute. They cannot, simply cannot name, what they know: that death lives inside them. They just wail like wolves, or cry silently without tears. Some unfortunate women even begin to see themselves as the active agent in the deaths of their fertility and their children.

Jones criticises other theological themes, such as Mary as womb and chosen agent, and the doctrine of sin, creation and eschatology, as doctrinal loci that are not strong enough to hold and shape the unique characteristics of grieving over reproductive loss. Instead, she proposes the image of the Trinity to carry the experience of infertility, miscarriage and stillbirth in a profound way: 'a vision of divinity into which one could crawl and then rest' (Jones 2001:240). The Trinity experienced one of its members bleeding away on the cross, and 'God takes this death into the depths of Godself'. When Christ was crucified, God's own child died. Thus the Trinity holds death: the First Person holds the Second, united by the power of the Third, the Spirit. God, who sent Jesus the child into the world, experienced the death of the son. But the death is a death of hope, although it happens deep within – perhaps in the womb of God. The image shows a 'death bearing grave of a God, where God paradoxically doesn't die, but lives. She lives to love yet again and to offer the world the gift of a future' (Jones 2001:242). The reality of the death on the cross reverberates in the reality of women's experiences of infertility, stillbirth and miscarriage. It points to the ironic fact that the image that 'most effectively captures the nature of God's redeeming grace is not an image of mothering, but an image of maternal loss' (2001:243). This image of the Trinity experiencing death in its innermost being speaks in a new way to women experiencing reproductive loss. It gives them a place of hope to creep into when their bodies refuse to bring forth life. It is a warm, womb-like place where they can identify with the mother God and the father God, who lost a child. It is a place that can make them whole again, so they can be born into a new spiritual understanding of the One who knows how it feels.

7.2.2. Ritual and reproductive loss

7.2.2.1 Jewish thoughts

In commenting on the argument that Exodus 21:22 indicates that the foetus is valued as less than human or inhuman, Fuller (1994:180) maintains that within the wider ancient Near Eastern legal context generally and in the Bible specifically, this does not stand up. Simply because different punishments apply to perpetrators when it comes to injury of the mother and foetus, it cannot be deduced that the foetus's life is valueless or that it can wilfully be destroyed in an abortion act. Exodus 21:22 refer to an unintentional, negligent assault on a pregnant woman, and not an intentional assault on the foetus. Other Biblical passages clearly show that God regards the foetus as more than a lump of tissue; in fact its life is unfolding under his watchful eye.

Susan Grossman (1992:285), a committed Jew, describes her overwhelming feelings of helplessness when she suffered a miscarriage. The actual miscarriage itself, she says, is a terrifying experience, with the body bleeding uncontrollably. At one point she feared for her own life. In the aftermath, though, after she had recovered physically, she had no answer to why it happened and no assurances that it would not recur in the future. She found nothing of comfort in Jewish ritual and prayer. A foetus under 30 days old is not defined as a person, and the laws of mourning subsequently do not apply to it, along with the high probability of miscarriage and infant death in the pre-modern world. This only partially explained the lack of traditional prayers to recite over a miscarriage. Rather, the fact that Jewish traditions were framed by men, and thus reflected male concerns and viewpoints, is to blame. She wanted to 'seek in liturgy a way to turn to God in my pain and fear and sense of helplessness, to seek comfort in the protection of God's grace' (Grossman 1992:287). She composed a meditation for herself to address her loss, one of a number of new liturgies being composed by women rabbis, scholars and lay people. Grossman found that the process of creating is itself healing, but especially the processes of *commending, lamentation, praising and imploring* God in conjunction with a larger or smaller part of the congregation (1992:287):.

> O God, I commend back to Your safe keeping the potential life entrusted to me for so short a time. Not yet having reached 40

> days of life, this foetus did not open my womb, it was not my *bakhor*, still I grieve its passing out of the protection of my body.
>
> Who are we to understand your ways, to know what future would have lain ahead for myself and my child had it come to term?
>
> *Ha-Rahaman*. O Merciful One, heal my body and my soul; heal my womb so that I may carry to term a healthy soul, that I may come to sing your praises as a happy mother surrounded by her children in the courtyards of a Jerusalem at peace.

Interestingly, Grossman also proposes a ritual for affirming and accepting pregnancy, in order (despite its 'naturalness') to recognise and appreciate parenting as valuable and sacrificial. She bemoans the fact that all the major biological events of women's lives have been ignored by religious tradition, to become secular events. It includes menarche, sexual maturation, pregnancy, lactation and menopause.

In line with this understanding, Rabbi Debra Orenstein (in Berner 2000:44) points out that Jewish men and women are in need of far more ritual acknowledgement and sanctification of life's key moments. Already, feminist Jews have been instrumental in expanding the definition of the life cycle in four ways, ways that the Christian Church could take into consideration. 1) Women are included in the observance of passages that formerly spoke only to and for men, for example, establishing Bat Mitzvah (for girls) alongside the Bar Mitzvah. 2) Supplementing or altering traditional rituals related to the life cycle, e.g. divorce rituals. 3) Valuing and often ritualising the events of women's biological cycle: menarche, menses, childbirth, miscarriage, and menopause. 4) In addition, sacralising non-biological passages or milestones not contemplated by tradition, such as ceremonies celebrating elder wisdom or healing from sexual abuse (and, one could add, healing from infertility, whether or not it would lead to children).

The Church and the Synagogue may have many faces, but they certainly house a lot of grief-stricken members. One very common version of complicated grief has been termed by Peppers and Knapp (in Witzel & Chartier 1989:19) as 'shadow grief'. Shadow grief is not overt; rather, it can be likened to a burden that some mothers carry for the rest of their lives. It tends to emerge on specific occasions when they recall their loss. It is described as a 'dull ache' that infuses their lives

and it leaves them mildly sad and anxious. This grief is exacerbated by reminders of the child a woman doesn't have, or the child she lost, and it can be triggered by everyday images of mothers or fathers and their children doing everyday things. Taking the statistical figure into consideration, it could well be that 25 percent of women in a congregation have experienced miscarriage and a certain number are infertile. Men and women, though perhaps differently, suffer equally when it comes to reproductive loss. The researcher can imagine that even a simple expression of concern and acknowledgment in the sermon could help to bring them healing. An unidentified Reform Jewish rabbi spoke about the need for community acknowledgement of pregnancy loss, saying that her own miscarriage sensitised her to the need to help lift the silence surrounding pregnancy loss (in Singh, Stewart & Moses 2004:53):

> On the eve of every Sabbath at my synagogue, we read a list of the names of the members of our communal family who are not well, and then we say a blessing for healing. Only those suffering from socially acceptable afflictions are mentioned, by our mutual consent. In the last few years it has occurred to me that the list is a well-meaning sham…Those with broken covenants, troubled children and empty wombs are not mentioned.

Several authors have documented 'complicated grief' following a miscarriage or accompanying infertility, as grief that is inhibited, unresolved, delayed, prolonged and chronic.

7.2.2.2 Reformed thoughts

One of the reasons why ritual is important in addressing reproductive loss is that it can precipitate a faith crisis (Seaton 1996:41). A reappraisal of one's relationship with God, adjusting one's beliefs or understanding about God in the face of loss and suffering could be called for. The lack of religious rituals leaves a void where spiritual comfort and support within the faith community should have been found, and it eliminates the opportunity to commend the child (or foetus) to God's eternal care in the presence of the faithful, thereby communicating to the parents that grieving over the pregnancy loss is inappropriate. It also suggests that the foetus has little or no standing with God. To express and hear in Church reminders that God was with the foetus from gestation to the end of its life brings comfort, hope and closure. In cases where parents deliberately decide to end the pregnancy because of medical confirmation of significant foetal deformities, appropriate

prayer and ritual in the congregation could help them overcome both their grief and their feelings of guilt (1996:41). The possible need for forgiveness on the part of parents who decided for a therapeutic abortion could also be acknowledged, and the whole congregation could carry the 'burden'. The panic, guilt and fear with which parents have to deal when learning that the foetus is deformed, and then having the option to terminate is precisely what Helga dreaded, and it seriously influenced her decision to forego trying to fall pregnant.

Arthur McClanahan, Methodist priest, says his experience with reproductive losses in his congregation taught him that parents are angry, and that the anger is often directed at God, the Church and the clergy. He makes sense of this by saying that one of the reasons is probably that these are safe areas for venting frustration and bitterness. Couples try to keep their anger with each other in check, lest they separate. The Church should lovingly and wisely 'cushion' such understandable anger, and educate those in the congregation who think a miscarriage or stillbirth represents 'an unperson', who until then had existed only in the parents' imagination (McClanahan 1983:4).

'What has died and is dying in me and in the world that God longs to see come to birth?' was the question Lydia Speller, pastor, asked herself after she experienced a miscarriage. She found her loss to be 'so insignificant, and yet so great' (Speller 1993:9), and, although there were no remains to bury, she and her husband named the child in order to bid it farewell. Talking about her miscarriage and conducting a ritual for her loss in the congregation helped other women in the pews who had suffered miscarriage to share their pain. She believes, because she and her family had the courage to publicly share their grief and confusion, other worshippers experienced their loss through miscarriage in a new way. No two people bear it in the same way, but the empty womb matters very much to God, and can be named in the Christian community and in God's presence (Speller 1993:8). In fact, God, especially as God the Mother, can be seen as the One who 'suffers with' in this situation, thinks Hunt (1984:275). Expanding Christian symbols to include female terms is very valuable in a crisis like miscarriage, where the woman may feel she has failed in her womanly task and is surrounded by men, from her husband and doctor to her minister. The image of the motherhood of God

as she awaits delivery, enduring over and over the loss of her perfect creation, could enrich the grieving parents' understanding of God's presence in their situation. Another important factor is that the pastor or minister's primary concern is the mourners' story, the feelings and questions of the grieving family and friends (Wassner 1991:359). It is only then that the ceremony, the ritual, the prayer, the few words, and even the respectful silence, become meaningful and healing.

Social workers Mahan and Calica (1997) suggest that the act of naming means moving to a place of healing in all manner of reproductive loss, whether it is therapeutic abortions, miscarriages or stillborn infants. Perinatal loss includes miscarriages, neo-natal deaths, intrauterine foetal deaths and stillbirths. It includes the failure to conceive and the birth of a child with medical problems or special needs as losses associated with perinatal health care (1997:142). Since perinatal loss is coping with the loss of someone you never really knew, they advise parents to keep tangible remembrances of the brief life, such as hospital tags and a blanket bought for the baby. Seeing, touching and holding the stillborn and taking photographs could help to make the baby's short life a reality. They mention that some parents at the funeral or memorial service even choose to hold the (deceased) baby before it is laid to rest. The feeling that this is taking things too far or that it is sick, demonstrates how people not directly affected still underestimate the impact of the loss of a baby. Trying to console the parents with: 'You can always have another baby', or 'At least you didn't know the child very well', or 'She wasn't normal anyway', may be technically correct, but unlikely to bring comfort.

Many couples with live children have experienced reproductive loss in one form or another. Even if the foetus is lost at a few weeks, it is indeed the great and sorrowful loss of a 'real' child and it leaves a gap in the order of siblings. Different losses cannot be evaluated alongside each other, as if the one were worse than the other. This is to do the inexcusable and attempt to relativise reproductive pain. In the eyes of a woman who has never fallen pregnant, even the death of an embryo is a heartbreaking tragedy; it could have been her last chance for a baby of her own.

Liturgies place the events of human life in a context of faith and tradition. The word literally means 'the work of the people' (Newsom 2002:284). Ritual has the

potential to bring some comfort in an impasse, such as reproductive loss. The word impasse refers to the feeling that there is 'no way out, no way around, no rational escape from what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation' (Fitzgerald 1986:288). Ritual should aid in trying to find a language, a context and a way to live with this loss. Soelle (in Fitzgerald 1986) holds that, insofar as the experience of impasse is repressed, in like manner will passion for life disappear. The most dangerous temptation would be to surrender to cynicism and despair. Ritual can uncover layers of pain and can explore how grief embodies and saturates people's lives. Ritual has the capacity to speak a unifying language in words of comfort: its symbolic richness and mythic substructure, which underlies traditional Christian worship, makes it familiar, powerful and caring. Newsom (2002:284) posits that people need ritual, and ritual needs people. It exists within the presence of a shared fellowship, because of its nature, and it implies the presence of community. It even creates the lifeblood of community. It should also, within the embracing arms of the community, give opportunity to the grieving to share their bleeding wombs by speaking out in their pain. It should give God afresh to those who have to say farewell to a dream, a loved child, a dead embryo. It should give a fresh vision of what God, as the living, renewing creator, promises in a time of death (Wassner 1981:358). Wilma Jean Hahn (in Hunt 1984:276) grieving for her little son:

> Yet – I'm not mad at my God/for My God doesn't kill
> There is through Him a source/of strength, an honesty, a will
> To make it through life's painful times/when dealt a lousy hand
> To learn from it what I still have/but not to understand…
> So see, it's going to be all right/and still there will be joy
> It's also that there'll never be /a chance to raise our boy.

7.2.3 Two apt metaphors: The disabled God and Adoption

7.2.3.1 The disabled God

Nancy Eiesland (1998:104) describes herself as 'a sociologist of religion' and a 'woman with disabilities'. In her book *The disabled God* (1994), she points to the value of an accessible 'practical theological method in the creation of a liberatory theology of disability', arguing that the lament, as a descriptive as well as theological act, is the first step in bringing about change in the Church and in

broader society. Lamenting, as part of a liberatory theology of disability, connects dissimilarity, specificity and embodiment. Furthermore, it leads to solidarity, anticipation and transformation. Lamenting is helpful in creating solidarity among people who suffer in the same way. In addition, the lament opens the way to healing on a personal level, because it moves people from silence to speech. It moves them to listen to what they truly feel in their hearts, because it involves a 'deep expression of sorrow'. To lament also means 'to mourn, to wail; to deplore, to grieve for' (1982:655).

Sometimes people remain silent about their deepest sorrow and pain, because they are afraid that speaking out will make them look pitiable or pathetic, they will embarrass themselves or others or seem inappropriate. If people view suffering as the result of a personal error, or as something that is simply their burden in life, it is difficult to bring this out into the open. When suffering becomes an unspeakable foe, it turns into something that must be either concealed or accepted. If it is not named openly and bravely, the possibility of using suffering as a channel for transformation is lost (Eiesland 1998:104).

Silence is a sly character. It manages to keep groups of people who are suffering in the same way isolated from each other, but it is also proficient at keeping a couple within the intimate enclosure of their longstanding relationship separate from each other. In the research discussions, both Helga and James expressed their surprise at learning how the other separately and personally experienced the miscarriages they had endured.

Eiesland (1998:104) quotes Dorothee Soelle, who explains three phases of suffering. Apart from the specific suffering that someone endures, there is the added inability to speak about the experience, which in itself spells suffering. She describes the first phase as a place where isolation and powerlessness reign because the sufferer is locked into silence. The reasons for the silence could be manifold. The second phase involves rebelliousness and boldness against the tyranny of silence. Silence is death. Lamenting brings life, because it drives despair away. Pain should be expressed and communicated, and placed within its social context in order to reach the third phase, which consists of the possibility of new life and new growth.

The lament of the Biblical matriarch Rachel to Jacob (and God): 'Give me children, or else I will die!' (Genesis 30:1), is found in every Christian congregation. In every religious community there are women (and men) who are living the story of infertility, miscarriages and stillbirth. Are these stories suppressed only because they are so very private, or could it be that the 'pro-birth, pro-family Christian community has found it theologically problematic – or at least awkward – to fully acknowledge those who cannot, for whatever reason, 'be fruitful and multiply' (Westerfield-Tucker 2002:487)? The fact that there is abundant evidence in the Bible of women whose infertility was reversed (except those who were punished with infertility, like Michal, wife of King David) reinforces the belief that 'prayer necessarily conquers infertility and that insufficient faith is a cause of childlessness' (2002:496). This seems to support the idea, in the context of God's command to procreate, and as expressed in texts like Psalm 127:3 ('Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward'); Psalm 128:1 ('Blessed is everyone who fears, reveres, and worships the Lord, who walks in His ways and lives according to His commandments'; and v.3 ('Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the innermost parts of your house; your children shall be like olive plants around your table'. Bearing a child was a sign of God's mercy and favour. By default, then, the opposite also seems to apply, that childlessness could be seen as God showing displeasure and judgment, although the accounts of Sarah (Genesis 11:29-21:7), Rebecca (Genesis 25:20-21), Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29:31-30:24), Manoah's wife (Judges 13:2-24), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-20), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-57) do not demonstrate this to be the case (Westerfield-Tucker 2002:491). There is a pervasive tendency in some Christian circles to interpret causal relationships between sin and disability (Willis 2002:220).

Taking the above into account, infertility and childlessness in its various forms and possibilities (including, perhaps, even losing a grown child to death) can be seen as a debilitating condition. Something is wrong, and who is to blame? If it's not the devil, God or the sinful world we live in, it has to be you. Being childless in a Christian milieu, where most members believe that 'God wants the faithful to have children; that is clearly His will', those that do not fulfil the norm of the dominant

discourse of the family-focused gospel, and deviate from societal norms are regarded as disabled alongside the 'able-bodied with children'. Kimberley Willis (2002:218), handicapped theologian, says persons with disabilities are oppressed by a temporarily able-bodied norm that deems disability to be antithetical to participation in the *imago Dei* (the attributes that make it capable of relationship with God). Robert Murphy, quadriplegic, says' the disabled serve as constant, visible reminders to the able-bodied that the society we live in is shot through with inequity and suffering, that they live in a counterfeit paradise, that they too are vulnerable. We represent a fearsome possibility' (in Willis 2002:221). Differences in disabilities or the circumstances of their onset are not easily acknowledged, and persons with disabilities are often just 'lumped together' as a uniform sub-group of society. However, the common factor among disabled persons is that 'some part of the body, at some point in time, for some reason, ceased to function properly and resulted in either a temporary or permanent disability'. Furthermore, the disabled community is made up of individuals with numerous disabilities (for example, mental, physical, emotional, developmental and learning) that manifest in a variety of ways. Some disabilities are obviously visible, such as a missing limb, but others, like infertility, are 'invisible' from the outside, but are no less disabling for the individual. The person with the 'invisible' disability has to repeatedly reveal the inoperative attribute or impediment, precisely because it is not obvious.

Willis complains about the persistent social and theological marginalisation, which, coupled with fear and misunderstanding, 'exiles persons with disabilities from the community called to embody the very One who is the Bread of Life (2002:216). She echoes Eiesland's conviction that those who are perceived as different, deviant, impaired, challenged, who are unwelcome in the *imago Dei,* can incorporate their experience of disability in the Disabled God. The Disabled God is both the God who becomes disabled on our behalf, and the One who refuses to abandon those on the margins (Willis 2002:223). Eiesland says the power of the Disabled God lies in the seemingly innate contradiction He embodies. 'This revelation of God disorders the social-symbolic order, and God appears in the most unexpected bodies' (1998:100). Instead of seeking dominance or creating a new normative power, He appears at the margins with people with disabilities, and

instigates transformation from this de-centred position. Referring to the passage in John 20:19-30, which describes the interaction between Thomas and the risen Christ, Willis points out that Jesus was resurrected in a state of disable-bodiedness, his wounds testimony to his disabling death. God not only became disabled on our behalf, but was raised disabled. The Disabled God nevertheless embodies wholeness, authenticity and transformation, and is thus inviting and genuine to all who are disabled (including the so-called 'able', as all fall short).

7.2.3.2 Adoption or second birth

Westerfield-Tucker (2002:495) argues that, judging by the prayers and ritual texts of past centuries, it is evident that the Christian Church's approach to infertility is deeply immersed in the Old Testament perspective that defines a family, and specifically a woman, in terms of fruitfulness. However in the New Testament (John 1:12-13), adoption replaces procreation as the dominant way by which the faithful are 'made':

> *But to as many as did receive and welcome Him, He gave the authority (power, privilege, right) to become the children of God, that is to those who believe in His name. Who own their birth neither to blood nor to the will of the flesh (that of physical impulse) nor to the will of man (that of a natural father), but to God. (They are born of God).*

Being 'adopted into God's family as the principal method of generativity in the Church', the second birth is of paramount importance, and not physical birth (2002:500). Westerfield-Tucker invites the Church to look imaginatively at the ways in which it interprets fertility and infertility and designs rituals for addressing reproductive loss.

She warns against the construction of prayers or rites addressing and acknowledging infertility, which would perpetuate the false assumption that, by being faithful and trustworthy, the barren will most certainly be changed into the fruitful. Rather, new prayers, taking the metaphor of adoption into consideration, along with the real lived experiences of the grief and frustration of the childless, should be composed. This could include the recognition of the mystery and unknowingness of the situation: Why doesn't God answer my prayers? Why is this

happening to me? At the same time, the prayers should also emphasise 'resoluteness or a move toward acceptance' (2002:502). Prayers of forgiveness, for healing and wholeness and of lamentation could be included, along with a willingness to listen to the specific stories of those in pain. If the Church could embrace more fully a theology that focused on the inclusiveness of the metaphor of adoption involving all members of the congregation, less loneliness and separation from those who do not fit the 'family model' would be experienced. The Christian family is, in the first instance, one that is established by the 'womb-like waters of the font', not by blood ties (Westerfield-Tucker 2002:502).

7.3 Giving birth to an alternative: voluntary childlessness

Childless couples, whether by choice or circumstance, challenge traditional, social constructs of 'family'. They also challenge conventional and even modern ideas on femininity and the female role (Sundby 1999:13). Cohabiting couples, single-parent families, gay and lesbian (as well as bisexual and transsexual) families, and childless couples reflect different family variations (Park 2005:372). The voluntary childless stand in contrast to pro-natalism: a philosophy that encourages all births and views them as contributing to individual, family and social wellbeing (2005:375). Pro-natalism is a strong and enduring discourse for a number of reasons. Procreation is an important developmental stage in adulthood, giving full adult status to its members, and enforcing family ties. Further, all major religious groups support and encourage procreation within marriage. Biblical conservatism, particularly, is linked with significantly more negative views of childlessness, and Jewish respondents had the most negative, prescriptive attitudes about childlessness. They are less likely to have positive views about the possibility of leading a fulfilling life without children (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell 2007:1078).

Some within the childless population are biologically unable to have children, others are merely temporarily childless, and the rest are permanently and deliberately without children. The voluntarily childless include the categories: 'do not want children', 'too busy to have children' and 'have other competing interests' (Dykstra & Hagestad 2007:1297). Sundby (1999:13) points out that because of the sensitivity of the problem of childlessness some secrets are kept: people who are trying unsuccessfully for children may claim to be voluntarily childless. Park says

society views the voluntarily childless as 'less socially desirable, less well-adjusted, less nurturant, less mature', and, at the same time, more materialistic, more selfish and more individualistic' (2005:376). Despite voluntarily childless women's assurances that they are content and cheerful about their choices, society seems to insist that they can't possibly have rewarding, happy lives (McQuirk & McQuirk 1991:152). The implication is that 'there is something wrong with them' not to want children. Could they have had an unpleasant childhood, or are they simply deviant or possibly evil? Parents in general and mothers in particular find it hard to accept any motive good enough to warrant someone (especially a woman) rejecting the idea of motherhood.

Pro-natalism includes the cultural ideal of a splendid, multi-tasking woman with the reins of her career in her left hand, and her baby's warmed-up bottle in her right hand. The philosophy points to an emerging picture of masculinity that includes a nurturing father, balancing the heavy load of the splendid working mother. It places, from a political, social and religious viewpoint, an extremely high value on the importance of family and family values as a guarantee of creating and maintaining a safe, healthy and stable social order. All these combined, powerful 'reasons' and encouragements for living the 'family life' are cause for the voluntarily childless to feel misunderstood, misquoted and stigmatised. The childless comprise one of many social groups that are strongly negatively stereotyped. Voluntary choice to be childless is seen as deviating from the norm, and as having problematic issues at a personal and social level (Rowlands & Lee 2006:55). When the voluntarily childless say they doubt their parenting abilities because of personality attributes, the pro-natalists say parenting is an acquired skill. When the voluntarily childless say they are not interested in children, the answer is, wait till you have your own. When the voluntarily childless say they would rather pursue personal ambition and leisure, they are labelled selfish, immature and irresponsible by pro-natalists. When they say they have altruistic motives like population concerns, they are told that childlessness is not a practical solution to the problem. The voluntarily childless, trying to survive in a pro-natal context, often have to lie (or engage in information control, as Park puts it), and use stigma management techniques designed for particular audiences, in order to manage their deviant identities (2004:372). At the same time, childlessness is

slowly increasing in developed countries, which might reflect acceptance of diversity, scope for individual choice and a creative 'social imaginary' about being feminine without being a mother (Wood & Newton 2006:338).

Helga and James have made a deliberate decision to actively stop trying to conceive, and in the process have chosen childfree living. It has given them a new energy to celebrate their union together, to appreciate their animals, to draw even closer to God, and to start a new life in a foreign country. McQuirk and McQuirk (1991:151) point out that there are different types of childfree decisions within the context of struggling with infertility. Some couples use contraception only temporarily to give them a break from the stresses of attempting pregnancy, and then resume their efforts again. Another group comes to an unyielding resolution that requires an irreversible act (sometimes sterilisation) to conclude their battle with infertility once and for all, which at the same time serves as a commitment to their decision to be childfree.

Living childfree does not necessarily mean living childless. McQuirk and McQuirk make the distinction as follows: 'Childless' implies to settle without wanting to, in a rather hopeless and powerless way, into a second rate lifestyle without children. On the other hand, childfree refers to a decision consciously made, after much careful deliberation, to 'stop being infertile', and to 'stop placing so much importance on having children' (1991:151). It boils down to 'minimising the desire for a biological child, in order to proceed with a (fruitful) life style that is an alternative to parenting' (1991:152). This childfree lifestyle could or need not include types of parenting to satisfy the nurturing instinct: taking responsibility for an underprivileged child in some way, baby-sitting for friends, reconstructing relationships with nieces and nephews in a new way, looking after elderly parents, or mentoring younger people in the workplace. Parenting in any of these forms could quite easily be abandoned by a childfree couple, and their new-found energy (no more depleted by feelings of inadequacy, grief and rage) used to stimulate their relationship, and enjoy a renewed purpose and direction in terms of self-fulfilment and happiness. In giving up their infertility, or rather the power infertility had over their lives, they can get on with a reconstructed life. Sundby, (1999:18) an infertile doctor who worked for many years in fertility clinics, says infertility is

problematic, but is a condition that allows for self-healing and emotional resolution. It is an experience to which is possible to adapt and recover from, whether children enter the picture of the couple in any way or not. For most people, the fact of their infertility fades, and is replaced by many other experiences and events that life presents. Sundby agrees with the McQuirks (1991) that, when a couple or individual give up the preferred best solution of a biological child, they can begin the mourning process and their eyes can be opened to other alternatives, including living childfree. Infertility can consume the most productive years of a person's life, and render its other aspects (selfhood, marriage, relationships) infertile as well. In deconstructing infertility, and reconstructing one's life in the context of fruitfulness, healing can begin, although mourning one's own children who never came into being can last a life time. The difference is that now infertility has lost its power to demand exorbitant attention: it can no longer render one passive, victimised and infertile. It has to make room for other ways of bearing life.

In the following chapter, the focus will be on underlying discourses that have bearing on this and the other three narratives of the co-researchers, as described in Chapters 4 - 7.

CHAPTER 8

WATERING THE LAND: DISCOURSES OF GROWTH AND UPGROWTH

In the previous four chapters some underlying discourses were introduced relating to the respective narratives. However, these discourses are informed by meta-discourses, which present themselves in terms of congruency and divergence, as well as discrepancy. In this chapter, the focus will be on matters of faith, family, parenting, and discourses on death.

Cheek (2000:23) says discourses create discursive frameworks, which order reality in a particular way. By allowing for certain ways of thinking about reality, while at the same time excluding others, discourses both enable and constrain the production of knowledge. Whichever discursive frame, at any time, is afforded presence is a consequence of the effect of power relations. According to Kress (1985:7), 'a discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about'. All the 'objects' of our consciousness, including our 'self', our perception of what it means to be a person, our own identity, are all constructed through language, and discourses, as coherent systems of representations, produce these things (Burr 1995:56). Discourses permit us to see things that are not 'really' there, but, at the same time, once an object has been elaborated in a discourse it is difficult not to refer to it as if it were real (Parker 1992:5). Freedman and Combs (1996:42) explain that people are born into stories, with their social and historical contexts continuously inviting them to tell and remember certain events, and to leave others unstoried. The reason for this is that discourses sustain particular worldviews. Not only do discourses powerfully shape a person's choices about what can be storied, and how, but people's ideas, language, communication, and actions relating to discourses keep them influentially in place (1996:43).

8.1 Faith and pluralism

Religious discourses are reflected in the stories of the four couples narrated in Chapters 4 through 7, as well as in the story of the researcher, described in

Chapter 2. Certain aspects of all five stories vary in one way or another from the dominant traditional discourses in, for instance, the Christian Church. On the one hand, the Church and other religious communities have become more aware of and sensitised towards the deconstruction of outdated policies and practices. On the other hand, though, the co-researchers continue to experience not only a lack of understanding but also marginalisation on the part of formal institutions of faith and many individual believers.

As far as growing awareness and sensitivity amongst communities of faith are concerned Stroup (1998:6) comments on the way Christian theology handled the issue of searching for the meaning of the gospel in a pluralistic world during the first half of the twentieth century. The diversity of the world in relation to religions, cultures, race and gender was then described as a problem that had to be addressed. But that changed during the later 1900s. The idea that pluralism is a problem begging to be solved came to be seen rather as an opportunity to re-interpret the meaning of the gospel and to bring new life to the Church. According to Stroup, this new thinking had at least four consequences (1998:6).

In the first place, by accepting pluralism, theology needs to admit and explore the relationship between the interpretation of the gospel and cultural conditionings. It seems as if, across the board, every interpretation of Christian faith was and is influenced by certain cultural assumptions.

Secondly, as Stroup points out, seeing that pluralism is opening up new meaning for the gospel, the willingness to reinterpret Christian identity becomes paramount. It might be safer to cling to a blind acceptance of traditional interpretations, instead of celebrating and honouring true Christianity along the lines of being faithful to 'a surprising, unpredictable, and mysterious God' who 'creates the new and unknown' and 'destabilises the familiar' (1998:7).

Thirdly, pluralism should not be uncritically accepted, because, *per se*, it is not the gospel. That pride of place belongs to Jesus and his life, death and reign. Although Christ created diversity and variety, he also invites us to test all things critically. Certain things are true to the Christian faith, while others are not.

Fourthly, the issue of pluralism puts on the table questions about the Church's understanding of the missionary role in the world. The Church could gain a deeper insight into its role by humbly accepting that God is already at work in His world and that He invites the imperfect church to learn wisdom and participate in this pluralistic world by His grace. Sadly, too often the Church sees its role as that of saviour of a sinful world, and then arrogantly and forcefully sets itself to task (Stroup 1998:8).

To revert briefly to Stroup's second sentiment, stated above, that the reinterpretation of Christian traditions should be tolerated and even pursued, Kriel and Kriel (2002:135), supporters of the so-called 'New Reformation' in South Africa, plead for the traditional Church to become more amenable to alternative understandings. They propose tolerance for doubts and questioning, and advocate for open discussions concerning those Christians who, facing intellectual and ethical problems, are trying to strike a balance between the modern scientific worldview and the 'only, official' traditional interpretation of the Jesus occurrences.

Kriel and Kriel (2002:135) point out that many sincere Christians (some more conventional, others less so) struggle with the tension between understandings of Biblical events at the time they occurred, and the present understandings about those events. In other words, the question is whether Biblical knowledge as it was formed and understood in the context of its time can be smoothly transported into our time and worldview. They are concerned that those Christians who are honest enough to express their doubts are labelled lost and sinful. The contentious issue of homosexuality is one case in point where questioning the wisdom and fairness of the traditional viewpoint elicits diverse responses within the Church. Although there is an ongoing dialogue about how homosexual orientation should be viewed, accommodated and utilised in the internal structures of the Church, it seems as if not enough dialogue is undertaken with homosexual Christians themselves. Tienie and Samuel's worst feelings of rejection and marginalisation have not been caused by society in general, because that is probably to be expected. But being rejected by Christians, not only in terms of their identity as gay men and gay parents, but especially in terms of their identity as fellow Christians who happen to

be gay, has been for them a double rejection. Tienie and Samuel were convinced that the Church and its members, ironically themselves recipients of the grace of God, and constituting, as both institute and organism, the inclusive body of Christ, should behave better to the most vulnerable in their ranks.

Because human knowledge embodies certain interpretations relating to specific paradigms, and because paradigms are formed by culture and language, not only our worldviews, but especially our religious views are continuous interpretations of interpretations. The authors argue that even the natural sciences are not a block of information that never contradicts or questions subjacent knowledge, as the complex and challenging findings of, for example, quantum theory have shown. Scientific knowledge is not knowledge about reality *per se.* It is merely methodological construction or interpretation relating to certain assumptions or preconceived suppositions (Kriel & Kriel 2002:139). Constructs as 'realities' and 'truths' are textured in a complex way and richly shaded: created and maintained by a specific approach, method and play of language. This justifies the existence of various concurrent, valid interpretations that see the 'truth' as complex, and the natural sciences as much messengers of 'truth' as are narratives, poetry, myths and other fiction genres. Putting a question mark against the historicity of certain Biblical narratives does not necessarily question their veracity, but suggests that a pertinent question would be: With what kind of truth are we dealing? Biblical knowledge that finds its source in revelation is still subject to interpretation and cannot be elevated to the absolute truth merely because of its revelatory status. They point out that an interpretation of the content of the revelation is inevitable. Interpretations lie entrenched in a believer's religious, historic, socio-cultural paradigm. Kriel and Kriel (2002:138) propose that Christians try to assist each other in creating a living space where individual meaning and significance can be promoted and tolerated.

Müller (2008:5) argues against a theology that oversimplifies truths and reduces them to one fundamental truth; that moulds certainties into absolutes, and, in the process, reduces the gospel to universal, tried and trusted knowledge. All that needs to be done with such pre-packaged, sure-footed theological propositions is to meticulously apply and repeat the neat formulas. Further interpretation,

questioning and imagination are unnecessary and even undesirable. However, instead of choosing to suffer from a theology likened to an immovable structure, with confronting, provocative and often, loveless qualities, Müller extends an invitation to find the language of poetry and song in theology. He proposes a theology that truthfully acknowledges doubts, uncertainties and confusion. Such honest confessions tend to lead to a search for connective links between seemingly improbable narratives within specific contexts. He uses the metaphor of a fisherman to describe the character of a preferred theologian: the line (theological questions) must be thrown into deep and challenging waters, in order to elude obvious answers. Helpful theology always strives to find language to describe (and thus, construct) life in the current experience: the mundane as well as the mysteries, the material world as well as the imaginary planes, man and woman, as well as God. Such a theology moves past the fundamental, but lies on this side of relativism; it stands hither orthodoxy's exactness and in between certainty and fear. A kind of theology that is near right and wrong, breathes within context, and lives with people (Müller 2008:5).

Hans Küng (in Pretorius 2007:6) refuses to equate Christianity with thoughtless, un-inquiring belief. He says his deep faith in God and Christ is precisely the prerequisite for doubt; it prompts doubt, it leaves room to doubt, and is certainly not a sign that he is an unbeliever. The issue is not doubting *per se*, but the route taken to seek out responses for addressing and meeting those doubts.

Van Buren (1972:133) says that when people use the concept 'God', they are, in reality, testing the last boundary of language…'a word uttered when one wants desperately to say the most that is possible'…'the final speech-act at the limit of language'. It is therefore understandable that the respective couples would speak about and language God in varying ways. Stan and Sena, for example, introduced God into their narrative by viewing Him as their ally in fighting infertility by way of biomedical advances, such as IVF and surrogate motherhood. They never believed that their infertility was God's will, or that He was trying to convey some profound message to them through their struggle to have children of their own. However, at the point of their last attempt to fall pregnant Sena realised that if they failed again she would have to find a new way of making sense of childlessness in

terms of her identities as a woman, marriage partner, professional person and believer.

Hester, on her part, battles with God because she views Him as the One who can lock and unlock the womb, the One in charge of the key to motherhood. She does not understand why He has withheld children from her. For the past thirty years, she has submissively and incessantly pleaded with Him in private, as well as during parish prayers, because she views Him as her only hope of restoring her human, female, parental dignity and status.

Gerkin (1996:19) describes the complexity of pluralism in Western culture as involving a 'pluralism of values as well as a pluralism of languages for interpretation of what human life in the world is about'. The use of Christian language to formulate, evaluate, interpret and predict is currently only one language amongst many. Even more intricate is the way in which an individual would move through different languages (including dissimilar moral contexts) of different social contexts in the course of a single day. Gerkin (1986:20) proposes that pastors, in an attempt to address the pluralistic situation comprehensively, should be willing to widen the horizon of their pastoral care from one-on-one crisis ministry to culturally contextual thinking. People live much of their daily lives in social situations that do not support their Christian thinking and ethics. However, if their pastor, as 'guiding interpreter', takes the socio-cultural context of their lives into account, it gives a clearer perspective: it tends to lessen the confusion and tensions of living within a particular time in a specific space. All the co-researchers, to a greater or lesser extent, expressed this need for pastoral guidance on infertility and childlessness. Helga and James, for instance, are members of a particular religious community, but have never had sufficient trust that its leaders and membership would understand their plight and offer meaningful support. They would like to be part of a Christ-centred congregation that makes room for different people and different interpretations about life in Christ.

Gerkin (1986:20) finds the ideas of H. Richard Niebuhr, in his book *The responsible self*, very helpful regarding the meaning of responsibility when it

comes to living in a pluralistic environment of manifold choices and actions. Niebuhr uses the metaphor of responsibility in trying to fathom the multiplicity of any social situation, and to demonstrate how to apply unswerving moral action. Responsibility, in Niebuhr's view, means responding to action upon us, or responding at least to the situation that acts upon us. Because humans always try to make some kind of interpretation of meaning when they respond, Niebuhr finds it important to use a framework of meaning in which accountability to God as the absolute centre is embedded. It goes even further than that: he sees God in all actions that come our way. Niebuhr (in Gerkin 1986:21) says: 'Responsibility affirms: God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action'. His idea of the moral life is closely related to the idea of the responsible life: a specific life within a continuously forming society. Niebuhr defines the idea of responsibility as follows (1978:65):

> An agent's action as response to an act upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents.

This framework of accountability to God also leaves room for the idea of social solidarity with other human beings. Because we are a society with others, our responses must be carefully weighed, and, because we want to be a continuing society, we must give responsible responses. Gerkin aptly points out that, even though a pluralistic world is fragmented and complex, it also contains the potential for fermentation and creativity. Hester and the gay couple, Tienie and Samuel, expressed deep concern and unhappiness about the lack of creative responses from the religious community to their desire to have children and be parents. Their perception seems to be that dominant traditional discourses are being kept intact by the Church, resulting in insufficient responsibility and solidarity, which in turn is disseminated into society at large. The ultimate consequence for these co-researchers is marginalisation in many areas of their existence.

Whitall Smith (1977:106) wrote about the difficulty of seeing God in all things when it would seem that nearly all our troubles come at the hands of other humans (so-called second causes). She feels that, although God may not necessarily be the author of our problems and difficulties, He is somehow the agent in these matters.

She is of the opinion that we should side with God at all times, and, in order to respond lovingly and patiently to those who trouble us, we need to see God in everything that happens to us. The question could be asked: Should we see God (or at least the will of God) in all things, such as infertility and childlessness? The answer to that is highly personal, and depends on how an individual interprets 'God's hand' in this issue.

When Jacob, in his dream, sees the ladder set up on the earth and reaching to the heavens with angels ascending and descending, he understood that God is everywhere. F.B. Meyer comments on Jacob's dream by indicating that, when he found God in his own heart, he found him everywhere; he had thought God was local, but instead He was in all places. 'All men feel that earth and heaven touch at the horizons of the distant past and future; but we ought to feel that the present moment of time and this bit of the world's surface are linked with heaven. This is what the ladder meant for Jacob (1966:19).

Explaining the thinking of Saint Ignatius, Hebblethwaite (1987:20) states that the overriding task of people's lives is to find the way to God, who made us in order to know him, and that the purpose of our lives is God. In short we must find God in all things and not see creation as some kind of rival to God. It is not a question of either God or creation, as if we should please a dull and jealous God by avoiding the enjoyable things in life. God can indeed be enjoyed through the world, Saint Ignatius says. All kinds of things, apart from God, should be used to help us in the search for God. For instance, the belief that romantic love for another human being can potentially stand in the way of true love and devotion to God is false. Ida Coudenhove (in Hebblethwaite 1987:22) says:

> And I maintain that the way to Divine Love is not spiritual self-mutilation, however many weighty options declare it to be so, but that the gift of human love is a mirror, which though dim and broken, is still the plainest in which to see what our love to God might be; the alphabet from which, like children learning to read, we spell out the language we should speak to God.

All the co-researchers tried to find God in their childlessness, or tried to find the way to God through the language of their childlessness.

Cobb (1983:318) sees the challenge of theology in a pluralistic world as a fresh opportunity to assimilate into our faith understandings of the wisdoms of ancient traditions and cultures, especially those from China and India. At the same time, we should not abandon our own heritage and traditions, particularly our faith in Jesus Christ. Faith means to be secure enough to listen non-defensively to what others believe and to learn from that, even become transformed by it. At the same time, we need to be critical of the limitations of others' ideas, but even more so of our own. One such area, says Cobb (1983:320), is the fact that Christians often treat the Jewish community rather as a fossil than a living movement that lies at the root of its traditional identity, and whose wisdoms can bring healing to both the Church and the neglected relationship between the two parties. In fact, Smart (1977:159) describes the Jewish faith as 'fruitful', precisely because it has helped to shape Christianity and Islam, and because of its ability to survive as a vital, ethical, monotheistic religion.

This study was, amongst others, an effort to listen: to listen to the stories of the co-researchers, to listen to the narratives of their contexts, to listen to the contributions of various traditions, such as Judaism, as well as to listen to how the couples understood the Grand Narrative of God in their lives of infertility and childlessness. However, for these research participants to experience God's presence in a meaningful and relevant way, it is of equal importance for communities of faith to listen to Stan and Sena and their story of surrogate motherhood, to Hester and her story of marginalisation in the African context, to Tienie and Samuel and their story of gay parenthood, and to Helga and James and their story of miscarriage and loss. At the same time, the onus is on people living with infertility and childlessness to make their voices heard, loud and clear. This is indeed not an easy task, because the Church and other religious groups generally do not provide an accommodating climate for creative and critical contributions, especially when it comes to longstanding and fixed convictions and viewpoints, such as the preference for the traditional nuclear family, biomedical advances, homosexuality, gay parenting and voluntarily childfree lives. However difficult it might be, neither the religious communities nor persons affected by infertility can avoid their joint accountability to God. Nor can they avoid

responsibility towards each other and society by evading uncomfortable and so-called sensitive issues when trying to find greater inclusivity and care.

8.2 The many faces of family

The institutions of marriage and family give shape and substance to people's daily lives and mean that people can be married, single or divorced and can be mothers, fathers or childless (Burr 1995:54). Society expects and encourages certain practices of living from couples, from marriage, and from adulthood in general. The social practice of finding a life partner and taking part in constructing a family makes the formation of one type of sexual and familial identity possible. This emotional and biological need is ensured and encouraged by religious 'laws', as well as the formal and informal 'laws' of society.

As was previously pointed out, the Christian Church focuses strongly on the virtues of maintaining and developing traditional family life. 'Family', in the language of Christianity, presupposes adherence to values of commitment, responsibility and family roles, as they are understood by interpretation of the Word of God. The Church, both as institution and as various communities of believers, understandably, but regrettably, is often guilty of ineptness, displaying even disapproval in its approach to couples and families that live out relational patterns that do not accord with the so-called ideal family unit of a husband and wife as a union of a first marriage, with biological or adopted children. Despite the existence of family diversity, all other family forms are judged against the typical nuclear family, and code terms like 'family values' are used to imply that traditional nuclear families are the only valid families (Carter & McGoldrick 2005:10). All the research participants concurred that is not that the Church respects and underwrites traditional family structures, but that the other many faces of what constitutes 'family' are not sensitively and sensibly acknowledged, respected and accommodated likewise. The preached sermon's subtext often indicates that those who fall short of the norm are God's stepchildren and are living out a second best option, fragments and weakens the family members of the body of Christ as a whole. For the researcher, for instance, the bosom of the Church is the place where she receives, at the same time, both the most care and the least care, in

terms of her challenge of living with infertility. She can talk of receiving the most care because there is, from some quarters, a genuine attempt at understanding and showing empathy for her family composition, and that of others like her; but the least care, in the sense that the incessant focus on the rigid, traditional (preferred) family arises all year round on the church calendar, infusing weekend camps, programmes, courses, special studies, Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day and Family Day celebrations. One of the possible effects of this focal point is that childless couples, single adults, divorcees, gays and even widows and widowers, feel hurt and sidelined, because their differently (and often painfully) constructed lives are undervalued. They could come to feel that they had missed their 'true' identity in Christ and in the community of believers, as if their lives lacked fullness and value, as if God's blessing had passed them by. The dominant discourse of this 'truest' description of 'family' as the traditional one could comfortably grow into the idea that this was 'God's will' for everyone. In turn, the perception is nurtured that those outside the mainstream are not blessed, and are even somehow to blame for their own marginalisation.

The researchers are not disputing the Church's role and concomitant responsibility to address unhealthy and destructive relationships in families, nor are they negating the ideals of God, for which the community of faith should strive. However, all the research participants questioned the wisdom of doggedly holding on to the traditional template as measuring rod to validate and evaluate the so-called ideal family life, especially, in light of the considerable number of congregational members who do not fit this pattern. The reality is that even Christians get divorced, and subsequently form new relationships. All families are constructed. But 'new' constituted families are painstakingly re-constructed by grandparents, parents and children who lack the privilege of blood ties. Furthermore, there are Christian couples who either do not want or cannot have children, and there are Christian gay couples who feel they need the Church's blessing on their relationship and their parenthood. Ironically, although Stan and Sena, at great cost, brought their triplets to South Africa from half way around the world to have them christened, they were not completely open with their congregation about the surrogacy origin of their babies, for fear of being judged one way or another.

What, then, constitutes 'family'? Müller (2002:12) states that any group describing itself as a 'family' should be honoured in that way. The term 'family' should be inclusive, and how a family is put together should not have to conform to pre-conceived definitions but should be defined according to the members' subjective stories of belonging to a particular family. For example, Zucker (2003:34) refers to the life of Abraham and Sarah, depicted in Genesis as 'that wonderfully dysfunctional first family' whose issues of love, hatred, physical violence, blended families, the other woman, the other man, step-children, jealousy and favouritism make 'quite a narrative'. Gillis (in Carter & McGoldrick 2005:15) argues that our family cultures should be kept diverse, fluid and unresolved, accepting of the input of all who have a stake in it. Even our rituals, myths and images should not serve the interests of any one class, gender or generation, but should be open to perpetual revision. 'We must recognize that families are worlds of our own making and accept responsibility for our own creations' (2005:15).

Some of the varying shapes of 'family' were demonstrated in the stories of the different research participants, with all of them experiencing the general unacceptability of these non-traditional forms, judging by the largely negative responses they had encountered from various communities in the different contexts of their lives. This was despite the fact that all the families to which they had belonged had esteemed the values of commitment and respect, values identical to those held by members of traditional families. Helga and James, for instance, were very aware of the disappointment amongst some of their close family members that they had chosen to life a childfree life. It seems that a greater willingness to reinterpret the concept of 'family' would be helpful and healing to those on the borders of conventional practice.

Balswick and Balswick (1998:254) point out that Jesus radically redefined the concept of family as inclusive when he said: 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother' (Mark 3:34-35). With those words He deconstructed the idea of family characterised by blood ties, contract, law and conditional love, and challenged the community of faith to be 'family to one another, so that we can offer Christ's love and support in emotional

and physical ways…' (1998:254). On the face of it, it could even seem that Jesus actually undermined the family, if one takes into account that he chose the single life, and taught a radical discipleship which placed its adherents at odds with their families: 'For from now on, five members of a family will be divided, three against two and two against three; father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother against son's wife and son's wife against mother-in-law (Luke 12:52-53). However, in the wider context of His teaching it is evident that He was not against strong family life, but heeded the warning that loyalty must transcend family life and extend to the Christian community of family, as a whole (Balswick & Balswick 1998:298).

From a research point of view, Jorgensen's (1991:212) study on how families define themselves as 'families' made it clear that there are often great differences between the professional therapist's understanding and that of families themselves. Various disciplines (clinicians, ministers, lawyers, researchers) regard the term 'family' in a number of different ways: all are in line with the particular epistemology in which they are positioned, and the activities they are performing. However, in the context of this thesis narrative, the researcher was reminded of how fluid the descriptions of family are from the viewpoint of the co-researchers, and how graceful, empowering and loving it is to include the a-traditional family, in thought and deed, in the Family of Christ. Müller (2002:106) points out that in light of the fact that Christianity is an inconclusive religion, standing in the present, but reaching to and dreaming about the future, the Christian family reflects this inconclusiveness. It is, therefore, essential for families to reach out to each other, and be liberated from unbending structures that are damaging to the concept of family life.

8.3 Parenting: motherhood and fatherhood

According to Horowitz, Hughes and Perdue (1982:2), parenting can be defined as a role, a process, a task and a skill. Parenting, as a role, is performed by individuals, families and institutions. It is a process that involves individual parents in direct nurturing and nourishing activities. The parenting activities of families and institutions tend to contain the element of coordinating and facilitating events and resources associated with the growth and development of children. One of the

main tasks of parenting is taking up the challenge for adults and institutions to create an environment favourable to the child learning social participation and personal responsibility. In the words of the authors, parenting, with all its joys and pains is, and always has been hard. It involves 'the skilful and creative use of knowledge, experience and technique. It is a 'complex, multifaceted act' (Horowitz et al 1982:3). It is also an act that complicates and enriches one's identity.

Furthermore, parenthood is seen as part of the developmental stages in life. Erikson (in Meyer, Moore & Viljoen 1988:170) describes eight different life stages, with each stage embodying a developmental crisis. These crises are precipitated by an interaction between social influence and epigenetic development (Meyer et al 1988:161). Early adulthood gives the opportunity to share one's life (and one's identity) with another. Failure to become intimate with a partner so that one would be able to generate procreation, amongst other things, could lead to isolation (Meyer et al 1988:170). Sena was the one co-researcher who openly expressed her need to take part in all the stages or seasons in life, in order to feel that she had truly participated in the fullness of life. She had a deep desire to become a mother. Even as a teenager, she looked after the neighbours' babies for the sheer enjoyment of it. Declining payment for her efforts, she would even sleep over when the parents went out for the evening. In the middle of the night, when the children woke up crying, she, and not the parents, would be the one to soothe them and change their nappies. She felt isolated during the nearly twenty years she and Stan were childless. She described her position as that of someone who simply did not fit in: as a childless person, she didn't belong even with the 'childless group', as those women were career-orientated, while she just tagged along from one place to another because of her husband's professional opportunities. The researchers' experience was that that children serve as 'markers' of development in terms of the rites of passage of the life cycle. For instance, attending the weddings of friends' children reminded James and Helga that they would not take part in such profound rituals celebrating the various stages of adulthood. Becoming part of the parent club was seen an achievement and a huge enjoyment for Sena, Tienie and Samuel: they felt it made 'real' adults out of them.

The arrival of children 'to begin or complete a family' is usually taken for granted, and encountering fertility difficulties is met with feelings of utter surprise, denial, frustration, isolation, anger and bewilderment (Barker 1990:9). The pastoral viewpoint of Anthonissen (1989:60) highlights the effects that infertility had on the co-researchers:

> Infertile couples at times experience intense alienation from God and view themselves as stigmatised by and excluded from the normal flow of life. They view themselves as non-entities without hope or future. They are in need of a God, a Father, who is bent upon humanity and who is offering liberation for the excluded.

8.3.1 Motherhood

In all cultures, the ability to fall pregnant and take on motherhood is regarded as an important milestone in the female developmental graph (Szabo 2002:1). If that potential is obstructed, it usually leads to stress and anxiety. The presupposition is that children (at least in a heterosexual marriage) are both a right and an expectation from various communities and society in general. Ironically, many couples use contraceptives, or apply other preventative measures for years to prevent pregnancy, only to find, when they are emotionally or financially 'ready' for children, that it has become nearly impossible to achieve. The discourse that couples can plan, space and control the number of children, had, in the case of Helga, Sena and Stan, contributed to their feelings of helplessness and anger. Hester felt out of control and vulnerable, because she could not fulfil the maternal expectations her community had of her.

According to Schwartz (1993:48), the maternal figure is 'other', not merely to men, as Simone de Beauvoir maintained in her book *The Second Sex*, but to all human beings. For instance, our awareness of self begins as we distinguish our body from our mother's body. Furthermore, whatever 'Mother' was or what she was imagined to be, continues to be a reference point for the rest of people's lives. Schwartz says many ideas surrounding motherhood are born of fantasy and need, leaving room for plenty of contradictions. For example, maternal behaviour is seen as inborn, so that every woman should be capable of being a good mother, yet

'bad mothering' has been blamed for a lot of 'societal ills', from homosexuality to overeating; in her personal capacity, a woman may be powerless, yet as 'mother' she is assigned strength. Further, on the individual level, a mother is often taken for granted, while society imbues the institution of motherhood with a series of attributes that glorifies her as altruistic and nurturing, making her larger than life (Schwartz 1993:49). Motherhood, much more than fatherhood, it seems, is infused with qualities of creativity, and powerful life-giving energy. It also speaks of heroism, not only in the day-to-day sacrifices that most women make for their children, but also in the fact that before the medical technological advances in gynaecological practices of the past decades, many women lost their lives during childbirth.

Chodorow (1978:11) says that although we can talk about a man 'mothering' a child, if he is the child's primary nurturing figure, or acting in a nurturing manner, we never talk about a woman 'fathering' a child. Being a mother, then, is not only bearing a child, 'it is being a person who socializes and nurtures' (1978:11). She points out that women as wives and mothers reproduce people (their children and partners), physically and psychologically. But they also reproduce themselves, in terms of reproducing 'mothering', both daily and generationally (1978:36).

These dominant discourses concerning the power of motherhood, make the failure to attain maternal identity a substantial loss, for both a woman who does not 'become' a mother, and her partner, who fails 'to make' a mother out of her. Sexuality and parenthood are closely linked, although in the Western culture this is rather underplayed, as opposed to the African context. However, when couples experience infertility problems, there is a much clearer connection between sexuality and the ability to procreate. Couples often develop sexual difficulties when they repeatedly fail to become pregnant (Coetsee 1989:23). Sena mentioned that sexual difficulties plagued them from time to time as a matter of course, as it did other couples who went through similarly gruelling infertility procedures.

8.3.2 Gay 'motherhood'

In Chapter 6, the issue of gay parenting was addressed in great detail, and it was pointed out homosexual men and women are still seen by wider society as unfit to raise balanced, well-adjusted children. Comments such as 'sick', 'wrong and perverted', 'sinful' and 'promiscuous' are often heard in the same breath when gay parenting is mentioned. Tienie and Samuel felt that this discourse is partly fuelled by lack of knowledge, and taking part in this research was one way in which they could try to change perceptions and biases. Another reason for the negative evaluation of gay parenting, they felt, was straight parents' conviction that their beliefs and values relating to 'family' and childrearing would be undermined if gay parenting were 'allowed' to openly exist. They found that, if they were willing to candidly discuss their unconventional situation with strangers who stared at them or made negative comments, they could put a personal face to gay parenting, and escape the identity-less power of stereotyping them as 'those gays who think they can be parents'. Tienie and Samuel understand the concept of mothering in a very wide sense: it is not something that only females can do, and they see the roles of father and mother as interchangeable and fluid.

Tournier (1963:71) wrote about the enormous power of fear, saying that it 'is the catalyst of suggestion, and suggestion implants all kinds of stubborn and absurd fears in the hearts of even the most intelligent and courageous men' (1963:67). It appears that even the fear of fear causes people to become afraid to acknowledge it. Fear then turns into 'a vague anxiety' that hangs persistently in the air because it has no specific object. Tournier (1963:69) says that every fear nourishes all other fears in an individual's life. Fear tends to create what it fears. He posits that the most damaging fears that crop up in childhood are those related to sexuality.

Weingarten (1994:152) describes how homophobia makes it particularly difficult for lesbians to become mothers. In recent years, lesbians have been rebelling against mainstream culture and its disapproval of a homosexual partnership when it comes to rearing children. Not too long ago, the practical issue of becoming pregnant or adopting as a single mother was a real obstacle, but the internal struggles are often even more trying. With the aid of sperm banks and new adoption laws that do not discriminate against gay couples, the possibilities of

lesbians becoming mothers without conceiving children in heterosexual arrangements broaden considerably. Weingarten (1994:153) posits that lesbians tend to find themselves in an unfortunate double-bind situation concerning motherhood. As young girls (whatever their sexual orientation turns out to be), they grow up within the western culture of 'compulsory motherhood'. In other words they should want to become mothers in order to fit the bill of being true, balanced and sound females. However, the double bind kicks in when the lesbian expresses and/or pursues her desire to become a mother. She is then told by society that it is wrong. Culturally, motherhood and selflessness are intertwined, and the idea of a lesbian mother is, by definition, selfish. The reasons are twofold. First is the absent father rhetoric that says children suffer without a dad. Second, in openly living as a lesbian, the mother exposes her children to society's homophobic discrimination and the feeling is that children will subsequently be damaged by it.

8.3.3 Fatherhood

Fathers are important to any child's development, and one cannot say that all family lifestyles are simply equal. Yet the lifestyle where fathers dominate, intimidate or use violence is certainly highly objectionable. In that case, no father at all is the better option, according to Weingarten (1994:142). She points out the important role that some men play in children's lives, in spite of their not physically living with the lesbian family. Men like grandfathers, uncles, friends, honorary fathers and, of course, biological fathers can supply a strong male presence to add to the female household. She also points to the upside, that children in lesbian households gain another mother, alongside their 'primary' mother.

Weingarten (1994:143) underlines the importance of fathers in the lives of boys and girls alike, as well as the notion that masculinity and nurturance combine well. However, the strong belief that fathers are the main financial providers and disciplinarians for their families challenges the discourse of fathers as nurturers. The family is, amongst other things, a power system, with power unequally distributed between parents and children and between spouses, with the male typically dominant. Male dominance has been perpetuated by societal systems

and religious teachings (Zinn & Eitzen 1993:338), and a perceived threat to male dominance is often met with hostility or violence of some sort.

Weingarten (1994:143) challenges some of the assumptions of the absent father rhetoric, such as the idea that an absent father is completely absent, while he is, in fact, merely physically absent, but psychologically not at all. Secondly, 'if father absence causes problems, father presence prevents them'. And lastly, there is the assumption that the two-parent family is always preferable to the single-mother family, and that the second parent should be male. It is not so much the generalities of behaviour in families that are crucial, but rather the contexts within which they are taking place. Competent adults (of any gender), living in peace and harmony, can parent well. To be able to provide the beautiful experience of 'home' is what the crucial factor in parenthood boils down to, according to Weingarten. To be able to make a home, to actively produce a place (physically, psychologically and spiritually) where you and others feel at home, is a sign of good living and good parenting. It will be a place where intimacy is nurtured and creatively sought out, by all ages and genders in the family, regardless of life's difficulties and members' personalities and whims. It boils down to radically listening to each other, being aware of cultural influences, and resisting and transforming those cultural messages that are oppressive (Weingarten 1994:211).

The structure of the family is seen as entrenched in a larger network of influences. Although parents are important socialising agents, the child is also an active social being who shapes the parents, and both are shaped by the larger contexts in which they live (Zinn & Eitzen 1993:315). Both Stan and Sena, and Tienie and Samuel were very aware of how differently they perceived themselves after they had become parents, and how differently others in turn saw them.

8.4 Discourses of death

8.4.1 Infertility as death

All the researchers had at one point had to grapple with the strong discourse surrounding infertility that it is somehow equated with death, and is usually articulated in two ways. In the first instance, infertility spells death for a relationship, or could very well lead to its demise. In the second, infertility is, in one

way or another, the result of deadness already present in the relationship. The reason is that infertility is both a medical condition and an emotional experience. The longer a couple struggles with infertility, the greater the probability that their relationship will experience enormous strain (McGuirk & McGuirk 1991:16). Infertility can destroy the love between two people because it maims the dream they had of themselves as parents caring for a family of their own; it disables their sense of self, their sense of being a couple and their sexuality. When a husband battles to *make* his wife pregnant, or when the wife *loses* the baby, or when the couple does not manage to *acquire* a pregnancy, it is often experienced as much more than merely a medical, physiological problem at the cellular level. Infertility has the capacity to announce and speak to the couple about the quality and validity of their relationship on an emotional, psychological and mystical level. Infertility can subtly, but powerfully suggest to the couple that their very relationship is basically infertile, and therefore does not bear fruit. Infertility can mercilessly taunt one of the partners that the other one doesn't really love him/her, doesn't really want to have children, or have un-confessed sins and for those reasons the pregnancy is being 'blocked' in the mystical, spiritual sphere. The voice of infertility can, rightly or wrongly, place blame on an individual, in an attempt to find reasons and make sense of the helpless situation. When infertility is present, its deadness, sadness and starkness can cast doubt on every area of a relationship, if its misconceptions are not firmly kept in place. It has the cruel ability to curse even the fertile parts of a couple's world, and can transform that which is growing and breathing life in their union into a parody.

Infertility cuts off the next generation. Infertile couples lose not only the chance to have offspring, but to see themselves and their partner in their offspring as proof and reminder of their commitment to each other. It is a double blow, and the lifeless voice of Infertility is often quick to come with a nasty suggestion: 'You are wasting your time with the wrong partner. Get out while you can, and try to have children with someone else. The fact that there are no children is a sign and metaphor of your barren, unfruitful, uncreative relationship'.

Infertility does not limit its effects to the infertile couple. Unless the would-be grandparents have other grandchildren, infertility can also brand them as 'infertile

grandparents' (McGuirk & McGuirk 1991:16). All the researchers had asked themselves: Who am I if I'll never be able to have children? What am I willing to do to have children, and how can I grow past the desire for children? What would children bring into my life and relationship with my partner?

8.4.2 Grieving for loss

Grieving is the natural response to the experience of infertility as death, or at least as a significant loss. Kübler-Ross (1969:28) developed great insight into the different phases of grief, and regarded the 'dying as teachers' to those who wanted to learn more about the emotional journey they were on (1969:28). In her book, *On death and dying*, she simply tells her dying patients' stories of fear and hope. The infertile person or couple is dying to their ability to procreate. The process of dying to dreams of becoming the parent of a biological child also involves dying to a part of self, and it resonates with Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, applicable to losses of various kinds.

The first stage is described as *denial and isolation*, when most patients refuse to believe the diagnosis. Some would concoct long and intricate ways of holding onto the refusal to accept the reality presented to them. Denial is not only initially present, but reappears from time to time in order to make it possible to carry on and even pursue life while it is still available (1969:39) The second stage she refers to is one of *rational and irrational anger*. It involves a movement from: 'It can't be happening to me' (from the first stage) to a bitter question of: 'Why does it have to be me?' Anger is a way of staging a revolt against the dire situation, and an effort to get some emotional relief from extreme feelings of helplessness.

The third stage involves *bargaining,* which is employed for brief periods during the illness from start to finish. Kübler-Ross (1969:84) sees bargaining as a typical human manoeuvre, one that even children are capable of, and involves asking (instead of demanding) to postpone the inevitable. It places its hope on attempting a kind of transaction: 'If I promise to behave in this or that manner, please grant me this one (last) request.' She found that patients mostly bargained with God, and that the promises made could often be traced to feelings of guilt about some or other issue in their lives.

The fourth stage involves realisation of the loss, and it typically leads to *depression*. According to Kübler-Ross, the patient usually expresses or describes two kinds of depression in dealing with terminal illness. Reactive depression refers to the sadness and feelings of guilt the patient experiences when losses are contemplated and endured in the course of the illness, a kind of looking back to past losses.

But a different kind of depression sets in when the patient realises that death (infertility) is imminent and the losses in the future will even be greater. There is no future. Kübler-Ross describes this sadness as 'a tool to prepare for the impending loss of all the love objects, in order to facilitate the state of acceptance…' (1969:87). This is a silent grieving, during which the patient turns his/her emotional and spiritual resources to the mystery of what lies ahead after the end has begun. It is also a time when a renewed search for meaning of the person's life, with all its disappointments and joys brings a sense of peace and closure.

The last stage of *acceptance,* if it is reached, is usually devoid of depression or anger. The patient has gone through a period of mourning and has reached a point where the fight is over. There is an element of relief, even of calm expectation.

8.4.3 Grieving for a dead child

Although it is possible to grieve for a living child for various reasons, Geerinck-Vercammen (1998:58) states that experiencing the death of one's child is one of the most difficult forms of loss to endure. When a child is stillborn, the bitterness of Death is even more cruel than usual. The natural rhythm of life has been turned upside down: birth brought forth the end of life, and parents have to say their goodbyes to a child who should have been welcomed into the world. Parents have usually formed a concrete attachment, and made physical and emotional room for the new child in the family (Werner-Lin & Moro 2004:249). Medical personel encourage parents to see and name their dead baby, even to handle the body and in the process gather as many memories about the child and the situation around the birth and death as possible. Jolly (1987) and Janssen (1995), cited in

Geerinck-Vercammen (1998:59), concur that seeing the deceased baby, even though it is difficult to face the pain, generally holds more positive than negative possibilities. In looking at and even taking pictures as mementos of the baby, there is a real, tangible person to mourn. Even if the baby is deformed, is it still advisable to face the child than be haunted by images of some kind of monster delivered by the mother.

Although the experience of loss cannot and should never be placed on a scale of grief, there are perceived differences (at least in the way society tends to see it) between losing a foetus through miscarriage, losing a child through stillbirth and losing a baby who was born alive. In the case of the stillborn baby, a relationship with the parents and especially the mother was formed in utero. The father's hopes, dreams and DNA secured the baby. The child grew and developed because of their symbiotic union: 'the most intensive bond possible between humans' (Geerinck-Vercammen 1998:58).

She mentions a number of specific aspects that normally present around the issue of stillborn babies. The parents never saw and knew the baby as a living child, and that makes it hard to fathom a true image of the child as a person. Although the contact between the parents and the baby is very short-lived, the temporary meeting does help the grief process along, because the sad reality is confronted full on. When a child is stillborn, the parents contemplate their potential share in the outcome, and blame themselves for real or imagined wrongdoings. A mother in particular could have severe feelings of guilt and uselessness. These could take many forms and tend to leave her feeling that she (or her body) could not protect the baby from death, that she is incompetent as a woman and mother. The parents tend to feel very alone in their grief. The child has not been known and loved by their social circle, so, while they receive a lot of sympathy for their loss, it is thought that they, as parents, should be able to get over their pain relatively easy. Geerinck-Vercammen (1998:59) goes on to explain that not only has a child been lost, but the parents are affected by a dent in their self-confidence about future pregnancies. If they fall pregnant again, that pregnancy and birth are usually filled with anxiety and fear. Normally a lot of attention is heaped on the grieving mother (probably because she is the one who went through the delivery process),

but less on the father. He often struggles with negative feelings of self-worth, while he tries to support his partner and understand his own disappointment and loss.

Geerinck-Vercammen (1998:52) describes four stages of grieving parents' reactions as she saw them in her experiences as a social worker.

The first stage of denial, betrayal and deadening is characterised by total disbelief at what has happened, ranging from mere minutes to weeks. The parent(s) are engulfed by an emptiness that is made evident through a kind of emotional absentia, great difficulty in concentrating and an inability to fathom and accept the dire situation. It is nearly impossible to counsel such persons at such a time and it is more meaningful to show them emotional support. These reactions are obviously extremely functional, in that they take the impact of the emotional pain to such an extent that it shields people from going mad with grief.

The second stage is described as non-acceptance, whereby emotions of anger and protest are prominent. The search for reasons for the loss is on and the guilty party is snuffed out. It could be seen as the doctor, God, the deceased baby, the partner or the person themselves. Even a situation that had nothing to do with the tragic event can be viewed as the reason for the heartbreak. A feeling of helplessness prevails, whether a 'guilty party' could be found or not.

The third part of the process is basically a head-on confrontation with the horrendous loss. Intense grief is experienced, and the full realisation of the death of the child as well as the loss of the imagined future together is felt. Emotionally and physically, the grieving parents suffer. Moreover, they sometimes find themselves at a spiritual crossroads, when their trusted theology no longer fits into the mould of what they have recently endured. Interestingly, this phase of confrontation is described as the most helpful and positive in the journey, despite the despair that goes with it. It seems that the act of confronting grief aids the process of healing and acceptance in the time to come. The term 'confronting' in this instance does not mean to have a confrontation with or to resist or put up a fight with grief. It seems rather to conform to the following definition:

> To confront is to be able to face things (or people) without flinching or avoiding them, simply being fully aware of them, paying attention to them, being present comfortably with them, and not necessarily having to do anything to them or about them. In talking about confronting, we are talking about awareness: consciousness, the ability to perceive.
>
> (French & Gerbode 1992:34)

The fourth and last stage involves acceptance and integration. The act of grieving is a natural process, and the focus should be on an active participation, not a passive experiencing. Keirse (in Geerinck-Vercammen 1998:57) describes the action of overcoming grief in terms of various tasks. The reality of the loss has to be accepted and the pain has to be experienced. The person must adapt to the environment without the deceased and inject sufficient emotional energies into old and new relationships.

The discourse that infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth or the death of a baby shortly after birth are not as trying and devastating as losing an older child, with whom there has been more bonding, is short-sighted. It tends to lead to the kind of well-meant advice to 'get over' the loss as quickly as possible, and try again for a baby. The researchers who had had these experiences were adamant that death demands grieving for a particular pregnancy, or a particular child. Even in the case of loss of an embryo, anguish and sorrow are experienced. Hester, Helga and Sena agreed that, little as one child cannot replace another child, one pregnancy, cannot replace another.

8.4.4 Daring to denounce death

The death discourses described above do not imply a passive submission to the effect of infertility on the part of the co-researchers. To the contrary, as explained in Chapters 4 through 7, as well as in this chapter, none of the co-researchers simply accepted their 'allotted fate' of infertility and childlessness. Instead, they tried all possible means within their power to rise up against their given reality. For instance, they made use of medical biotechnology and surrogate motherhood, exercising gay parenthood, adopting a child or reformulating their childlessness by living a childfree lifestyle.

These respective pro-active means of responding to infertility and childlessness reflect a theological positioning which finds its roots in the resurrection of Christ. In rising from the dead, we have arisen to a new life. His resurrection is a resistance to death and a rising up for life against sin and for salvation, against evil for good. His resurrection is also a resistance to the deadness of infertility and childlessness including the discourses supporting these realities. At the same time, it is a rising up to bring new and alternative narratives to life in the face of barrenness, as in gay parenthood and childfree lives. Gutierrez (1977:158) says the work of Christ on Calvary should be conceived as a re-creation, a breath of freedom and complete fulfilment.

In summary, this chapter discussed some meta-discourses underlying the narratives introduced in this thesis. Although numerous discourses relate to the various stories, those presented here are dominant. In the following chapter the researcher will reflect upon certain aspects of this and other chapters, including the research process in its entirety and the thesis in general.

CHAPTER 9

PASTURING, REFLECTING AND GIVING REST TO THE LAND

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart
And try to love the questions themselves.
Do not seek the answers that cannot be given you
Because you would not be able to live them
And the point is to live everything
Live the questions now
Perhaps you will gradually without noticing it
Live along some distant day into the answers.

Rainer Maria Rilke

9.1 Overall impression

During the research and documentation of this study the researcher was continuously, involved in a spiraling process of designing, conversing, writing, contemplating, re-designing, reflecting and anticipating. However, having arrived at a point where the last chapter had to be written, long after the gestation of the research idea had taken root, and sprouted life, the researcher was challenged to reflect anew on the process. In shaping the last chapter, it was essential to take a retrospective look at the research journey. In a sense she, the researcher, had come full circle: the end evoked the beginning in such a way that the end itself seemed to be a new beginning.

The configuration of the nine chapters was designed to tell a particular research story starting at Chapter 1. It presented as an idea on infertility that could be compared to a seed planted in rich soil, insisting on being narrated. One of the most important things discussed was the motivation for the particular research theme. Chapter 2 presented aspects of the researcher's personal and professional identities, layered and intersected with her identity as researcher, which showed, among other things, how she was herself, subjectively, part of the research. Two of her identities, the 'self' as childless woman, and another, her identity as researcher, were emphasised in the context of the infertility theme.

Chapter 3 outlined the epistemological and methodological points of departure of the postfoundational, social constructionist narrative approach employed.

Metaphors of working the land, tilling, harrowing and planting, harvesting and giving rest to the soil were used throughout to describe the researcher's figurative understanding of the research process. 'The Seven Movements' described in Chapter 3 were used as the specific methodological metaphor and practical rite throughout the research thesis in a spiralling, and recursive manner. In Chapters 4 through 7, the narratives of the diverse groups of co-researchers were shared, with each group reflecting a different (but, by no means, exhaustive) manifestation of infertility and childlessness. The 'harvest songs' of the respective storytellers resounded through the chapters as they communicated their experiences and responses. In the following Chapter 8, traditions and discourses again came to the fore in an interpretation of the corresponding, related and discordant themes of the various co-researchers on infertility. Eventually the research configuration came to a time of rest in a place of pasturing and reflecting in this final chapter.

In this chapter, the title, the research process, dimensions of understanding, the co-researchers and their relationship with the researcher, as well as the influence of the research undertaking on the researcher are reflected on in terms of both insights and limitations. The researcher also included a dream she had that presented itself amidst the dreams and hopes, anticipations and images of the co-researchers. The researcher presented her dream to all the co-researchers and the reflecting team as a gift.

9.2 The title

The title: *Narratives of couples affected by infertility: daring to be fruitful*, developed eventually into the preferred name of the research undertaking. It was easier said than done to formulate this, because right from the start the researcher wanted to include the story of a same-sex couple. Thus, the traditional understanding of infertility, referring to the inability of a male and female partnership to produce biological children, was challenged. In Chapter 1, however, the researcher explained that, in the context of this thesis narrative, the definition of infertility would be expanded to reach beyond the obvious literal, biological limits. Untill a few years ago, it was accepted that gay and lesbian couples would be childless, because of the biological impossibility to produce children with someone from the same sex. In a sense, they were regarded as childless (or

infertile) by design. Muzio (1999:197) says, until recently, it was thought that mothers and lesbians were two, discrete, nonintersecting groups. It was assumed that children could not be born independent of heterosexual relations. Lesbian mothers are a relatively new social phenomenon, reflecting 'the birth of increasingly active and cohesive lesbian communities' (1999:197).

The term 'narratives' refers to the 'storying' of the research theme by the co-researchers. It denotes the fact that they described their realities in the context of their infertility and/or childlessness in story form to the researcher. She was more interested in the meaning and social constructions of these stories than in the 'facts' of the details or the sequences of the events (Freedman & Combs 1996:40). The word 'narratives' also implies the epistemological assumptions of the social construction and narrative research paradigms that influenced the researcher in her approach. Further, 'narratives' in the plural form, point not only to the various stories of the four different groups of co-researchers, including the story of the researcher herself, but also to the many narratives of multiple meanings within the one story of one single group (or couple). These multiple meanings highlighted the fact that individuals live their experiences in terms of their multiple identities. The co-researchers, as individuals, and as couples, also demonstrated their multiple identities. It points to the phenomenon of plural identity in terms of Ricoeur's description of 'cohesion of life in common' (Barash 1999:33). It assumes an intermediary configuration between two extremes of being an individual and being part of the spirit of peoples: 'a social-political entity above and beyond the individuals constitutuing it' (1999:33).

The use of the preposition 'of' indicates the notion of 'by', implying that the couples themselves took subjective ownership of their narratives. It means that these personal stories are told from the viewpoint and lived experiences of the co-researchers, by themselves, in the language they preferred (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:viii). In addition, they were involved in all the aspects of their entire storytelling process, starting from the first word of the first conversation, and moving on to the documented thesis manuscript, as it currently exists. If the title had used the word 'on', instead of 'of', the implication would have been that the researcher was speaking for them, interpreting on their behalf and presenting

them to the reader on their behalf. Heshusius and Ballard (1996:175) proposed a reimagination and articulation of what being a researcher means: 'in restoring a participatory and embodied understanding of what is involved in constructing knowledge, we might perhaps think of research as a responsiveness to the integrity of life forms beyond the self.' It refers to a 'non-egocenctric responsiveness', an 'awareness of kinship' with the research subjects, and require respect and wisdom (1996:175).

According to the co-researchers, a couple is composed of two people choosing and negotiating to connect and relate to one another as a couple. It includes those who are married and those who live together. It can be said that any two people who describe themselves as a couple, can be seen as a couple. The concept 'couple' should be understood as the exclusive, committed partnership between those individuals who are in a physical (sexual or romantic), emotional, intellectual and spiritual relationship with each other, e g James and Helga, Sena and Stan, specifically in the context of desired parenthood. 'Couple' in this sense, thus easily accommodates the homosexual partnership of Tienie and Samuel, in view of the fact that homosexuality and gay parenting exist socially and are lawfully acknowledged. The researcher does not regard Hester and her daughter, Florence as a couple because they are not in an emotional, sexual relationship. In fact, Hester's current partner, and/or previous partners were invited to take part in the research, but they all declined. They felt it would be an awkward social situation, and the specific theme of infertility made the prospect even less attractive. In order to thicken Hester's story, the researcher and Hester decided to include Florence in the narrative.

The word 'affected' refers to the fact that being infertile or childless has had an influence on the couple or individual. They do not feel neutral about the issue of having children, rather, it 'acts upon them', 'moves' them, 'has an effect upon' them and 'touches' them (Hayward & Sparkes 1982:18).

The concept of 'infertility' lies at the heart of this thesis and is used in the biophysical sense of the word (stemming from the Latin, *infertilis,*), namely 'not fertile or unfruitful' (Hayward & Sparkes 1982:603). On one level it refers to the inability to achieve a viable pregnancy after 12 months of regular, unprotected

intercourse (Smith & Smith 2004:48). At the same time it, it should also be understood in its mysterious and prophetic sense of the word with the implied meanings of growth, development, transcending, birthing, adjusting and transforming. Living a fruitful life would involve much more than merely begetting biological off spring, but would also reflect a certain attitude to life where ideas, relationships, dreams and language comes to fruition in a way that not only enhances oneself, but is life-giving to others as well. It refers to the capacity to create something of abundance, to shape a dead end into an open possibility. It means to be able to bear fruit and be prolific in various areas of life. It carries with it the aptitude and gift to enjoy what you have, and 'to simply have your whole mind on what you are doing' in such a wat that 'a well-cleaned, well-cut carrot is a praise of God (Versfeld 2004:31). Fertility is and becomes a way of being, far more encompassing than the biological and historical state of begetting children. At the same time, giving birth to children, fathering children, adopting children, or just loving the children in your world – even if they are not 'your own', is indeed one of the most profound ways of being fruitful, and experiencing the fullness of life. If something is 'fruitless', it is 'unsuccessful, unprofitable, vain, idle and useless' (Hayward & Sparkes 1982:463). A person can indeed be 'fruitful' in some areas of life, and fruitless in others.

The extension of the title: 'daring to be fruitful' indicates both a declaration concerning the responses of the researcher and co-researchers to infertility and childlessness, as well as a subtle invitation to the reader of this thesis. It summons a dare or challenge to the reader, and especially those with biological children to re-think the notion of childlessness and those affected by it. It also dares those readers who want to, but cannot have children of their own, to ponder on and recognise the fruitfulness that is apparent in their thinking and actions. The notion and proposal of daring to be fruitful, furthermore, lies in the greater scope of the spiritual understanding of God's presence in the world and the lives of people. Ghandi said: 'Act, but seek not the fruit of your actions'. For Vardey it means, that your actions flow out of who you are, that is your fruit. It's a bit like being in love – when love just flows out to the person you are in love with (Vardey 1995:85).

9.3 Epistemology and methodology

The preference for a practical theological and postfoundationalist, social constructionist epistemology was stated in Chapter 1. In accordance with the interdisciplinary movement of postfoundationalism, relevant literatures of various disciplines were consulted to inform the research theme. This included quantitative studies, and systematic sociological introspection angles, besides research approaches from ethnographical and narrative perspectives. However, one of the researcher's motivations for taking a position in the above-mentioned paradigm is that it represents her current academic, professional and personal position.

The researcher's interdisciplinary literature search generated a much greater research harvest on infertility from positivistic and quantitative perspectives, than from social constructionist standpoints. In approaching this thesis from a social constructionist viewpoint, the researcher subsequently did not focus on medical or psychological classification systems with regard to infertility. This thesis, shaped by its postfoundationalist point of departure, was much more interested in the interpretations of the subjective experiences of infertility and childlessness than in scientific definitions of the state of infertility.

The choice of this particular methodology gave the researcher the freedom to concentrate on a small sample of only four stories, contextually, and in depth. However, this intensive research process was laborious and slow. In the context of narrative research, having as many as four different couples (five, including the researcher) taking part in the research, meant that the processes of continuously conversing and reflecting, from the first conversation to the last written word, added up to a time-consuming and concentrated effort. The researcher had at least three conversations with the respective co-researchers (with one couple she had four), which in the end, proved worth her while. As the relationship between the researcher and co-researchers became more relaxed, and as they became more comfortable with the strangeness of being actively involved in the social constructionist, narrative approach, they started to share their stories with more ease.

'The Seven Movements' developed by Müller (2002:8) were used as the specific postfoundationalist, social constructionist, narrative tool to apply the practical

research procedure. It presented the possibility of doing research in a non-linear, reflexive manner, while acknowledging both context and tradition. It opened space for reflection on God's presence, without forcing preconceptions. This approach furthermore focused on interdisciplinary investigation and developed alternative interpretations that took into account the specific contexts of the co-researchers and researcher, but also pointed beyond the local community.

The in-context experiences listened to and described, provided a thick description around infertility and childlessness, and enabled the researcher to explore related disciplines in order to understand and write the stories of the co-researchers in their complex entirety.

The interpretations and development of experiences in partnership with the researcher, co-researchers and reflecting team comprised a reciprocal interaction of going back and forth. This proved a very interesting part of the research process, as various members of the reflecting team commented on and interpreted experiences in markedly differing ways. It was clear that, *inter alia*, they were unmistakably influenced in their thinking by the different disciplines they worked.

The influence of dominant discourses on the co-researchers' experiences, thinking and attitudes in relation to infertility and childlessness was glaringly obvious. From the researcher's perspective, the 'presence' of traditional beliefs and historical standpoints was almost palpable as a force to be reckoned with, and some co-researchers found it very liberating to become more aware of the power of these 'knowledges'. The gay couple, Tienie and Samuel, and the black woman, Hester, were the most cognisant of the often, destructive, propensity of these interpretative traditions, because they were the most affected by them.

The co-researchers unselfconsciously wove God into all their stories. The researcher never introduced it into the conversation, but asked questions relating to the experiences already shared. Possibly the mere fact that the researcher, was carrying out research in the discipline of Practical Theology, and not Psychology, for example, influenced the co-researchers to focus more, and share more about spiritual considerations. This tendency refers to the so-called Hawthorne effect, cited in Babbi and Mouton (1998:642). It again became clear that God means

many different things to different people. The mystery and familiarity of God became apparent in these narratives. He was sometimes close enough in their lives for His hem to be touched, like the woman who suffered from blood flow, and often so clouded as to be completely impenetrable.

An attempt to thicken the research narrative by relating it to other disciplines highlighted the diversity of understandings within different academic areas. It also demonstrated that various thinking paradigms do enhance each other. The practical theological and postfoundational social constructionist narrative point of departure was, however, maintained throughout, and, a search for optimal cohesion rather than an eclectic approach was always uppermost. Sometimes there was a similar or even identical finding across the different disciplines, but it would be described in a different language. Sometimes differences diverged so widely on the theme of infertility that it was hardly credible that the same theme was being addressed. For instance, childlessness in the context of conservative Christian theology and then in the discipline of Sociology where gay parenthood is researched rather than judged, is a case in point. However, the challenge is to show that it is often on the borders between disciplines that new discoveries take place (Van Huyssteen 2006:9).

Part of the value of this thesis research resides in the fact that alternative interpretations extended further than the local context. Although the research is not intended to be representative of similar infertile or childless groups, the fact that the stories were told, listened to by the reflecting team and others, and documented, presented the opportunity for them to be aired and circulated. This adds in some way to the voices and concerns of those standing between infertility and childlessness, trying to find a way to live with its pain and challenges.

The nature of this research allowed for the subjectivity of the researcher, to such an extent that her personal story was woven into the research story. She shared some of her experiences of infertility as far as comfort allowed, and as far as she thought it would assist in telling the research story with integrity. Using the layered approach in Chapter 2, and making particular use of poetic representation, facilitated her sharing aspects of her personal relationship with infertility. The researcher was in no way attempting to hide her subjective stance, as, true to the

nature of social constructionist, narrative research, one's own story must be integrated into the larger developing narrative. However, not only was she subjective, but was very much aware of her subjectivity in that she entered into dialogue with it, reflected on it and employed it to consider her multiple identities in multiple situations in the research process. Throughout the thesis, the researcher took the liberty of speaking in both the first and third persons, depending on her relative positioning in a specific context.

9.4 The co-researchers

While carrying out this research, I experienced the complex character of my identity as narrator. At times, it was difficult to live with this self and to negotiate its different meanings. It seemed that I was moving both towards and away from the research in these differing identities. I was both the researcher of stories, and someone whose motives, assumptions and experiences were, indirectly, being called into question by her involvement as researcher. I was part of the process in the same way that at least the rest of the co-researchers were: I was experiencing the process as it was happening. I was reflecting with them what we thought was taking place. I was engulfed in this course of events; it took hold of me and, as if with a life of its own, challenged me, gave direction, questioned my beliefs and offered new possibilities in tired understandings and set emotional expressions of what infertility means to these co-researchers and to me.

My understanding of the research process and those of my co-researchers seem to differ in certain respects, not merely because we were living through different experiences, but because I bore, *inter alia*, the identity of The Researcher. It was challenging to apply appropriate language to the actions that permeated the research. I often asked myself: What on earth is going on here? In other words: in trying to describe the experience of the experience I was aware of its strangeness. I was reminded of Ricoeur's (1966) explanation on experiencing one's life, within the examination of life as the moments of structure, growth and birth. He says that, in the first place, life has the essential characteristic of being enjoyed rather than known. There is a sense and being of affectivity at play. Although we can observe things, (including other people), we cannot observe our lives. 'At every moment, I grasp as much of it as I can ever grasp of it' (Ricoeur 1966:411). Although I

realised that the research process was influencing us, perhaps even shaping or changing the way we thought about each other, it would be impossible to say what exactly 'happened', what precisely was different. In some way, this process is a great mystery to me. It is as if a little magic was cast, an enchantment that 'happened' beyond any planned design, which had a very specific character and could never be repeated exactly.

Secondly, Ricoeur (1966:412) describes this 'affective consciousness' of the person's 'myself-body', as presenting life as indivisible. Humans experience themselves as a 'living totality', he says. We can experience different levels and tonalities, but not different parts. That, in fact, would mean the death of life, the end. Thirdly, he discusses the fact that we find we exist. To experience life is to experience a paradox and a mystery. Linking life to the metaphor of support, he explains it thus: 'Because I do not posit my life, I am posed on it, I stand on it as a foundation' and also: 'I not only basically am life, I also rest on it as on my foundation (Ricoeur 1966:412).

It didn't seem so tricky in theory when I was doing the initial planning, and was still only imagining the process. My experience of conducting some earlier research from a positivistic point of view, where the methodology not only favours, but demands objectivity from the researcher, was in some ways a lot easier. The researcher can keep herself out of the subjects' way to a certain extent. In fact, she can also keep both the real and social worlds at bay, study the universe as an independent entity and view knowledge as an image of this world (Steier 1991:2). I think that, at a certain level, the rules of maintaining an objective stance, distant from the subjects, are in the personal sense more comfortable and certainly less complex. For example, it is far easier to only take your own experiences and interpretations into consideration. Less time and emotional energy are expended in incorporating the input of (many) others than if they were on a par with your own views.

Certainly a great deal of time and energy went into inviting the co-researchers to participate in a continuous manner with interpretations and feedback. Some found it difficult to grasp the rationale of the participating process, and to find the time, energy and commitment to give feedback as fully as the researcher would have

preferred. Others found it hard to believe that, as researcher, I was serious in expecting them to take an active role, as true co-researchers. This was completely beyond their frames of reference.

Mary Law (1997) expresses her experience as a participatory action researcher in working with parents of disabled children. She said she found it difficult not to operate as a technician, but as a facilitator, using the stories of the participants 'accurately as the basis for further discussion' (1997:53). This, for her involved a non-directive approach. In my research experience, taking a social constructionist, narrative stance, meant constantly reminding myself that it was not about my perceptions but mainly about the thoughts and intentions of the co-researchers, and that I was not to force anything in a certain direction.

I was intrigued and often surprised by what the co-researchers in certain instances demonstrated in terms of their decisions on and responses to childlessness and infertility. I was again reminded that people are so very unique despite the many parallel similarities in their experiences. It was refreshing and interesting to be drawn into the diverse thinking and acting of the four groups: looking at a single issue, but encountering a myriad interpretations and responses. Each one of their stories affected my thinking on my own story with infertility. This was something I had not expected, and had consequently completely underestimated.

Law also mentions how hard it was for her to live with the uncertainties of doing research when the co-researchers had such a large say in the pace and direction of the action. 'Not knowing where the research process would lead was difficult, as was avoiding the temptation to push things too quickly before the intentions of the participants became clear' (1997:53). She also found she had to make a conscious effort not to be judgmental, and not to be biased towards her own thoughts. In my case, I became quite despondent after receiving feedback from a member of my reflecting team questioning the apparent lack of structure and direction in the conversations. He felt that the process was going around in circles and, that some themes repeated themselves, again and again. He felt that there should be a 'moving on'. For a while I had my doubts about the effectiveness of narrative research. I took his comments very seriously, and I felt like a directionless fake: as if I was throwing a stone into a lake, and daring to call it

research. I panicked. Was I not simply wasting everyone's time by playing at listening to stories? Eventually I recovered from my angst, because I rediscovered the rationale behind narrative research, and reminded myself that I had to trust the process. The particular concerns of this member of the reflecting team thus forced me once more to take a hard look at why I thought the research I was doing was meaningful, why I thought the narrative approach was a helpful way of going about it and why it was so hard to accept and live with vagueness and uncertainty. I concluded that this was not so much about getting answers according to a pre-planned plan, but to get some kind of insight into a perplexing situation.

The narrative research method can be reflected in the metaphor of scouting (Law 1997:58), scouting in such a way that the pathfinder makes herself known to those on whom she is spying, where she forces herself not to take anything and any thinking for granted, and where she realises she will never see the full complexities of what she is looking at (not even with the help of those being watched, and, who watch her in return). The poet Danie Marais says he only writes about the things that bother him, the things that are difficult for him to put into words. In the end, the writing does not bring solutions, but gives him a grip on an overwhelming situation (Van der Merwe 2007:8). I can testify that the research experience has given me a new hold on the issues that intrigued me. It has also taken hold of me.

The researcher did not feel compelled to present 'findings' and 'recommendations' because of the spiralling, reflexive approach and process of this research thesis.

The four different groups (couples) had their own private ideas on my reasons for doing the research (which they let slip now and then) and for choosing the context of infertility (despite what I explicitly told them at the beginning, and continued to mention at times during the research). This never became a major point of discussion, but they gave signals of their thinking by inquiring: How will this research help me (the researcher)? How will it help others? There were also questions and suggestions about my own childless situation. Often, the most interesting part of the conversation took place after the audio recorder had been switched off. It was as if there was at that point, at which the 'research roleplaying'

was over, a sense that previously unspoken things could now be mentioned while standing in the 'real world'. One such example of this was during my second meeting with the gay couple. I had packed the recorder away and we were having a last cup of coffee, after they had shown me their daughters' beautiful clothes and rooms. One of them attended to some business, while the other earnestly inquired why I hadn't yet adopted. He took on the role of researcher (Have you thought about adoption?), prophet (It would make a world of difference to you, like it did to me) and friend/counsellor (I can support you with all the arrangements).

Some co-researchers would use the opportunity when the tape recorder had been switched off, to add to what they had said on record in order to tell the 'whole' story. However, this added information was too sensitive to be written into the research document. They shared it spontaneously, purely for my benefit, so that I could understand them and their situations better. In this instance, the tape recorder was seen as an eaves-dropper, someone who had to leave the conversation before more could be revealed.

9.5 Conversations and themes

Looking back at the conversations with my co-researchers, I am amazed at how much they shared of themselves about the sensitive issues of sexuality, infertility and parenting. On the one hand, it seems almost impossible not to give away a lot about one self, one's beliefs and one's dreams. But in just being willing to take part in the research, they communicated their intention of disclosing and re-experiencing their lives. On the other hand, it certainly wasn't easy to ignite the conversations or to keep the relationship between us going for the duration of the research conversations. It is also true that it is difficult, time-consuming and frustrating to try and understand, to try and negotiate about what was being said and how it should be understood.

I had at least three formal conversations with each of the four groups, and four with James and Helga. These took place over a period of more than a year. I wasn't interested in using a fixed time schedule to plan the conversations, and the consecutive meetings were arranged with a certain kind of flexibility in mind. When and how they would take place was to some extent dependent on how ready they felt to have the next meeting, not only on when I needed to have the next

conversation. It depended much more on our emotional timetables than on our availability after reading and digesting the verbatim reports, or the deadline(s) of the research thesis. (I had, in fact, many deadlines for handing the thesis in.) For example, after the second conversation with James and Helga, I sensed that they wanted to be left alone, that they wanted a break from the research. I had the feeling that bringing the issue of their miscarriages into the open had had slight repercussions on their relationship. These were probably not earth-shattering, but enough to surprise and slightly unsettle them, and they had mainly to do with how the miscarriages had affected them differently. They withdrew a little. I also felt it wasn't appropriate to carry on amidst their emotional imbalance. I thought it would make them feel too vulnerable, and I decided to just leave them in peace for a while. It was only much later during the last conversation that it was possible for them to admit to, and talk about the fact that discussing the miscarriages had resulted in anger on Helga's side. She herself was surprised by her reaction, while James was surprised that she hadn't realised she was coming across in a forceful way. When the issue was eventually put on the table, I was certain that I had not forced it. I do believe if I had pursued this issue of feeling angry, hurt and confused during that particular conversation or afterwards, I could have possibly lost them as co-researchers.

The research took a great deal of time and involvement. The fact that the research conversations were stretched over such a long period was, in my opinion, helpful. Time gave us the advantage of re-thinking and re-living what had been discussed. In our relationship as researcher and co-researchers, a certain amount of ripening and developing took place. We had come a long way from the uncomfortable tensions of the first conversations to the last one. However, I am not saying one should become comfortable and placid in this kind of research process. In fact, it seems that we are all constantly influenced by ideas (and each other), and challenged by the social constructionist/narrative notion that things must be questioned and not propagated, which places us permanently in a position where feelings of uncertainty are a given. By feelings of uncertainty, I mean that one should never be tempted to say this is the last word, the ultimate interpretation of the research that has been carried out.

There was also a fair amount of informal communication between us during the research process, in addition to the reflecting that took place between the consecutive conversations. When we parted at the end (as if we were strangers on the same European tour bus journey, I thought) I experienced it as a loss. We have kept contact with each other, and everyone felt the undertaking had enriched their lives, except Stan, perhaps. He increasingly withdrew after the first conversation. He was not upset or completely inaccessible, but rather amicably aloof. In contrast, the gay couple in particular took a lot of trouble to invite me as researcher (and new acquaintance) into their social milieu.

During the research process I was aware of keeping the practice of narrative research and narrative therapy in mind, and seperate from each other. I continually reminded myself that I was doing research, interacting with the process and writing about it. However, I feel that at least once I probably crossed that line. With hindsight, I realise I 'sinned' in the conversation I had with Hester and Florence. Although Hester translated to Florence, and she understood and took part as far as she felt she wanted, there was a communication problem, which, I think stemmed not only from the language difficulty, but also from her feeling rather uncomfortable. Florence's shyness and the strangeness of the situation, as well as the perceived unequal power relations had a debilitating effect. I felt helpless and frustrated about her life in general, in particular the fact that she apparently didn't see the value of re-writing grade 11. (It got to me that she was unsure of what school subjects she had taken the previous year. Also, she had a young baby with no support from the father, no job, little money and hardly any willpower.) I then unfortunately abandoned my identity as researcher and embraced my identity as narrative counsellor, a role I am used to in my professional life. It was only later, when I received feedback from the reflecting team, that, I realised I had been unaware of crossing the line between narrative counsellor and narrative researcher.

I think it is safe to say that both narrative therapists and narrative researchers are interested in change, and therefore in questioning of ideas. In the mere acts of listening, telling, pondering and re-telling, change is likely to take place. It seems

that nothing will stay the same in the continual complex influencing that takes place amongst all concerned, including their ideas and languages.

The unequal power relation between Hester and Florence and me brought ethical issues to the fore. Riane Eisler (in Weingarten 1998:36) uses the term 'cultural transformation' to describe the shift from domination to partnership. A challenging of cultural beliefs took place between the three of us. Just after the research concluded, Hester and I discussed the issue of her calling me 'miesies'. The reason I didn't just tell her to stop calling me that, a term with which she was comfortable with, and even preferred, was because of the more powerful position I had. If I had just told her to use my first name, it could have been perceived as just another order. Also, timing had to be considered. I didn't want to force the issue (or any other issue) artificially, just because we were doing research together. Hester's story of secondary infertility lies embedded in a story of historical political discrimination.

Antjie Krog says that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that started its first hearings in April 1996, despite its mistakes and incompetence, has 'painstakingly chiselled a way beyond racism and made space for all of our voices' (Krog 1998:278). She proclaims the following to all voices and all victims in this country, and the researcher dedicate this poem of Krog (1998:278) to Hester and Florence:

> because of you
> this country no longer lies
> between us but within
> it breathes becalmed
> after being wounded
> in its wonderous throat
>
> in the cradle of my skull
> it sings, it ignites
> my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of heart
> shudders towards the outline

new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

of my soul the retina learns to expand
daily because by a thousand stories
I was scorched

a new skin.

I am changed forever. I want to say:
    forgive me
    forgive me
    forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please
take me

with you.

Using an open structure for listening to the narratives helped the co-researchers to tell their stories in the way they wanted. That refers not only to the specific methodology employed, but also to the ethical stance. At the start of the project, I introduced the core ideas of narrative research to each group, as a way of explaining what could be expected. It was important to convey that clearly, because, without their dedicated participation, this research would not have been possible. Issues like confidentiality and the possibility of recusing themselves from the research at any time was agreed upon. Smythe and Murray (2000:22) describe it as the 'process of consent': a mutually negotiated, ongoing process between research participants, and not 'a one time agreement'. However, in spite of my explaining as best I could what narrative research, and in particular, this specific exercise, would ask of them as co-researchers, it was only when the process started that they realised what it really entailed. Some of the co-researchers were less enthusiastic than others to become true co- researchers. It was often a bit of a battle to keep them in the reflecting process.

The 'multiple layers of meaning involved' (Alvesson 2003:31) in terms of the research context (social scene), the meaning making individuality of all the research participants, and the 'double-edged nature of language', made the research interesting. Such a 'thicker understanding' of meaning, makes for a socially, linguistically, and subjectively rich and complex situation' (Alvesson 2003:31) between researcher and co-researchers.

I made use of a few semi-structured questions in the first interview, because I wanted to focus specifically on their experience of children (or lack of children) in their lives. I wanted to know how they had reached that place, and how they foresaw the journey forward. I went for the most part with the flow of different thoughts, issues and concerns as they were presented by the co-researchers. However, my responses, questions and mere presence coloured and influenced the research. For instance, the fact that I am childless created a certain assumed understanding between us, that would have been different had I had children. These narratives are so diverse and complex that I can happily say, that I didn't hear 'the' story of people struggling with infertility, but interesting, even contradictory stories of people who live with infertility. But, part of the understanding between us, a kind of knowing what is at stake, issued from the fact that I am without children and that some of them, at one point, were also without children. That, of course, holds certain dangers, because it may be tempting to understand only too well, and assume things too readily, just because someone is in a similar life situation.

I enjoyed the diversity of the groups, but at the same time I was reminded of the localism of peoples' stories. Of the thirteen conversations, only four were conducted with a single person at a time. The rest took place between me and two other people. It was interesting to observe the negotiating that went on between a couple, trying to tell their story or trying to explain who or where they are as a couple.

We also agreed not to make use of their real names. Some of the information given to me was off the record, some was shared with me to be used in the research, but after some thought, retracted.

At the start of the research, when I was dreaming about how it could eventually turn out, I envisaged a large meeting at the end where all the co-researchers and reflecting team would take part in a 'family gathering', sharing their experiences and interpretations. That never saw the light of day. When I mentioned 'my dream of a finale' I found, instead, that those who had participated were not interested. They valued their privacy to such an extent that something like that would be tantamount to prostituting themselves. Furthermore, there was very little interest from one group of co-researchers about the narratives or circumstances of another group. They were all informed at the beginning of the research that there were four groups of which they were one, with a broad outline of the particular context of the others. However, there was not one single question from any couple about another couple. It reinforced my awareness that I am standing on holy ground, and that I have a responsibility to do research in an ethical way.

Quite understandably, the themes introduced by the four groups differed considerably. I had expected some of the preferred themes to be aired, for example, the indignation of the gay couple in not being regarded as worthy enough parents for adopted children. They felt that both the adoption agency and the public at large send them that message. They felt judged, misunderstood and sidelined. Interestingly, more or less the same feelings were forthcoming from Stan and Sena, the couple who had undergone fourteen in vitro treatments. Eventually they had triplets with the aid of a surrogate mother. They felt that many people judged their conduct to be unethical, from both a biomedical and a theological viewpoint.

Although many different themes came to the fore that concerned the groups separately, some themes were common to all. This does not mean that everyone in similar circumstances experiences these themes in their lives.

The following themes were apparent:

- experiencing their situation as perplexing and unfair, to a greater or lesser extent
- being in dialogue with God about why they were in that position and wondering what to do about it

- feeling powerless and frustrated about not having the choices they would like to have
- experiencing loss, grieving for someone or searching for some way of achieving parenthood, that turns out to be difficult or impossible relating to life creatively, adapting, accepting and being inventive.

I believe that the use of a postfoundationalist social constructionist narrative approach allowed for the opportunity to tell their marginalised stories. The approach gave direction to the assumption that they were shaping their own life stories. The questions they asked issued mainly from their preferences and the meaning they ascribed to their stories, and was respected and documented. As researcher, I believe I encouraged them to use the forms and language they were comfortable with in telling their stories, and the way in which I wrote those stories reflected that. For example, Hester spoke in short sentences, using very specific Afrikaans words to express her situation. One of the reasons why I told her story in the form of a poem was that it captured the nature and rhythm of her conversation best.

There were times during and after the conversations that I felt lost in the movement of the dialogue. At times I felt I was doing too little, or too much. At other times I felt nothing was happening in the process, and that no kind of 'development' had taken place. I became despondent. One of the people from the reflecting team commented on how it seem as if the conversations with the group she was reflecting on, seemed to be going in circles. I panicked about that. Did it mean everything had been said? Was I boring the group in question? Then I realised that the onus was not on me to introduce fresh topics. In fact, the mere telling and re-telling of the stories gave rise to the potential of a different story. There were things that I wanted to know, things that I was curious and concerned about, but I do not believe I was forcing the research to move in a specific, pre-planned direction.

The process of transcribing the audio recording was painstaking, but extremely helpful in hearing every conversation in a new way. Standing 'outside' of the conversation, I was often surprised by my own reactions to what was being said

on the tape. In the slow and laborious process of transcription, I had the opportunity to relive the conversation and listen 'between the lines'. I was confronted with a certain emotional quality of which I had not been quite aware when present in person, probably because there were too many things happening at the time when the conversations was taking place. I had to concentrate on 'being there', on taking in what was being said, on thinking about what was happening and how I was going to respond. Or else I was doing my best not to miss something in the conversation that I would regret later on.

The above-mentioned emotional quality that I picked up in a new way by listening to the tapes, added to the story of meaning. The tone of voice, the way in which the co-researchers would interrupt each other, the silences that they struggled to overcome, the poignant words they chose to express themselves, touched me. For fear of sounding dramatic, let me say it awakened me to their stories. I heard them for the second time, as if I was hearing them anew, in reality for the first time. It was like a superimposition on the conversations we had had. At times I became so affected by their 'emotional language' in the audio recordings, that it made me cry.

The fact that I knew Helga and James made a difference to the initial ease with which we conversed. Interestingly, it was easier to listen to the stories of the couples I didn't know at all. It took a while for me to build up trust between myself and all the groups, and to develop more openness.

I was comfortable doing narrative research, because it matched my approach on the personal and professional level. However, even though I am naturally at ease with respecting different people's viewpoints, there were moments when I felt the research was not achieving anything worthwhile. Where were the climactic highpoints we should be experiencing?

I sometimes saw interesting patterns developing, for example, Hester and Florence showed signs of appreciating each other in a new light as mother and daughter. There were moments when I thought they understood that they firmly belonged to each other, even beyond what blood ties could have offered them.

9.6 Gifts of fruitfulness

Initially, before I started conducting the conversations and writing the research document, I planned to keep my personal story out of the picture as far as possible. In fact, in one of the drafts of the first chapter I once wrote: 'As narrative researcher, my own story of not having children will be firmly in the background'. In the end, despite the fact that I had planned to reveal only the absolute minimum to both co-researchers and reader, my story managed to get free. Perhaps, after the many years of being disciplined to keep its voice down and not make a song and dance about children, it was finally determined to have its say.

After I had started to document the research, I realised it would be unfair and dishonest to purposefully hide my experience of childlessness as a loss in many ways. I reminded myself how very hard it had been – precisely because of the emotional voltage the topic held for me - to get started with the research (it took me a long, long time to get past my own evasion tactics), and to see it through to where I am now typing this sentence. I was thinking of how many tears I cried while listening to the conversations on tape, and how touched I was by the similar experiences of a circle of people who loved and wanted children. I also remembered how pleased and surprised I was that people are so ingeniously, wonderfully creative at finding ways out of a labyrinth that could have made them feel left out and sad. Thinking about all those things made it more acceptable to share more.

I had the expectation, right from the start, that I would find something in experiencing this research process, something I didn't have before. After meeting the co-researchers, I anticipated receiving something from them, too. From Sena and Stan, I received an indication of determination, and insight into how adaptable the human spirit can be. From Hester and Florence, I received the gift of a more integrated outlook on life: seeing the whole, not just the parts. Tienie and Samuel gave me their friendship, as well as their story, while Helga and James, demonstrated creativity and courage in the face of a potentially debilitating childless situation. By ultimately choosing childlessness, they turned the unwanted, the fearsome, on its head.

My gift to the co-researchers, the reflecting team, and the reader is the following dream. Jung underscored the importance of archetypes, which are simply common dream symbols and the meanings they tend to have most often among people whose associations with those symbols are fairly impartial (Browne & Harrison 2002:44). However, he also stressed an approach called 'taking up the context' (2002:44), that means that in order to fully understand the meaning of the symbols in our dreams, we have to take our own 'context', or personal associations with those symbols, into account. Jung (1963:131) says: 'What counts, after all, is not whether a theory is corroborated, but whether the patient grasps himself as an individual.' As dreams are by nature personal, and filled with symbolic meaning, the dream will speak for itself, and is not interested in being analysed as the researcher's dream. However, the researcher will say this much: this dream was constructed out of a number of different dreams and visions that had, indeed, been dreamt. The main theme of the dream is a search for a child who is absolutely real, but always out of reach. Trying to reach the plane that the child occupies, the researcher learned to extend her boundaries, sharpen her senses. She can hear through her pores and see with closed eyes. The researcher knows the child's smile smells like freckled apricots, and she knows her name. But that is the researcher's delicious secret.

But, the idea of the dream as gift is not to hear the researcher's dream as she understands it. It is for the reader to interpret the dream in his/her preferred way, and allow it to speak to the heart.

9.6.1 The dream

> I know I'm dreaming, because once again I'm in this house that I've been dreaming about so often. Imagine a Victorian house, with spacious rooms full of dark, opulent furniture, giving evidence of skilled workmanship. There are expensive carpets, wall hangings and mirrors. Wide wooden staircases swirl up and up to the fifth storey. (My personal preference is for the Colonial style.)
>
> I'm not surprised to find myself in this imposing house once more, because, without a doubt, I belong here, although I'm not

presumptuous enough to think that it is all mine. However, let me give an example of why I feel so wonderfully at ease here. When I entered the green bedroom in one of my previous dreams (and up to that point I hadn't taken much notice of it at all), I was shocked to see that someone had decorated the place in such a recognisable fashion that it seemed to be a true reflection of myself. I identified closely with the colour combinations of the greens, the details of the ornaments, the small box inlaid with amethyst on the dressing table, as well as the aristocratic drapery of the long, heavy curtains. That was how I would have furnished the place if only I had known myself better. And I stood there crying because the moment was just so painful and delicate.

The words that came to me at that point were a clear confirmation of what I knew already: I must try once more to find the powerful Animal that was going to speak to me. I had heard that he had three heads: the first head would deliver the question and the next would give the answer, while the third head would not share its secrets.

Again I was going to leave the house behind. Nobody was living there, except me, who was allowed there from time to time. I would genuinely have liked to live there for eternity on my own. It would take a lifetime to explore only one of the many spacious rooms, but there were two things standing in my way. First, sinister things were taking place on the two top storeys. So ominous and unwholesome were they that, when I had ascended the stairs in one of my previous dreams, I had completely lacked the strength or nerve to go any further. I had been petrified with anxiety and frightened by my own hand that was holding onto the balustrade. I had heard someone say: 'I could strangle you with your own hand, did you know?' Secondly, there was the powerful Animal that I had to find.

I decided to rest before I started hiking to find the powerful Animal. I lay down amongst the fruit and candelabra on the dining room table, and drifted off. I dreamt then that I was standing outside the house looking through the window at a woman amidst the candelabra and fruit, and bright yellow sunbeams. I wondered how she was managing to sleep surrounded by all the light.

When I woke up, I took a handful of berries and flowers, as well as a small bag of wine with me, because I felt it was the right thing to do. I must have walked quite a distance before I realised I was in a deep, cool valley conversing with a lion that had joined me along the way. 'Do you realise I'm quite scared of you?' I asked. I think I suffered a blow from a lion as a child, but my parents deny that. After a long silence he eventually said something like: 'Don't ever try to run from fate, because it will stalk you. Or else, when you decide to stop running from fate and turn around to catch up with it, it will play a game of cat and mouse with you. Isn't that what has happened?'

Although he had helped me, I tried to shake off the lion after that. He was right. I felt guilty about all the things that I'd judged incorrectly. But, because of him, I also knew that I'd come closer to the possibility of meeting the powerful Animal.

I was on the mountain when the drops started falling, lightly at first, and in such a way that I could scarcely hear the singing of the leaves. But, too late, I realised that this was a mighty cloudburst and it was going to drench everything in its path. Right where I was standing, I dropped down in the pouring rain and drank half my wine, and then I joined in the crying, because I'm living in a mystery and dream too much about things that I think are pointing to the future, but that seem merely to be going round in circles.

The Alsatian sitting at the roadside the following morning, in the manner of an owl refusing to take to the sky, didn't really exist. It was just an image that reminded me of how tired I was feeling. A little further along the road I again heard words: 'Fetch the dappled one'. So dead tired was I that I could hardly move. Besides, all I could see was a lone brown stallion grazing on the other side of the stone house. I was tempted to give up and turn away from it all, but feared that whatever was marked out for me would sooner or later start pursuing me once again, back to the same spot, forcing me to start all over again.

I prayed that the horse would stand still while I approached it. Luckily it didn't, because, in its haste to get away, a swarm of bees matted on its body on account of the honeycomb it carried on its head, lifted. As the horse trotted away, I saw it was indeed the dappled one, but also the brown stallion and I knew I should hold the handful of berries to its lips so it could eat. Then it calmly walked me to the stone house.

The woman sitting on the veranda of the house amongst a table laden with food and drink told me her name was 'Wisdom', and that some people laughed about that. They thought she was simple and foolish, and refused the food she prepared. She was young, and certainly more than attractive, but I suspected she had seen much of many past generations. She told me she and the horse were together, and, because the aroma of the honeycomb had whetted my appetite, we could eat.

I was thankful for her good-heartedness, the cheese, fish and bread. She told me there was another guest present who knew me well, but that I wouldn't be able to actually see him right then. In fact, he was the one who had brought the flowers along all the way from the house. He knew all the questions (like a powerful Animal), as well as the answers, but some things are great mysteries and

> weigh as much as a sleeping child whom you carry all day long, a child who would never wake up and whom you could never put down. But he also shared something important with me: the house, with its elegant rooms, was within me, and he and the child I was looking, for were living in it.

9.7 Conclusion: narrative without an end

It is both a challenge and an opportunity to heed the call of involving yourself in a life-giving theology as promulgated by Mercy Oduyoye, says Njoroge (2006:63), because it seems as if its elucidation in all its potential is hard to grasp among the imperfections of life. The birth of the Christ-Child can be interpreted as God saying that He is sending a life-changing gift, and that all who partake of that gift will become bearers of gifts themselves. The Christ-Child is to live amongst us as Emmanuel, 'God with us'. Christ's continuing presence in this world is the story of God's mission to display and invite grace, justice and righteousness in order to mend his creation (Russell 2006:47). God offers Himself to us as an unremitting force of Life that gives birth to emotional, spiritual and biological being, encompassing all possible situations, times and spaces. He proposes to humankind: become a gift to others by allowing yourself to be a birth channel by which the fruit of the Holy Spirit can be born and increased on earth and in heaven. Both men and women, created equally as human beings in the image of God are called to be such magi bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). By wisely following the star, in celebration of the Child that was born, the magi fell down and worshipped him.

> We cannot be happy and unashamed in each other's company if we are hiding behind our gender (or any other excuse) to shirk responsibility. As baptized people, our suffering is salvific when taken on voluntarily and our sharing of the gifts of others gives us the ability to thank God who made us male and female. Happy and responsible in my being human and female, I shall be able to live a life of doxology in the human community, glorifying God for the gifts I receive in others and for the possibility I have of giving myself freely for the well-being of the community while remaining responsible and responsive to God.
>
> (Oduyoye in Russell 2006:47)

Christianity's narrative also tells us that God sent his son to hang on a cross, alone and forsaken. This is the story of God's violence against evil and death, in order to free us from committing violence in word and deed, against each other (Van Niekerk 2008:16). In this research thesis, some parts of all the stories that were shared spoke about the 'violence' that the participants experienced at the hands of those who are not like them, and therefore, often, do not like them. In each one of the cases it was different: Hester was shunned because she couldn't have biological children, something that is beyond her control. Stan and Sena were blamed because they used biomedical technology to produce children. Tienie and Samuel were often regarded as 'a little disgusting' because of their homosexuality, and their parenthood is seen as 'a little sick' in a society, that despite the reality of diverse families still clings to a traditional norm, as the only acceptable standard. Ironically, James and Helga were first pitied and labelled by some because they didn't have children, and then when they consciously decided to live childfree, reproached because it is 'unnatural'.

In seeking and experiencing the presence of God in our lives, the fruitlessness and losses we endure, can be re-imagined and constructed in a different way in order to counteract the silence, passivity and inadequate life-diminishing descriptions within which our lives are often contained and restricted. The researcher and co-researchers have acknowledged their infertility and childlessness. For some it was the first time they had spoken about it openly. In the process of trying to name their barrenness they found new language constructs that helped to reclaim their identities as persons who are fruitful and daring, not limited and stunted.

Ackermann (2006:231) posits that story telling is inherent to professing one's identity, and, subsequently, to finding impulses of hope. One characteristic of story telling is that it attemps to make sense. It helps the narrator to understand a little better: Why?, What is happening? Hoffman (1992:20) says the therapist (and researcher) should encourage a plurality of stories, and associative formats, for example stories, ideas, images, and dreams in order to keep meanings unfixed. The value of a reflecting team's reflexive questioning enhances a mutually influenced process between all research participants (1992:17).

Telling your own story can be risky in terms of yourself and others, and in terms of the journey you are on. It can reveal things about you that you don't want to know, things, that would change forever who you are, or who you would prefer to be. Your tale not only lies on your tongue in the idioms you choose to highlight, but it takes on the contours of those ears that listen. There is power in narrative. Authority and influence are positioned not only in the voice of the narrator, but also in the hearts and minds of those who listen. Even if the listener grants opportunity and space to the narrator for speech, there is no guarantee that an understanding or life-giving response will be offered by those who hear. What happens to the narrative after it has been told?

Ackermann (2006:231) extends an invitation to the listener/reader to apply caution and 'respect for the complexity of the life of the narrator, knowing that what is revealed is but a fragment of life'. Within this fragment of life, is a world full of stories with different dimensions of understandings. The researcher's interaction with the present text, as social constructionist, narrative researcher, has had an impact on how the text was constructed. The meanings and interpretations presented in this thesis were greatly affected by the researcher's co-constructions of her conversations with the co-researchers, her own story, the time span of the research, what texts she read, the broader societal discourses that informed her, and the rest of the research participants' perceptions.

The stories have been told. The same themes in different guises appeared at different places in the text. The theme of infertility and childlessness showed different faces, but all shared the same shape. The presence of the other, the one who is different and possibly excluded, was palpable. Alongside those who were socially marginalised, shadowed in the subtext of the thesis, was also the presence of God. His understanding of and even preference for the excluded ones is a beacon of hope for them. Because humans are made in the image of God, and dignified by such knowledge, those who are infertile or childless do not have to fear that they are defined by their so-called barren selves, barren marriages or barren lives (Gabobonwe 2004:61).

From a social constructionist, narrative point of view, this chapter signifies a time for pasturing, and reflecting and presents the opportunity to give rest to the land.

However, it is not meant to be the end, but is rather a narrative without an end. This text is not complete because the narratives of these couple's affected by infertility are not complete. It is reflected in the title that partly says: 'Narratives of couples affected by infertility…' and not, '*The* narratives of couples affected by infertility…' Not only do the stories of their lives continue, but, the meanings of this text could differ every time it is read, even by the same reader more than once. Within this fragment of life, is a world full of stories with different dimensions of understandings.

With twists and turns, the stories about infertility and fruitfulness have been told, but the story has not ended.

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ADDENDUM A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION AS CO-RESEARCHER

University of Pretoria
Department of Practical Theology
Promoter: Prof J C Müller

Researcher: Ilse Gravett

Title of the study

Narratives of couples affected by infertility: daring to be fruitful.

Purpose of the study

I understand that I am invited to take part in a research study on the narratives/stories of couples who are affected by infertility.
I undertake to willingly share my story with the researcher on the issue of infertility, as an individual, as part of a couple, but also as part of the larger research group consisting of four couples.

Procedures

I understand that I will have a number of conversations with the researcher, and furthermore that I will be treated as a co-researcher and not merely be a subject being researched.
I understand that to be a co-researcher means that I will take part in reflective conversations and/or correspond with the researcher on the conversations that have taken place.
I understand that I will be asked to share my feelings, emotions and beliefs about my story concerning infertility, and will be asked to give meaning and interpretations to my story and the research process as a whole.
I understand that a reflecting team, consisting of various persons from different disciplines for instance, a psychologist, social worker, embryologist, bio-chemist, linguist and minister, among others, will read the verbatim reports of my conversations with the researcher and give their comments.
I understand that I will be expected to reflect on their reflections.
I understand that I will have the opportunity and responsibility to be continuously involved in the research process as a whole.

Risks and discomforts

I understand that there will be no physical risk to me being involved in this study.
I acknowledge however, that I might feel emotionally uncomfortable at some stages in the research conversations or thereafter, as a result of the conversations.

Benefits

I understand that there are no financial benefits as a result of taking part in the research.
However, I hope that in sharing my story about infertility I will add to the available narrative research on the theme, and enrich my lived experiences, as well as those of the researcher and reader of the research thesis in some ways.

Participants' rights

I understand that my participation is voluntary.
I understand that I have no obligation to continue as co-researcher, and that I can withdraw at any time from the research process, without negative consequences from any of the other research participants.

Confidentiality

The assurance of all information being treated as confidential has been given to me, my anonymity is assured and no information about my story will be used in any way if I don't give my permission for it.
If I withdraw all data concerning my story will be destroyed.
I understand that I have the right to the names of all those on the reflective team, although they will not be given my real name.

Statement and permission by co-researcher

Hereby I state that

I am aware of the purpose of the study.
I had an opportunity to ask questions about the research, and that I my decision is an informed one.
I am a voluntary participant, and that I was not forced to take part in the research.
I am fully aware of the fact that the results of this research for the purpose of an academic scientific will be published.

I agree to take part in this research project.

Name of co-researcher	Signature

Place	Date	Witness

Statement by researcher

I gave verbal information about the research project.
I undertake to answer all questions about the research to the best of my ability.
I undertake to keep to the arrangement between the co-researcher and me.

Name of researcher	Signature
Place	Date