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When Religion Matters: A Practical Theological Engagement of Liberian Women's
Narratives and Practices of Healing Post-Conflict

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Abstract

When Religion Matters: A Practical Theological Engagement of Liberian Women's Narratives and Practices of Healing Post-Conflict By Annie Hardison-Moody

This dissertation argues that religion matters for women who seek out healing in light of experiences of violence they endured during the Liberian Civil War. I look to women's narratives and faith practices to argue for a theological understanding of healing as a process that occurs in and through the course of women's lives.

Drawing on feminist post-conflict literature, this dissertation makes a case for including religion as a vital source for women's healing work. It also offers a background and context of the Liberian Civil War, using women's narratives as the backdrop. Using methods drawn from both feminist pastoral care and feminist ethnography, I cultivate a research method that is attentive to the ways religion emerges in and through the course of women's daily lives. As such, I examine Liberian women's narratives, drawing on seven interviews, in which God's presence in the moment of hardship provides a way of envisioning healing out of situations of grave hardship and trauma. I also look to Liberian women's faith practices – namely worship, parenting, and prayer – to argue that healing emerges for women as much in the practices they carry out as in the stories they tell about what they have endured. Finally, I develop a practical theological response to the traumas faced by the women with whom I worked, a women's empowerment group. Drawing on each of these instances of narrative and practice, the dissertation argues for an understanding of healing that is attentive to the complex ways that religion matters in women's lives – through the stories they tell, the practices they adopt, and the families and communities that they form. This necessitates, I argue, a participatory stance by researchers and illuminates the vital place for practical theologians in women's human rights conversations.

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My friends and colleagues have been a generous support to me during this process, notably the women of PCRL and the staff of *Practical Matters*. I feel lucky to have experienced such a true endeavor at interdisciplinarity through my time at Emory and I'm grateful to my PCRL and Practical Matters colleagues for modeling this for me. I also want to thank my writing partners, both near and far: Claire Bischoff, whose thoughtful comments on my work have made me a better theologian and scholar; Abbie Holland Conley and Brandi Denison, who both made meeting to write a joyous event; and Jenna Tiitsman, whose friendship has sustained me during the rough times. Additionally, my dear friends Brittany, Justine, Megan, Brooke and Miriam have always encouraged me and my work. I love you all so much.

I have been able to travel to Liberia, Ghana and Kenya over the course of my work at Emory thanks to the generous financial support of Emory University's States at Regional Risk Program, Emory's Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology, and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Through a Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship with the SSRC, I was able to interact with both faculty mentors (Vincent Pecora and Jonathan Sheehan) and an interdisciplinary group of graduate student colleagues who helped to shape this dissertation into a concise and coherent project. I am thankful to each of these programs and funders for their support of my work.

In addition to such wonderful colleagues and friends, I have been blessed with a dissertation committee that has pushed me to do the work I was meant to do. Elizabeth Bounds has been, since I came to Emory, one of my favorite conversation partners, particularly around issues of women's religious lives. Wendy Farley has been an incredible mentor, helping me to see that I am, indeed, a theologian. Pamela Scully is the kind of feminist scholar I aspire to be: one who is generous in her engagement with others and passionately committed to feminist work on the ground. And finally, working with Emmanuel Lartey, my advisor, has helped me to see what practical theology can be: a liberative discourse that engages global issues and healing practices. I am forever grateful for his support of my growth as a practical theologian.

It is difficult to write about how important my family is to me. Will's family has been my family for the past 14 years, and Susan, Wilton, Seth and Meredith have been there for me every time I have needed them. Jenny Drossner, although we are not related by blood, has been a part of my family since the day I met her in the fourth grade. I am so glad that I came to Emory so that I could see you, David and Emma more often. Our families have so many fun times ahead. My parents are incredible people who have supported me from the beginning – letting me know that whatever I chose to do with my

life, they would be right behind me. My sister, other than Will, is the person who knows me best in the world, and her unwavering support and reminders that my dissertation is not all that I am, helped me to see that there is more to life than this often strange academic world. To Will, my best friend and partner - I don't know how my life or any of this would be possible without you. I love you always.

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INTRODUCTION

In January of 2009, I went to Liberia for two weeks, primarily to attend a conference on post-conflict transformation and regional stability offered by Emory's States at Regional Risk initiative.¹ I stayed in Liberia after the conference to talk with leaders from women's organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the government about gender-based violence and the ways women were working together to promote healing and transformation. An unplanned "perk" of the trip came in a brief two and a half day stay in a small village in Lofa County (in north-western Liberia). One morning before church, I sat with a woman, Sonnie, who was sorting rice to prepare for the afternoon meal.² Sonnie and I exchanged smiles, and we talked about the women's gardens. She offered to take me down to the farm to work with them, laughing when I told her that she would have to teach me what to do. After a period of silence, she turned to me and said, "the women here suffered during the war."³ She then told me about how women were dragged into the bush by rebel soldiers to be raped. She herself had been their prisoner, "out there," she said, pointing to the immense stretch of rainforest that encircled the village. Women were left to find their own way back to the village through the treacherous terrain. The rebels burned the entire village save for two homes in 2000,

¹ Emory's States at Regional Risk project brings together scholars, policy makers, practitioners, and students in five key world regions with the aim of increasing practical understanding concerning the reduction of state risk and the increase of effective public governance and services. For more, visit <http://sarr.emory.edu/>. I am grateful to Emory professor Bruce Knauft for the opportunity to attend this conference.

² All names have been changed throughout this dissertation to protect the anonymity of the women with whom I worked. Additionally, the names of the organizations and faith communities where I worked in the Liberian community in Durham have been changed as well.

³ As the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report "Women and the Conflict" notes, Lofa county was one of the top seven counties that experienced the majority of violations as reported to the TRC. As the report goes on to note, "Sexual violence against women was of a particular nature involving brutal acts of rape, gang rape and multiple rapes, vaginal and anal rape and also with objects, guns, cassava plants, sticks, boots and knives." Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Volume Three: Appendices Title 1: Women and the Conflict." <https://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final> [Accessed 1 July 2011]. 40.

forcing the villagers to retreat to the bush, where many lived for several years.⁴ Others trekked across the border to Guinea or south into Monrovia, the capital. When I asked, at a loss for words, how Sonnie was able to get through all she has been through, she said “only God. God was there.” She continued to shuffle through the rice silently, while I peered off into the bush imagining being trapped there myself.

This conversation, and others that I had while in Liberia, frame the questions that guide this dissertation: Why it is that God must be present in the moment of rape or wartime violence? Does God provide a witness to the event? Does God provide a promise of future healing? If so, what does that healing look like? Does God provide a sense that someone cares about what has happened? In other words, I wonder how starting with the fact that “God was there” changes the ways that we think about violence, suffering, survival, and healing and the role of God in bringing these things to bear. These questions were the result of a longer journey – and not just the journey across an ocean to Liberia. They started with my study at Emory University, and in particular with several ethnographic experiences I had while studying there.

Beyond Institutional Religion: Studying Religion and Health

I came to Emory University after spending two years working in North Carolina for the Division of Public Health. I wanted to study the intersections of religion and public health, particularly as they related to obesity research and nutrition, but my research changed profoundly as a result of ethnographic research that I conducted as a research assistant for the Reproductive Health and Religion Project, a collaboration

⁴The TRC “Women and the Conflict” report notes that “approximately 300,000 Liberians were internally displaced by 2003 and another 320,000 were refugees in neighboring countries; an estimated 80% were women and children.” Ibid, 34.

between Rollins School of Public Health and the Department of Religion.⁵ Although the project addressed the effects of women's religious beliefs on their reproductive health decisions, my own analysis and writing began to focus on the prevalence of violence in the narratives of the women at the homeless shelter where we worked. For a course in Religious Practices and Practical Theology, I continued to focus on gender violence, spending several weeks conducting research in a domestic violence shelter in North Carolina. There, I focused on the various systems and organizations that women affected by violence must navigate, each with its own expectations of who the survivor is and each with its own vision for how justice and human rights are performed, created and maintained. In both of these settings, I have found myself wondering how people survive, endure, and even thrive in spite of this kind of intense violence. What does it mean to envision healing in the midst of pain, woundedness and suffering? How do understandings of flourishing shift when they are placed in critical conversation with women's experiences of violence? How do women experience and survive trauma – not only in the moment of violence – but as it “unfolds” in everyday life?⁶ And how do we care for women who have experienced this kind of trauma?

In addition to these experiences, I have been fortunate enough to attend the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meeting for the past two years (2010 and 2011), where my attention has been focused on the ways that religion emerges

⁵ For more information on this project, visit: <http://www.rhcemory.org/religion-reproductive-health/>. The ethnographic component of our interdisciplinary project on women's reproductive agency was conducted primarily by Dr. Iman Roushdy-Hammady (principal investigator) and myself, under the supervision of Dr. Don Seeman in the Emory Department of Religion. We also worked closely with Dr. Winifred Thompson, Dr. Laura Gaydos and Dr. Carol Hogue from Rollins School of Public Health. I am grateful to all the members of the research team for their mentorship and collegiality.

⁶ Veena Das. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 1.

(or fails to emerge) when women, peace and violence are discussed.⁷ I have found that those approaching these subjects from a human rights perspective often fail to recognize religion as a legitimate frame of reference, despite the fact that for many grassroots activists and, perhaps most significantly, survivors of violence, religion is often a guiding frame for all of life (particularly in an African context).⁸ As anthropologist Sally Engle Merry found in her work on the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, the assumption among international human rights actors is that secular approaches based in the legal or political system will (and should) ultimately triumph over “traditional” or “religious” practices for ending gender-based violence.⁹ This dissertation challenges the assumption that religious practices are (or should be) on the decline in anti-violence or peacebuilding work. Instead, I have found that activists and survivors increasingly utilize religious traditions and practices to address the complicated nature of violence and conflict.

These insights have emerged out of the research that I conducted for this dissertation, with the Liberian community in Durham, North Carolina, and also through fieldwork that I have done in a domestic violence shelter in Raleigh, North Carolina. At InterAct of Wake County, I conducted fifteen interviews with survivors, also spending two to three afternoons a week in the shelter as a participant observer for nine months.¹⁰ While the data from both field sites proved to be too much for this dissertation, the

⁷ My thanks to Emory University’s Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology for the funding to attend these meetings.

⁸ See Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Jacob Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang, Eds. *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honor of John Mbiti* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993); Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁹ Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 15.

¹⁰ InterAct of Wake County is a non-profit agency dedicated to preventing domestic violence and sexual assault, while also offering support services for victims and survivors. Find out more about their work at www.interactofwake.org.

perspective of the shelter clients at InterAct undoubtedly influences how I understand and describe the ways that women who have survived violence draw on their religious practices, traditions and beliefs to survive what they have been through and imagine a new future. In these two settings, as well as in the homeless shelter, where I worked for the Religion and Reproductive Health Project, I heard women talk about the fact that “God was there” in the moment of violence (or the threat of), helping them to get through it. The experiences I had at the homeless shelter, at InterAct and with the Liberian women I worked with in Durham, North Carolina helped me to see that there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of religion in international women’s rights conversations about women and violence. This intervention can be made, I argue, particularly well by theologians with both feminist and practical commitments, as I explore in Chapter one. In this dissertation, I investigate the ways that *religion matters* for women who have survived the Liberian Civil War. I do this by focusing on women’s narratives and practices, which demonstrate an alternative vision of healing as a process that occurs as a course of everyday life.

Why Liberia?

One key question that I feel I need to answer this early on in the dissertation is “Why Liberia?” The more scholarly answer is that Liberia has become somewhat of a case study for international conversations about women, war and peace. The adoption of UN SCR 1325 has led to international attention on the role women play in peacebuilding work.¹¹ In a report released in the fall of 2010 by the International Civil Society Network

¹¹ According to the United Nations Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, Security Council Resolution 1325 “reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.” <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/> [Accessed 8 March 2012].

(ICAN) and MIT Center for International Studies, titled “What the Women Say: Participation and UNSCR 1325,” the invisibility of women’s peacebuilding practices—to funders, international agencies, and national governments—was noted as a major barrier to implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, on women, peace and conflict.¹² The invisibility of women’s peacebuilding work and, significantly, a lack of attention to the ways women think about peace and healing has had concrete implications for women’s lives and for the future of peace processes worldwide. Liberia was a case study for this report, in addition to reports on financing and implementation conducted by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders.¹³ Additionally, the success of the 2008 film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* and the selection of two Liberian women, activist Leymah Gbowee and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize has brought renewed attention to women’s experiences of violence and their role as peacebuilders in this country.

These academic reasons for studying and working on Liberia are not the only reasons why Liberian women are the focus of this dissertation project. In truth, it is a matter of luck, fortune or consequence (providence?) that this topic and this community emerged as central for me. I began studying Liberia during a course on Feminist Theory with Pamela Scully, in the Department of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Emory University. During this course, we explored literature on women and violence, and I read for the first time many of the authors who are featured as conversation partners

¹² International Civil Society Network and MIT Center for International Studies, “What the Women Say: Participation and UNSCR 1325,” http://web.mit.edu/cis/pdf/WomenReport_10_2010.pdf [Accessed 25 June 2011].

¹³ The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders is a civil society organization dedicated to increasing women’s participation in peace work. They have produced a detailed report on cost and financing of SCR 1325. See Mavic Cabrera-Balleza and Nicola Popovic, “Costing and Financing Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325,” Cordaid and the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, <http://www.gnwp.org/what-we-do/policy-advocacy/costing-and-financing-implementation-of-united-nations-security-council-resolution-1325> [Accessed 8 March 2012].

in this dissertation. The most important part of this course, however, came in our decision as a class to create a different kind of final project. We wanted to do something about what we were reading – to find some way of thinking toward a practical intervention in feminist post-conflict transformation work. We discussed holding a conference, creating a blog, or developing a cross-university collaboration with some of Dr. Scully’s colleagues from universities in Liberia, where she was currently working with Emory’s Institute for Developing Nations on projects related to gender-based violence.¹⁴ With the semester drawing to a close, we decided to focus our final papers on a “practical” response to issues of gender-based violence, looking particularly at Liberia, a country we studied a great deal during the course thanks to Dr. Scully’s recent trips there and contacts. My final paper looked at church-based responses to gender-based violence, and it planted a seed in my mind to go to Liberia to see how faith communities were responding to this issue for myself. As I described earlier in this Introduction, I went to Liberia in January of 2009, with many thanks to Pamela Scully for informing me about the opportunity to travel there through Emory’s States at Regional Risk Program. I returned with the set of initial research questions I described above, which have guided this project.

When I returned from Liberia in early 2009, I met and befriended Laura Paynes, the Executive Director of an organization working on Liberian issues in the Triangle area (Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill) of North Carolina, while volunteering together for United Nations Women (then the United Nations Development Fund for Women, UNIFEM), U.S. National Committee, North Carolina Chapter. Laura and I got along immediately, and I decided to work with her for my dissertation. I wanted to be able to spend a good

¹⁴ For more on Emory University’s Institute for Developing Nations, visit <http://www.idn.emory.edu/>.

deal of time working with the community that I focused on for my dissertation, and my family situation made living in Raleigh, North Carolina an easy choice. As I noted above, studying Liberia makes sense, from an academic perspective; the country has received a good deal of attention both because of the harms done to women during the Civil War and because of women's roles as peacebuilders. However, my decision to work with the Liberian community in Durham was more serendipitous, and for that I am grateful. As I describe in Chapter Two, working with Laura led me to Friendship Community Church, where I conducted fieldwork for this project. Additionally, as I describe in Chapter Five, I partnered with Friendship Community Church and Laura's foundation to develop a "women's empowerment group" to address some of the issues of trauma and healing that are present in the Durham community. Before this dissertation proceeds in describing this work more fully, I elaborate the chapter structure that grounds this work.

Chapter Structure

In this dissertation, I argue for engaging local women's narratives and practices as a way to generate a theological reading of the ways healing emerges in women's lives despite the presence of violence. The next chapter begins by outlining the conversation partners, making a case for why religion matters in women's conceptions of healing. Additionally, Chapter one provides a context for the Liberian Civil War, using women's narratives to ground the discussion. I argue that there is a place for a feminist, practical theology in women's human rights discourse around women and violence, in that feminist practical theologians are attuned to the ways that religion emerges in the

everyday stories women tell about their lives and in the practices they engage in order to heal.

Practical theologians must be willing to place women's voices and practices at the forefront of our theological work. To do this, I develop a methodology in Chapter two that draws on pastoral practices of paying attention and deep listening, particularly to those voices that have gone unheard.¹⁵ I bring these methods of attention and care into a dialogue with feminist ethnographic methods of research, particularly the work of Saba Mahmood, Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger and Veena Das. This emerging methodology developed between these two seemingly disparate fields will help to ground the theological language for understanding healing that follows in this dissertation.

The second chapter of the dissertation provides both a reflection on method and a theoretical engagement of trauma and memory. The chapter discusses both the promises and limits of turning to narrative in trauma recovery. While many individuals are able to find healing through talking about their experiences of violence to an "empathic other,"¹⁶ for others telling stories of violence is not possible or desired,¹⁷ so practices of remembering and mourning become important ways of showing rather than speaking of violence. Given both the promises and pitfalls of narrative methodologies related to trauma and healing, this chapter outlines a methodology for the dissertation that engages not only narrative-based pastoral theological methods, but also participant observation

¹⁵ For examples of pastoral theological work in this vein, see Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, Sheryl and Karen B. Montagno, eds. *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression seriously in pastoral care* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009); Emmanuel Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006); Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Teresa Snorton, Eds. *Women out of Order: Risking change and Creating care in a multicultural world* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

¹⁶ See Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

¹⁷ See Veena Das, *Life and Words* and "Violence and Subjectivity."

research, grounded in feminist ethnographic methods. These questions of method are relevant not only to this project, but also to broader concrete issues in pastoral practice, including: caring for trauma survivors who are unable or unwilling to speak of violence, drawing on ritual and practice to illumine alternative arenas for healing for trauma survivors, and ethnographic practices of pastoral care and theological reflection that can “hear” trauma and healing that go unspoken.

Chapter three examines the ways that women repair narratives after traumatic experiences. I begin with seven women’s stories, allowing their words to form the base of the chapter that follows. I look at three themes that emerged in the women’s narratives: 1) healing as relational; 2) God’s presence as a healing resource in narratives of new life; and 3) the role of forgetting, or “going beyond” trauma in the process of recovery. I conclude the chapter with a focus on the ways women’s religious faith is revealed in these narratives, drawing on the themes highlighted above. I develop a theological language for healing that understands healing as a process through which God’s presence in and through moments of hardship and trauma reveals women’s ability to cultivate new life and hope out of suffering.

Chapter four looks to women’s religious practices, most notably through my ethnographic reflections on the practices of Friendship Community Church. I examine the ways that women’s practices of faith – through worship, prayer, and parenting practices – are another way that women repair life after violence. These practices of faith form another element of healing that women create as they search for peace and healing in their lives and communities.

Chapter five returns to practice to describe a program that I created in partnership with both the church where I worked and the community organization run by Laura Paynes. Over the course of several months, we developed what became a six-week “women’s empowerment workshop.” Working with a trauma counselor who uses art therapy as a way for refugee and immigrant communities to heal, non-verbally, from trauma, we created six sessions in which participants made collages that represented their life journey and visions for the future. I describe the work of this group, concluding with some reflections on partnering respectfully with communities of faith in trauma healing work.

The dissertation that follows is, as I have noted, the result of my own academic and personal journey to discover the ways women who have been affected by violence think about and practice healing. What follows demonstrates the following two points:

- 1) That religion matters to many survivors of violence. This must be taken into account in international women’s human rights work.
- 2) That the ways women talk about and practice peace and healing should be placed at the center of our theoretical and theological explorations of what healing is and how it lives in the world.

It must be said that no representation of another person can ever be completely “truthful” or “authentic” (and any study of trauma forces us to realize that the “truth” of memory is incredibly complex).¹⁸ However, I hope that what follows reflects, as best as it can, the

¹⁸ There are always difficulties in representing other people, particularly when it comes to survivors of violence. As Brison writes, “traumatic memory, like narrative memory, is articulated, selective, even malleable, in spite of the fact that the framing of such memory may not be under the survivor’s conscious control,” 31. She goes on to write that representing survivors of trauma can perpetuate harmful victim stereotypes, and “may inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes of one’s group as weak and helpless,” 35. Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). Additionally, as Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes, much of what has been written about African women in a theological context has been about their victimization. I have attempted to, in this dissertation, work against victimization narratives by writing about the ways women both experience and react to

ways the Liberian women with whom I have recreated their narratives and lives following the violence they endured, and the role religion plays in this transformation.

violence, including the ways that they survive, thrive and work for change in their worlds (see Chapter Three, particularly). See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

CHAPTER ONE: WOMEN, WAR AND PEACE

In March of 2010, I attended my first United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meeting, a United Nations meeting that brings together thousands of women representing hundreds of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) from around the world to strategize about how to improve the conditions of women's human rights globally. I was a representative from what was then the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United States Chapter, and as such was able to attend several of the official delegate-attended events on site at the UN. I knew at this point and time that my research was beginning to coalesce around the theme of women, violence and healing – and the role of religion and religious organizations in addressing these issues – but I was not sure about how to address the topic. Should I interview human rights actors who worked at the intersections of religion and human rights (something that I did during the trip)? Or should I focus on the human rights instruments themselves, looking at how the documents, treaties and organizational mandates address – or, more importantly, fail to address – the role of religion in anti-violence work? I spent much of my time at the UN that year acquainting myself with the process, with the ways the “transnational cultural flows” that anthropologist Sally Engle Merry has deftly described actually happen at the UN.¹⁹ In other words, I looked at the ways language about religion was framed, shaped and crafted at the United Nations and the ways that this was then translated and disseminated to local programs and organizations. I attended

¹⁹ Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 19-20. Merry's ethnography documents the ways that human rights are translated from global institutions (like the United Nations) to local NGO practice and programs. This happens through “transnational consensus building,” where global documents and treaties are crafted and negotiated, “transnational program transplants,” wherein social service and legal programs developed by international standards and actors are adopted locally, and the “localization of transnational knowledge,” the process by which local NGO actors come to the United Nations, take in the human rights language and frameworks presented there and then translate this language and framework back to local organizations and programs.

numerous NGO-sponsored events (called “parallel sessions”) at the Church Center Building and the Salvation Army, with topics like: Feminists on the Frontline: Resisting and Challenging Fundamentalisms, Recognizing Freedom of Religion with Human Rights, The Advancement of Women and the Right to Freedom of Religion, and Women, Faith and Development Alliance: Maintaining Momentum. After a week of fieldwork at CSW, I realized that religion has become a “buzz word” for international women’s human rights work. At numerous UN and NGO-sponsored events, I heard that international women’s human rights activists must be “vigilant” in working against “religious fundamentalisms,” while at the same time there was a call to recognize and build upon the “valuable” work of faith-based organizations.

At 2010 CSW, particularly in official United Nations Meetings that I attended, gender equality was touted as the best strategy available to end gender-based violence internationally. In other words, legal and political reforms are given priority over strategies that might (problematically) be described as “cultural,” “traditional,” or “religious.” Despite this fact, talk about religion circulated at the various meetings I attended (which ran the gamut from panels on migration, gender-based violence and intersectionality to organizational meetings for groups like the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and Ecumenical Women at the United Nations). To return to the question of what that word was doing as it circulated the halls of the United Nations, Church Center and the Salvation Army,²⁰ I would argue that the turn to religion was

²⁰ The long-term partnerships between (notably, Christian) faith-based organizations and the work of the United Nations are particularly evident in even the seemingly mundane function of meeting space. The United Methodist Church owns the Church Center building across from the UN where most of the parallel events for CSW take place. The Salvation Army also volunteers its space for parallel events at CSW and this year, they hosted the opening NGO Global Forum for Women, attended by hundreds of NGO CSW participants.

functioning in two ways: 1) the lighting rod phrase “religious fundamentalisms”²¹ served as a rallying point around which women’s human rights actors could mobilize. In other words, religious fundamentalisms were presented as a problem that women’s human rights actors needed to overcome. 2) “Faith-based organizations,” were offered as a promising institutional space for gender equality programmatic work. In this way, faith communities that affirm the ideals of gender equality could be mobilized to support and carry out international gender justice work. On the one hand, religion is something to be feared and combated and on the other, religion offers valuable institutional space and programmatic support.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women: Between Feminist Theory and Theology

This description of the ways that religion functioned at CSW becomes more complicated when examined from the standpoint of practice, rather than discourse alone. Following Courtney Bender’s study of lived religion at an AIDS organization, my focus at CSW and in my larger project is on the ways “religion and spiritual things are made manifest daily” through practice, words and actions.²² Each morning at CSW, I attended worship services planned and organized by the members of Ecumenical Women, a coalition of Christian denominations committed to gender equality and social justice.²³

These services highlighted in visual form the intersections of religion and human rights,

²¹ It is important to note that this word was used rather frequently at the NGO Global Forum and parallel events, without actually being defined. However, in a panel in 2010, titled “Feminists on the Frontline: Resisting and Challenging Fundamentalisms,” AWID released a report on the ways feminist activists define and understand religious fundamentalisms. The report, “Shared Insights: Women’s Rights Activists Define Religious Fundamentalisms,” notes that religious fundamentalisms are best described as an overlapping constellation of traits. In a survey of 1600 and interviews with 51 women’s human rights activists, they determined that activists experience religious fundamentalisms most often as “absolutist and intolerant” (42%), “anti-woman and patriarchal” (24%) and about the “fundamentals of religion” (18%). AWID, “Shared Insights: Women’s Rights Activists Define Religious Fundamentalisms,” <http://www.awid.org/About-AWID/AWID-News/Shared-Insights-Women-s-rights-activists-define-religious-fundamentalisms> [Accessed 8 March 2012].

²² Courtney Bender. *Heaven’s Kitchen: Living religion at God’s Love We Deliver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

²³ For more on Ecumenical Women at the United Nations, visit <http://ecumenicalwomen.org/>.

performatively blending the “stories” of human rights work (the Beijing Platform for Action, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) with the stories of women exemplars, saints and prophets from the Christian tradition. On the one hand, there is a particular human rights story that emerges in conversations about gender-based violence. It begins like this: Studies show that between ¼ and ¾ of all women worldwide will be affected by domestic violence or sexual assault. Gender-based violence is an epidemic across the world.²⁴ The story continues usually with a contextual situation – Women in Africa, Women in post-conflict countries, Women in refugee or internally displaced person camps, Women and global migration. Once the particulars of the problem have been outlined, the story continues to make suggestions for policy and programmatic solutions for ending violence, with most of these solutions based in legal or political frameworks. In other words, the assumption is that to control and prevent gender-based violence, the state needs to assume its proper role in the “protection” of women as “vulnerable” subjects.²⁵ The aim of these stories, offered by those who work on international women’s human rights, is toward gender equality throughout the world. This idea of gender equality, as is emphasized by anthropologist Sally Engle Merry, is often directly contrasted to strategies or solutions that are “traditional,” “cultural,” or “religious.”²⁶ In fact, at UN CSW in 2011, I heard one presenter from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) state that “religion and

²⁴ World Health Organization, “Fact Sheet: Violence Against Women,”

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/index.html> [Accessed 8 March 2012].

²⁵ For more on the “vulnerable subject” see Martha Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 20, no. 1 (2008). Fineman posits a turn to the vulnerable subject rather than the autonomous individual of liberalism. Vulnerability points out that we are all capable of being harmed by one another, or being subjected to diseases or disorders that attack from outside. Pamela Scully has written a salient critique of the use of the frame of vulnerability and protection in international women’s human rights work. See Pamela Scully, “Vulnerable Women: A Critical Reflection on Human Rights and Sexual Violence,” *Emory International Law Review* 23, no. 1 (2009): 113-124.

²⁶ Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence*, 15, 44.

culture are interlinked,” together they form the “basis for violence against women” and “harmful cultural practices.” My fieldwork at CSW left me with the following two questions: 1) What discursive and practical work does a turn to “religion” do for women’s human rights activists? 2) Is that role different from the role religion plays in the lives of those with/for whom these activists work?

As a feminist practical theologian, I found myself in a world that wanted to talk about the ways religion matters in women’s lives – the ways religious institutions discriminate against or oppress women, or the ways that religious organizations can be harnessed to do vital human rights work – without a concrete understanding of the ways that religion actually matters in women’s lives. Religion was only talked about as if it existed in its doctrinal or institutional forms, as if women’s interactions with religion happen only through formal structures. What then, of the ways that religion actually lives, breathes and functions in women’s lives? In other words, I wanted to know how or if religion actually functions in the everyday lives of women who are trying to survive and thrive despite horrific experiences of violence? This, I believe, is an apt place for theologians to enter these human rights conversations, particularly theologians who are committed to the everyday lives of religious people (in this sense, they are practical theologians) and theologians who are committed to the full humanity of women (in this sense, they hold feminist and womanist commitments). My experiences at the United Nations helped me to see the vital role that feminist practical theologians can play in these conversations and debates about the role of religion in women’s rights work, in that we offer a language and a way of understanding the role of religion in and through daily life that speaks to and with women’s experiences.

As Mary McClintock Fulkerson defines it, “in contrast with the definition of normative memory or systematic or philosophical judgment, the practical theological task has to do with the way Christian faith occurs as a contemporary situation.”²⁷

Additionally, feminist theologians like Serene Jones, have turned toward an examination of life and practice in their theological scholarship. In her article “Transnational Feminism and the Rhetoric of Religion,” Jones elaborates on the “nitty gritty play of our everyday practices” that engender a “transnational feminism that seeks the flourishing of women.”²⁸ When rhetoric breaks down, as it often does when people are working across great discursive and community divides, it is practice that can sustain us, that can call us back to the two practices of hospitality and solidarity:

In the intricate tissue of stories and in the awkward and often eccentric motions of practices, people appear before us in ways demanding compassion – their particularity and their vulnerability as well as their flaws elicit from us a response of understanding, if only partially. They also open up the space of our desires and allow our imaginations to be enticed and excited, just as our minds are being educated and sharpened.²⁹

As Jones and Fulkerson rightly point out, life and practice are not measurable; however, they point us toward an understanding of human experience that is illustrative for both theory and theology. Finding myself, a feminist practical theologian, in the midst of international conversations about women, violence and peace, I started to see that my particular training had something to offer these conversations. The following questions emerged: How might conversations about women, war and peace shift if we start by looking at the ways that women talk about peace and healing in their own words? What

²⁷Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7.

²⁸Serene Jones, “Transnationalism and the Rhetoric of Religion.” *A Just and True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics: Essays in Honor of Margaret A. Farley*. Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, Eds. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 104.

²⁹Ibid, 106.

might we learn about the ways women are able to survive after violence by being attentive to the “often eccentric motions of practices,” those things which cannot be measured, quantified or proven? Theologians, particularly those who are attuned to women’s religious lives, provide an alternative understanding of healing and peace that offers a pointed intervention into international conversations about women, war and peace. In other words, we can help these international and local human rights actors to see the ways *religion matters* for women who have survived violence.

When Religion Matters: Thesis and Background

As my time at the UN highlighted, there is a need for increased conversation about how, when and why religion matters for women who have faced experiences of violence. There is a real need to hear what women say about how they negotiate peace and healing in the course of their everyday lives. This is a place where a theology that is both practical and feminist can contribute to the growing conversation about women’s experiences of war and its aftermath. As Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern write in the Preface to their collection *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, pastoral and practical theology have “almost always looked to the parishioner, the believer, the suffering and the practices of religion as central resources in the search for theological answers.”³⁰ Our work centers on the lives and practices of religious people, providing a lens for understanding the ways religion matters in women’s lives. This dissertation is an intercession into the conversations about women and violence that I heard at the United Nations and the ways that religion was talked about as either a danger or potential instrument of change. I speak as a theologian, and as someone who

³⁰ Bonnie Miller McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern, “Preface,” in *Feminist and Womanist Theology*, edited by Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 11.

believes that theologians – particularly those attuned to women’s practices and daily lives – have much to contribute to these larger, international conversations. Not only are practical theologians equipped to pay attention to the intricate ways that religious practices emerge from, challenge and shape communities and individuals, but this disciplinary lens can help to develop a theological language of healing that can provide a valuable counter to the way health is often talked about as a measurable, quantifiable outcome.

In what follows, I explore the ways that religion matters to women who have survived the Liberian Civil War. I look at both their narratives and practices to discern the ways that healing and peace emerge in their lives, families and communities. By hearing what women say and understanding how they practice their faith, I argue that a complex picture of peace and healing emerge. This description of healing is not something that can be measured or quantified; instead, it is a process that emerges in the midst of ordinary life, as women take in the resources of their religious traditions and practices and harness them for survival, resilience and hope for the future. The vision of healing that emerges out of this dissertation is a theological one, developed in conversation with practical, feminist and womanist theologians. It is not based on quantifiable health objectives or measurements of health or peace. As such, it offers an alternative view of the ways peace and healing emerge in and through women’s everyday narratives and practices. This chapter lays some of the groundwork for the dissertation by providing both a historical context of the Liberian Civil War and by introducing some of the women’s human rights and feminist post-conflict transformation literature that serves as a backdrop for the theological work that I endeavor throughout this dissertation.

The Liberian Civil War: Women's Experiences

The context for this dissertation is the Liberian Civil War and its effects on Liberian women living in Durham, North Carolina. It is important, then, to provide some historical overview of the Civil War and some context for the country of origin for the women with whom I worked. Liberia is a small country in West Africa, founded in 1822 by emancipated slaves from the United States and slave boats bound for the United States. The connection with the United States has, through the years, remained strong, particularly in the minds of many Liberians. As Nobel Peace Prize Winner Leymah Gbowee writes,

The connection between us and the United States remained vital, like a blood tie, long after we became a nation in 1842. Our constitution was modeled on America's; our capital was named after President James Monroe. Until the 1980's, our official currency was the US dollar, and even after we had a Liberian dollar, US money was both accepted everywhere and desirable. My friends and I grew up on shows like Sanford and Son, Good Times, Dynasty and Dallas."³¹

Although not always recognized by U.S. Americans, Liberia's sister country played a significant role in both its political and cultural history.

From its founding in 1822 until 1980, Liberia was governed by descendants of the American settlers, known as Americo-Liberians or "Congo" Liberians. These settlers lived mainly in and around Monrovia, developing a system of indirect rule over the indigenous Africans already living in Liberia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.³² This system became a source of profit for the growing nation of Liberia, but this growing wealth did not reach most of its indigenous people.³³ It was only in 1963 that this system of indirect rule was abolished, although the effects of this "colonial-style system of

³¹ Leymah Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer and Sex Changed a Nation at War* (New York: Beast Books, 2011), 7.

³² Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimensions of an African Civil War*, 2nd Edition. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 37.

³³ *Ibid.*, 42.

government” lingered. As Stephen Ellis has recounted, non-Americo-Liberian families born before the 1960’s would have been raised under a system of government in which “national power and prestige lay with an oligarchy of people, most of them with some American ancestry, who professed Christianity, were literate in English, and made a public display of what they themselves called ‘civilisation.’”³⁴ Those who were from indigenous families were looked down upon, until the military coup of 1980, which established Samuel Doe as the first “native born” Liberian President.

Doe came to power in 1980, as a result of a military takeover. As Mary Moran writes, “the young military men who took power violently in 1980 represented themselves as acting in the interests of the disenfranchised: the rural and urban poor, the ‘tribal’ people who had been excluded from real power for the previous 30 years.”³⁵ Doe’s government initially presented itself as the liberating government for the native people, and several dozen Americo-Liberians were killed by this government, including prominent ministers and government officials. In her memoir, *The House at Sugar Beach: In Search of a Lost African Childhood*, journalist Helene Cooper talks about her family’s experience of the brutality of the Doe government toward Americo-Liberians. When indigenous Liberians took over the government, Cooper’s family was in danger, and on the first anniversary of the rice riots, they were visited by a group of soldiers who raped Cooper’s mother. Soon after, her uncle Cecil was shot at Barclay Beach, along with eight other men.³⁶ Her family left exactly one month after the coup.

Many other Liberians from of Americo-Liberian descent left for the United States in the early 1980’s, fearing retribution, harassment, imprisonment and even death at the

³⁴ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 42.

³⁵ Mary Moran. *Liberia: The Violence of Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 8.

³⁶ Helene Cooper, *The House at Sugar Beach: In Search of a Lost African Childhood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 175-8.

hands of the new government forces. Marie, one of the women I interviewed for this project, who later founded a shelter for Liberian survivors of gender-based violence, recounted to me how her family left Liberia in 1980; however, she was unable to make the last flight out of the airport with her family, and was left with an uncle in Monrovia until she was able to escape in the mid-1990's. Ella, another woman I interviewed, told me of her time as a young woman living in Doe's Liberia. Her mother, like Ella, a "Congo woman," (descendant of the settler class) was arrested. Her family moved to the United States in the mid-1980's to escape the persecution.

When Doe came to power, individuals from rural areas who had previously not been a part of the Monrovia establishment now took up residence in the capital city, becoming ministers and government officials.³⁷ As those who previously held power fled to the United States or other countries, Doe's government welcomed those indigenous Liberians who had previously been shunned from political life.³⁸ One such person was Aletha Meah, now the pastor of Friendship Community Church in Durham, North Carolina, another woman I interviewed for this dissertation. Pastor Meah, from Grand Gedeh county, served in the Doe government as Assistant Deputy Minister of Post and Telecommunications. In this position, she was able to travel the world, experiencing new places and people she had never met before, going to Europe, and many countries in Africa and the United States. She also served as an assistant minister in a Baptist Church in Monrovia, and took care of her own children as well as nieces and nephews who lived with her and her husband in Monrovia. As she states it, after the coup, things "settled down," but not for long.

³⁷ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*; Moran, *Liberia*, 80.

³⁸ See Ellis, 56.

By 1983, the support that previously held for the military government was beginning to slip. A coup attempt on Doe's government in 1982 led him to become increasingly paranoid. Although the original 1980 cabinet was "multiethnic," Doe became "fearful of ambitious young soldiers like himself" and began "the systematic purge of all but members of his own Krahn region from the ranks of the elite military forces and strategic government posts."³⁹ This Krahn dominated government, and the increasing retribution Doe forced on anyone who opposed him "prompted the formation of ethnically defined resistance groups, with no political ideology beyond opposition to Doe and led by men like Charles Taylor, whose sole ambition was to gain control of the apparatus of the state."⁴⁰ These conditions of repression and favoritism led to what would become the Liberian Civil War.

The first stage of the war began in 1989 when Charles Taylor and Prince Johnson, then both leaders of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) launched a coup. Supported by funds from individuals in the United States (including, it must be noted, current President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf⁴¹) and militarily by the Gaddafi government in Libya (where rebels received training and arms),⁴² a group of fighters calling itself the National Patriotic Front of Liberia began a plan of attack on their country. Despite the presence of troops from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in 1990, Samuel Doe was tortured and killed by rebels, reportedly on orders from Prince Johnson. While Johnson and Taylor ended up parting ways (Johnson to form the

³⁹ Ibid, 138.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Female President* (New York: Harper, 2009). Additionally, documents have been exposed recently detailing the United States' involvement in Charles Taylor's return to Liberia. See BBC News, "Charles Taylor 'Worked' for CIA in Liberia" <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16627628> [Accessed 8 March 2012].

⁴² See Ellis, *Mask of Anarchy*, 69-71.

Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia, INPFL), their campaigns that moved from the north-east and north-west respectively toward Monrovia marked the beginning of a brutal Civil War during which more than 200,000 Liberians were killed.

It was at this point that members of Doe's government, and notably, members of the Krahn ethnic group, began trying to leave Liberia en masse. For Pastor Meah (then Assistant Deputy Minister Meah), this meant that her life was in danger. As another minister and friend of hers explained during his sermon at Friendship Community Church one Sunday, the day finally came when Pastor Meah knew she had to leave. As she prepared to leave her home, her husband, and the nieces and nephews she had living with them, Pastor Meah sent her children back home to Grand Gedeh county, with the hope that it would be easier for them to escape to Ivory Coast when things "got bad." Pastor Meah then left with her driver for Sierra Leone, without, critically, her government passport (which she believes was stolen) – something that would make getting away from this increasingly regional conflict all the more difficult. When she got to the Sierra Leonean border, she heard from the officials there that she would not be able to cross, that all government ministers must return to Monrovia. It was there that she prayed, knowing that God would "make a way out of no way." Pastor Meah felt that she was delivered from Liberia by God, who protected her because she did not doubt His incredible presence.⁴³ She arrived in Sierra Leone and continued to travel north, to Guinea, where she then took a plane to Ivory Coast. This circuitous route to Ivory Coast was due in most part to the way that the war progressed in the country. Rebels were entering the country through Ivory Coast and beginning to set up deadly check points

⁴³ It is important to note that Pastor Meah and others in the church describe God in male gendered language. I am noting her words here.

where they would often murder, on the spot, those who were even suspected of being from certain ethnic groups.⁴⁴ As the rebels began to bear down on central Liberia toward the capital, the routes out of the country became increasingly perilous.

The war was perilous not only for those women and men who were a part of the Doe government. As the war waged on, other ethnic groups, organizations and national and regional bodies became involved. Doe's death did not mean the end of fighting, as government forces, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), INPFL and NPFL forces continued to struggle for control of the country. As a response to the violence of the NPFL and INPFL, other factions like the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO) emerged in 1991. As the rebel invasion wore on, it was increasingly apparent that the country was spiraling into what would become a brutal Civil War.

This brutality would be particularly felt by women (who experienced mass amounts of civilian violence) and children (many of whom were conscripted into armed service with rebel fighters).⁴⁵ For Laura Paynes, a Liberian woman from Caldwell, just outside of Monrovia, her current work as an advocate for Liberian youth living in the United States is fueled by her own harrowing experiences, and the experiences of children she

⁴⁴ As Ellis writes, "While Taylor was waiting to make a final assault on Monrovia, he was building an impressive personal fief [outside the city]. All roads in NPFL territory, the greater part of Liberia, were sealed with numerous check-points where travelers were liable to be stopped and interrogated and have their goods looted by those on duty. Many Monroviaans derive some of their worst memories of the war from the period in mid-to-late 1990, when the NPFL was establishing itself outside the city. All over its territory, the NPFL set up check-points known as 'gates' along the road, usually consisting of a piece of rope stretched between two poles, manned by gun-toting NPFL fighters, sometimes no more than children. Often these check-points were decorated with ghastly trophies such as human skulls...The US embassy estimated that at one NPFL check-point known as 'No Return,' no fewer than 2,000 people were killed in the course of 1990, their bodies often remaining unburied in the surrounding bush. No one would touch them for fear of being considered a government collaborator." *Mask of Anarchy*, 89.

⁴⁵ As the TRC "Women and the Conflict" report notes, the TRC collected more than 20,000 statements, of which 47% were from women. The TRC designated 23 kinds of violations, of which "forced displacement stands out and represented one third of the reported violations, followed by killing, assault, abduction, looting, forced labor, destruction of property." Women were significantly more likely to be raped. See the "Women in the Conflict" report for more detailed statistical analysis of women's varied experiences during the conflict, particularly pages 28-51.

helped in these early stages of the war. Laura and her family were held captive in their hometown of Caldwell by some of Charles Taylor's soldiers as they made their way to Monrovia. Eventually the young soldiers took the townspeople of Caldwell with them on the road, eventually shutting them inside a church between Caldwell and Monrovia.

Laura and her family were imprisoned there for several days, until the soldiers heard that Prince Johnson's soldiers were headed their way. The group inside the church felt some relief as the soldiers fled, but they did not step outside of the church until several days after they left. Laura, her mother and her little brother then traveled to Monrovia, where they were eventually separated, only to find each other again a year later. She was able to return to her job in Monrovia, working for the US Embassy, but now she would be fuelled to do something about what she had seen and escaped. As Laura tells it, there were dozens of homeless children, many displaced from family and home by the war, living near the Embassy. She began, discreetly (because of her job), to take care of these children, finding them a place to stay and giving them food from what little money she had. This was the beginning of Laura's humanitarian work: "And that was, you know, the beginning of some of the things that I do. And since I came [to the United States], for the 19 years that I've been here, some of the kids most of the kids we had they all grew up. You know, they grew up." They still call her on holidays and for her birthday, and to Laura, these will always be "my kids."

During the first war, a series of peace accords were reached, ending in 1997, with democratic elections where Charles Taylor was eventually elected President of Liberia in 1997, by 75% of the vote. His campaign slogan, "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, I'll

vote for him” reminded Liberians that if Taylor were to lose the election, he would continue to wage war for control of the country.⁴⁶

During and after the “First World War,” women like Laura, Marie and Pastor Meah were playing multiple roles in an attempt to save their families, their children (whether biological or not), and themselves.⁴⁷ All three women were able to make it to the United States before the “Second World War” began; however, this is not to say that this war did not profoundly affect their lives as well. Marie’s work for women affected by gender-based violence began as a result of her own experiences and hearing the stories of women she came in contact with at refugee camps or home in Liberia. Women were traumatized as a result of the violence they suffered at the hands of fighters during the war. As she told me:

It was important to open [the shelter] because there was no shelter, and you had survivors who had been raped during the Civil War and also after the war...and also after the war, post-conflict Liberia. There was an alarming rate of children who were seven to thirteen [in age] who needed a place where they could go to because the community would you know, shun them, you know, so they needed a place.

This account follows what has been reported in the TRC’s “Women and the Conflict” report, which notes that the continued effects of violence against women and girls during the Civil War has caused many women to feel ashamed, corroding their “self-worth and dignity.”⁴⁸

In 2000, “World War Two” broke out between new warring factions, including Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and Taylor’s government.

⁴⁶ Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, 109.

⁴⁷ As Agnes M. Fallah Kamara-Umunna writes, “We called the first war, the one fought from 1989 – 1996, ‘World War I.’ We called the second war, the one fought from 1999 – 2003, ‘World War II.’ Which goes to show you just how horrific they were.” Kamara-Umunna and Holland, *And Still Peace Did Not Come*, 4.

⁴⁸ “Women and the Conflict,” 52.

In the early 2000's, some of the most dangerous years of the war, fighting outside of Monrovia caused massive displacements, with thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing to Monrovia to overcrowded IDP camps and, eventually, the national football field. In 2003, due to pressure from West African leaders, the international community, and, significantly, women's peace movements within Liberia, the warring factions were finally brought together in Accra, Ghana to bring an end to the fighting and develop a roadmap for the way forward.⁴⁹

The film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (2008), directed by Gini Reticker, tells the story of women in the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in Liberia who worked together across religious divides to confront President Charles Taylor and rival warlords to bring peace to their country in the midst of this Civil War.⁵⁰ In the film, we hear the stories of Leymah Gbowee, Etweda "Sugars" Cooper, Vaiba Flomo and Asatu Bah Kenneth, leaders of WIPNET who brought Liberian women together to encourage a ceasefire and to push forward the peace process. For Gbowee and the other members of WIPNET, working for peace through more traditional avenues of politics and the law was dangerous. As we hear in the film, the women could be severely persecuted and punished for criticizing Taylor or the warlord leaders of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). Instead, the women decided to work through

⁴⁹ See Veronika Fuest, "This is the time to get out front: Changing roles and opportunities for women in Liberia." *African Affairs*, 2008 and Fuest. "Liberia's women acting for peace" in *Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa*, Stephen Ellis and Ineke van Kessel, eds. (Leiden: Brill Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ It is important to point out that women are only portrayed in this film as victims of violence and peacemakers; however, women played multiple roles during the conflict, something that I describe in the next section of this chapter. Women were also combatants during the Liberian Civil War, and one of the most notorious female fighters, Black Diamond, was profiled in the BBC audio documentary, See Sorious Samura, "West African Journeys: Part Three," http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/documentaries/2009/04/090430_west_african_journeys_three.shtml [Accessed 8 March 2012]. As Pamela Scully writes, Security Council Resolution 1325 and its accompanying resolutions focuses primarily on women's roles as victims of violence as opposed to considering them as "individuals legitimately aspiring to a variety of freedoms." See Scully, "Vulnerable Women," 120.

their religious institutions, choosing to focus on the word “peace” in their statements and efforts. As Gbowee recalls:

Taylor went to church, and the leadership of LURD went to the Mosque. Taylor could pray the devil out of hell. And we said, if this man is so religious, we need to get to that thing that he holds firmly to. So if the women started pressurizing the pastors and the bishops, the pastors and the bishops would pressurize the leaders. And if the women from the mosque started talking to the Imams, they would pressurize the warlords also (*Pray the Devil Back to Hell*)

For the women of WIPNET, working through religious avenues brought a significant contingent of leadership and supporters through various congregations throughout Liberia. It also gave their project legitimacy in the eyes of the people and leaders of Liberia, drawing upon accepted avenues of redress and representation, including mediation, prayer and the women’s status as mothers.⁵¹ As Gbowee recounts of the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process, women bring special skills to the work of peace: “We know the history. We know the people. We knew how to talk to an ex-combatant and get his cooperation, because we know where he comes from. To outsiders like the UN, these soldiers were a problem to be managed. But they were our children.”⁵²

The women of WIPNET drew on the memory of Christian-based coalitions, bringing in Muslim and traditional women as well, in order to work for peace and an end to violence. As you see in the film, through songs, prayer and mediation, the women of WIPNET were able to draw upon the resources of their congregations as well as indigenous traditions of women’s ritual and political authority to work for peace.⁵³

Gbowee’s memoirs, published in 2011, detail the religious motivations of this movement

⁵¹ Moran and Pitcher, “The Basket Case,” 506-7.

⁵² Gbowee, *Mighty Be our Powers*, 172.

⁵³ For an analysis of women’s ritual authority and political life in Nigeria, see Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (New York: Zed Books, 1987).

and the women's work for peace, which was accomplished both through the work of WIPNET and the Liberia Women's Initiative (LWI). The LWI attended the Accra Peace Conference in 2003 and conducted letter writing campaigns to African First Ladies to "impress upon their governments to intervene in ending the war in Liberia."⁵⁴ Eventually, the women's work paid off, and a peace deal was finally brokered at the Accra Peace Conference.

Taylor resigned the presidency on August 11, 2003, and a transitional government was appointed. This transitional government was headed by Chairman Gyude Bryant. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an establishment of the 2003 peace accords in Accra, Ghana, was formally established by this transitional government in 2005. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf won the elections held in the country in 2005. President Sirleaf was inaugurated in 2006, making her the first African woman to serve as head of state. The war was over, but the women's work had just begun, as Gbowee writes:

The psychic damage was almost unimaginable. A whole generation of young men had no idea who they were without a gun in their hands. Several generations of women were widowed, had been raped, seen their daughters and mothers raped, and their children kill and be killed. Neighbors had turned against neighbors; young people had lost hope and old people, everything they'd painstakingly earned. To a person, we were traumatized. We had survived the war, but now we had to remember how to live.⁵⁵

As this quote demonstrates, the work ahead for Liberians was immense. This is some of what this dissertation addresses, the ways one community remembers "how to live" and the ways that peace emerges in the midst of this. As Gbowee's quote continues, "Peace isn't a moment – it's a very long process."⁵⁶ As a part of the peace process, a Truth and

⁵⁴ "Women and the Conflict," 45.

⁵⁵ Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 268.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Reconciliation Commission was established in 2005.⁵⁷ In addition to working with the Liberian community in Liberia, the TRC engaged the Liberian Diaspora in the process, the first TRC in history to do so in such a sustained manner. This process provided a forum for 1,631 Liberians living outside of the country to participate in the statement-taking process of the TRC. This was important because key actors in the conflict (including witnesses, perpetrators and victims) were known to be residing in the United States, Europe and various countries in West Africa.⁵⁸

As the above narrative of the Civil War, woven with stories of women who experienced it illustrates, women played multiple roles during the conflict. In the next section, I elaborate upon this fact, arguing that it is crucial for theologians to be attentive to the complex realities of women's lives, particularly women who have experienced violence, war and trauma. While feminist theorists who work on issues of post-conflict transformation have addressed the multiple roles women play in conflict,⁵⁹ much of feminist and practical theology has focused on women's roles as victims of violence. While this dissertation is meant to be an intervention that brings theology into the feminist post-conflict transformation and human rights conversation, in the next section I take a brief turn to illustrate the dialogic process of this endeavor. In other words, I argue

⁵⁷ The mandate of the TRC in Liberia was to "document and investigate the massive wave of human rights violations," to "establish the root causes of the conflict and create a forum to address issues of impunity," to "identify victims and perpetrators," to create a "forum to facilitate constructive interchange between victims and perpetrators," to address economic and other social human rights violations, to review Liberia's history to determine the causes of the war, to deal with the issues faced by women and children during the conflict, to create a report, and to "make recommendations to the Government of Liberia for prosecution, reparation, amnesty, reconciliation and institutional reform." Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Consolidated Final Report*, www.trcofliberia.org/resources/reports/final/volume-two_layout-1.pdf [Accessed 6 March 2012], 12-13.

⁵⁸ Laura A. Young and Rosalyn Park, "Engaging Diasporas in Truth Commissions: Lessons Learned from the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Diaspora Project," *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*. 2009. Volume 3, 341-343. As Young and Park write, "Diasporas have long played a role in movements to precipitate transitions in nation states. Those who have been forced – or who have made the difficult choice – to flee a regime are those who often have the greatest interest in pushing forward a transition," 348.

⁵⁹ Helen Scanlon and Kelli Muddell, "Gender and Transitional Justice in Africa: Progress and Prospects," *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2009. Volume 9:2, 9-28.

that this rich literature, which demonstrates the multiple roles women play related to violence, can provide a more complex picture of women's relationship to violence than is often presented in theological scholarship.

Complicating the Ways We Talk about Women and Conflict

As has been widely noted, women in Liberia experienced numerous acts of violence during the conflict, including rape, sexual assault, forced displacement, sexual exploitation, murder and assault.⁶⁰ One woman told this story to the TRC:

Sixteen armed men jumped over the fence, burst the gate and came into our apartment. They took cell phones, money – everything. I had my children – my son, my daughter, my two nephews and my nurse – with me. A boy with a hammer came toward me and said, “This woman is for me.” He hit my head with the hammer. He pulled down my jeans in order to rape me. My little daughter started screaming. And the man grabbed my screaming child from my side and knocked her down and started raping her. He just grabbed her from me, raped her to death and laid her to the side.⁶¹

The gravity and magnitude of women's experiences of sexual violence during the war was a key focus of the TRC, which established a gender committee in 2006. As the former TRC Gender Advisor Anu Pillay writes, however, this led to a “tendency to focus on victimhood, especially sexual and physical violations” in the work of the Commission. She notes that the “full spectrum of women's involvement with their multiple identities did not fully emerge from the hearings.”⁶²

As Pillay and others have noted, this focus on women solely as victims of conflict completely “ignores their role as accomplices in a negative sense or as activists and comrades in a positive sense.”⁶³ The TRC report, titled “Women and the Conflict,”

⁶⁰ “Women and the Conflict,” 30

⁶¹ Ibid, 41.

⁶² Anu Pillay, “Truth Seeking and Gender: The Liberian Experience,” *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2009. Volume 9:2, 97.

⁶³ Anu Pillay, “Violence Against Women in the Aftermath,” *The Aftermath: Women in post-conflict transformation*. Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen, eds. (New York: Zed Press, 2001), 39. See also Codou Bop's essay, “Women in Conflicts, Their Gains and Their Losses” and Sheila Meintjes's essay “War and Post-War Shifts in Gender Relations” in the same volume.

provides a more comprehensive reading of the multiple roles women played during the conflict, including as combatants (either forced or voluntary). As the report notes, for many women combatants it was either “kill or be killed”:

I wanted to help the rebellion. I thought that if my brothers could do it, well so could I. I wanted to do like my brothers. When you are little, you want to do as if you were tall. When you are a girl, do as if you were a boy.⁶⁴

In her memoir, *And Still Peace Did Not Come: A Memoir of Reconciliation*, Agnes Fallah Kamara-Umunna describes her work with these young Liberian women who either joined or were conscripted into service, women who served as combatants were also abused sexually and forced to cook and clean for the male fighters. Hearing their stories caused Kamara-Umunna to wonder “if they had it worse in the war. Their jobs weren’t done when they left the battle field.”⁶⁵ She found these young women after the war, squatting in an old government building in Monrovia, “raising babies of rape and struggling to get by. Many were alcoholics. Some were sex workers. Others were on the verge of entering the sex trade. ‘What choice do we got?’ they asked me.”⁶⁶ Struggling to get by both during the war and after, these women did what they had to to survive. As one woman, Comfort, told Kamara-Umunna, “I don’t want no man to help me. I can support myself. Myself can help myself.”⁶⁷

As Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen illustrate in their introduction to *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, the issue of women’s identity in and after conflict is complicated. They write that, “women who live through war and conflict do not fall into a single group. Not only their experiences differ but also their connections to

⁶⁴ “Women and the Conflict,” 49.

⁶⁵ Agnes Fallah Kamara-Umunna and Emily Holland, *And Still Peace Did Not Come: A Memoir of Reconciliation* (New York: Hyperion, 2011), 231.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

the conflict, and these experiences and connections determine their position in the aftermath.”⁶⁸ Women are not only victims of war-time violence; they are also agents of both positive and negative change and transformation.⁶⁹

As scholars of conflict and post-conflict societies attest, conflict can provide a nation and its communities with an opportunity to redefine and transform its political and religious structures and practices to build upon gains made by oppressed groups, like women, during the conflict.⁷⁰ The women’s movement in Liberia’s role in moving forward the peace process and helping to elect the first African female president have been lauded internationally as a positive example of this type of transformation that can occur in the midst of and post-conflict. This is not to ignore the significant hardship and trauma women experienced during the war. It is to say that the devastating effect of conflict is not all that remains in the “aftermath” of war. New possibilities for *transforming* individual, communal, and national life also emerge. While conflict and violence impair and impede social and individual life, they also can provide an opportunity for individuals, communities and nations to re-imagine what it means to reconcile, heal and thrive.

The above brief points highlight the need for *theological* scholarship on women, violence and peace that is attentive to the following issues:

⁶⁸ Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen, “Introduction” *The Aftermath*, 5.

⁶⁹ As Pamela Scully aptly points out, the omission of women’s roles beyond victimhood in conflict has concrete political ramifications, in terms of women’s future leadership. As she writes, “How do vulnerable women who need protection morph into strong leaders who will help shape new terrains of liberty and security?” See Pamela Scully, “Vulnerable Women,” 119-120.

⁷⁰ See *The Aftermath*, also Veronika Fuest. “This is the time to get out front: Changing roles and opportunities for women in Liberia,” and Fuest. “Liberia’s women acting for peace” in *Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa*, Stephen Ellis and Ineke van Kessel, eds. (Leiden: Brill Press, 2009).

- 1) Women experience violence and work for peace in a variety of ways. They are not only victims of violence, but also carry it out. They not only suffer violations, but also actively work for peace on international/national/local scales and as a part of everyday life.
- 2) The “aftermath” of violence is a pivotal stage for women who are working to transform society. As Pillay, Turshen and Meintjes argue, to harness this transformative power, women’s full experiences of violence – the harms and the gains experienced – must be accounted for.⁷¹

While the two points above have been addressed in feminist literature on post-conflict transformation and peacebuilding, they pose, I believe, a quandary for Christian theological scholarship on women and peace. This, in part, can be attributed to what Shelly Rambo has named as the tendency toward a “redemptive gloss” in Christian stories of suffering and redemption.⁷² Mary McClintock Fulkerson echoes this when she states that, “The very conviction of God’s redemptive presence tempts the theologian to map sense and order onto the worldly.” Instead, she argues for a theology that provides “ever-fuller attention to the complexity of the world.”⁷³ As Fulkerson and Rambo point out, our first impulse when faced with suffering is to make it understandable, preferably by placing it within a frame of spiritual reference in which good triumphs over evil in a linear fashion. But what does this sort of story, this type of remembering violence, do to and for survivors? Does this speak to their experiences of violence, pain and (possibly) peace? To address these questions, I begin by outlining how these issues have been

⁷¹ Pillay, Turshen, Meintjes, “Introduction.”

⁷² Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 8.

⁷³ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6-7.

addressed in human rights discourse, arguing that feminist, practical theologians have an important contribution to offer this literature and discourse, notably through their understanding of the complicated ways religion matters for women who have experienced violence.

A Human Rights Approach

International conventions and treaties like the UN's Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), ratified in 1981, have provided local and transnational women's rights activists with a powerful language and orienting framework from which to launch a critique of practices, policies and laws that hinder the full flourishing of women.⁷⁴ Human rights policies and conventions emerged on the international stage in the 1940's and 1950's to address the harsh violations of the state to its own people, through practices of genocide, colonialism and torture. Initially the focus on war, genocide and torture in the language and policies of international human rights practice neglected the position and experiences of violence against women in war or in "peace" times. However, feminist theorists like Rhonda Copelon and Catherine MacKinnon were instrumental in expanding the discourse to include an analysis of the ways that human rights frameworks themselves discriminate against women by ignoring "private" acts like rape and domestic violence.⁷⁵ This expansion led to greater attention to women's issues in international treaty bodies like the UN, increased monitoring of violence against women by non-governmental organizations

⁷⁴ The full text of the convention is available from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/> [Accessed 8 March 2012].

⁷⁵ See Catharine MacKinnon, *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Rhonda Copelon, "Surfacing Gender: Re-Engraving Crimes Against Women in Humanitarian Law," *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Andrea Stiglmeier, Ed. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

(NGOs) like Amnesty International, and a wider adoption of a human rights framework as a means of explaining and countering violence against women in both international and local contexts.

In the international women's movement, particularly movements dedicated to women, war and conflict, international human rights treaty and consensus documents play a large part in the dissemination of programs and practices across the world. In particular, the following four United Nations Security Council Resolutions have been utilized by local peace activists in Liberia: 1325, passed in 2000, which calls for countries to include women in peacebuilding negotiations, post-conflict peacebuilding and governance; 1820, passed in 2008, which establishes the links between ending sexual violence and sustainable peace; 1888, passed in 2009, which deals with the implementation of 1820; and 1889, passed in 2009, which addresses the lack of implementation of 1325, prioritizing international funding to ensure women's participation in peace processes.⁷⁶

As Sally Engle Merry describes in her work *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*, the success of these orienting frameworks depends in large part on whether or not they are able to adapt and thrive in the everyday contexts in which people live. As she writes, "human rights are appropriated when they draw on transnational ideas but present them in familiar cultural terms."⁷⁷ In other words, the human rights frame must be translated and make a home for itself within local contexts – it must be found useful and productive by local actors. Merry examines the ways that global human rights discourse is cultivated at the

⁷⁶ See Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*; "Women and the Conflict"

⁷⁷ Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence*, 178.

transnational level (through international consensus), translated to local contexts and situated within the lives of everyday individuals. As she notes, this process does not significantly alter the frame or content of human rights itself, positing instead that human rights language and orienting frameworks, through practices of translation, are re-written and lived out in the vernacular language and context of the communities in which it is placed.⁷⁸

Merry's ethnography of the creating and translation of human rights discourse examines both international processes of deliberation and monitoring at the United Nations, and the ways that this consensus is localized by violence against women organizations in the US, Fiji, Hong Kong, China and India. She describes the ways that international conventions, like CEDAW, are created through a process of consensus building, in which each nation can contribute to the wording of the documents and can refuse to sign onto them once the process is complete (as the United States has done with CEDAW).⁷⁹ Additionally, these documents are crafted with the (sometimes peripheral) participation of NGO actors, who caucus with one another to draft language around issues that they then pass on to their national delegates, contributing to the sense that this global consensus reflects on-the-ground issues and concerns. In an attempt to cultivate international consensus, the resulting documents that are produced are often general, relying on language that is "agreed upon" and crafted in previous documents, conventions or meetings. Particularly contested issues like women's role in marriage, childbearing, or specific practices of violence are often described and named in general ways so that the broadest possible consensus on document creation can be reached

⁷⁸ Merry writes that, "Human rights must become part of local legal consciousness in order to fulfill their emancipatory potential," but in her work with local gender violence advocates she found that "the knowledge of human rights within village communities was quite limited." Ibid, 179.

⁷⁹ For a list of all states that have ratified CEDAW, visit <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/states.htm>.

(despite the frustration of NGO actors, who often want more specificity in the documents).⁸⁰ While this process of generalization might be seen as a significant compromise in that it is too ambiguous to carry any clout, this lack of specificity actually contributes to these documents' transformative power at the state and local level. Because these documents rely on and build out of such a broad level of agreement, they carry both educative and cultural power in that they can be called upon as evidence of a global consensus around eliminating discrimination against women. As she writes, "A critical feature of the CEDAW process is its cultural and educational role: its capacity to coalesce and express a particular understanding of gender. Like more conventional legal processes, its significance lies in its capacity to share cultural understandings and to articulate and expand a vision of rights."⁸¹ Although the CSW's actual power in monitoring state's compliance to CEDAW is persuasive, not coercive (they have no official sanctioning power), these documents do become a part of international consensus around good governance and states' responsibilities for upholding human rights.

This sense of international consensus and responsibility gives these documents a particular sort of power for local women's rights organizations. As Leymah Gbowee writes, the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 helped to bolster the women's movement in Liberia and West Africa, and encouraged the founding of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET). As she writes, "It was an audacious, perfectly timed idea. Internationally, there was a growing recognition that women were being left out of peace and negotiating processes." Despite the resolution's passage,

⁸⁰ Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence*, 72-109.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

nothing “substantial had happened.”⁸² The momentum around the resolution’s passage, in addition to the international attention on the lack of women’s participation in peace processes gave a certain legitimacy to the growing women’s movement for peace in Liberia. This international momentum around women, conflict and peace was also harnessed by the women who worked with Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in an effort to include women in the process.⁸³

Recognizing that men and women experience conflict differently, the “Women and the Conflict” report of Liberia’s TRC sought to bring about a, “gender sensitive program of transitional justice.” Such a program would:

Seek to analyse and acknowledge women and men’s different experiences of past gross human rights violations and provide redress via both judicial and non-judicial mechanisms, such as individual prosecutions, reparations, truth-seeking, memorialization, institutional reform, vetting and lustrations, dismissals or a combination thereof. This would ensure accountability, serve justice, achieve reconciliation and sustainable peace-building that contributes to gender equality.⁸⁴

One of these methods at gender sensitive transitional justice undertaken by women in Liberia was the Community Dialogue Process, conducted by the Women’s NGO Secretariat (WONGOSOL), in partnership with UNIFEM and the TRC Gender Unit. Over 500 women participated in these dialogues, which were held throughout Liberia. These groups provided “feelings of being cared about and valued” and helped women to see that “their contributions to peace in Liberia were essential. It also gave them hope for the future that something would actually happen for them to rebuild their lives after the

⁸² Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 109.

⁸³ As the authors of the “Women and the Conflict” report note, during the Liberian National Conference for Women, held to discuss the TRC report and outcomes, “Strategic interventions and recommendations for the promotion of conventions, protocol, national laws and policies on women, including the UN Resolution 1325, and other international instruments were called for” in response to women’s experiences of the war. “Women and the Conflict,” 21.

⁸⁴ “Women and the Conflict,” 1.

wars.”⁸⁵ These dialogue processes found that transitional justice must be translated into not only vernacular language, but also explained in “an engaging, participatory dialogue process.”⁸⁶ Additionally, they noted that although women continue to experience trauma from their experiences of violence during the war, they are also “ready to begin rebuilding and reworking their community configurations if given the space and some resources to do so.”⁸⁷ The dialogue process affirmed that “healing is possible” *if* there is follow up “directly after women are engaged with transitional justice processes such as truth commissions.”⁸⁸

In the case of Liberia, human rights frameworks like SCR 1325 were able to provide some momentum, national and international attention for including women in the process of the TRC. This led to increased participation by women in the TRC process (47% of statements taken were by women), and the creation of transitional justice mechanisms like the Community Dialogue Process. Increased attention to the women’s peacebuilding movement in Liberia and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 to Leymah Gbowee and Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf signals that something has changed in terms of international women’s rights work: women are being recognized for their peace work. But this begs the question, how much has this changed the way that this international work is structured and disseminated? Gbowee, who has become an international figure for women’s peace work has this response:

In September 2006...I travelled to New York to address the UN. It was the fifth anniversary of the passage of Resolution 1325, which called for bringing more

⁸⁵ Ibid, 27.

⁸⁶ Ibid. As Anu Pillay writes of the process, “The interpretation of gender in Liberia’s Truth Commission’s mandate as solely promoting women’s participation was done at a cost. At the practical level, even though space was created for women to participate, there has not been a significant change in social thinking, attitudes or behavior.” Pillay, “Truth Seeking and Gender: The Liberian Experience,” *African Journal of Conflict Resolution* 9, No. 2 (2009), 99.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

women into UN peace and security efforts, and for warring countries to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence. There wasn't anything new to say: the resolution still hadn't been widely implemented. (Today, after another five years, the story's the same. Every time there's a conflict, the resolution is dusted off and everyone shouts, "We need to do something!" Then nothing happens."⁸⁹

The power of the human rights framework is its ability to carry a sense of global injustice to local contexts of victimization and harm. However, the language of human rights carries within certain assumptions about what it means to be human, ideas that are firmly rooted in an Enlightenment, secular vision of the world. The liberal democratic anthropology out of which this vision of human rights emerges often assumes that religion and spirituality are "incidental to, rather than constitutive of" a person's identity.⁹⁰ When understood this way, religion is akin to an affinity group or voluntary association. This assumption mirrors the ways that religion was talked about at CSW, as an institution that either seeks to control women (religious fundamentalisms) or an instrument that can be deployed in service of the mission of gender equality. This leaves little room for understandings of healing and peace that emerge out of the ways religion matters in the course of women's everyday lives. In what follows, I argue for a more localized understanding of peace and healing, in large part because these strategies reveal the ways that religion matters for women.

Beyond Formal Structures: The Importance of the Everyday

When women speak, do we listen? I wrote this question in the margin of fieldnotes I recorded at a public symposium in New York on the implementation of the

⁸⁹ Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 197.

⁹⁰ Linda Hogan, "Religion and Public Reason in the Global Politics of Human Rights" in Biggar, Nigel and Hogan, eds. *Religious Voices in Public Places*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2009), 222.

Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) final report in the fall of 2010.⁹¹ During a panel discussion with this theme: "why did things fall apart with the TRC and where can it go?" I was sitting with a prominent women's human rights activist from Liberia. When the panelists finished, she raised her hand, visibly frustrated that this conversation that was meant to address reconciliation broadly instead seemed focused narrowly on political and legal methods of redress. She reminded the group that, "there are other aspects of the TRC" besides prosecution, and called attention to the gender dialogues conducted by the Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL) and UNIFEM, where women were brought together in Liberia to talk about how they understand reconciliation and peace.⁹² The women, she noted, were looking for ways to memorialize the thousands who had died during the war who had been piled in mass graves across the city and not properly buried. They also desire healthcare for survivors of sexual violence, scholarships for the children of widows and community-level reconciliation mechanisms.⁹³ As she told the group, "the women are saying repair, restore us."⁹⁴

Although this speech was applauded by many in the audience, the conversation afterwards turned back toward politics and the legal system, prompting my hastily

⁹¹ Held October 29 – 30, 2010, the Symposium on the Liberian TRC Process: Reform, Redress, Recovery, was co-sponsored by the New School, Columbia University and African Refugee, a non-profit in Staten Island. The agenda is available here: <http://africanrefuge.webs.com/symposiumagenda.htm>.

⁹² In 2008, the Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia, in concert with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Gender Unit and UNIFEM, hosted a series of community dialogue workshops with women across Liberia. The goal of these meetings was to, "evaluate the TRC process from a gender perspective, to discuss seven key pillars of transitional justice, and to take an in-depth look at community and individual responsibility for healing and transforming the Liberian society." In addition to revealing the continued traumatization of women and girls affected by violence during the conflict, the dialogue process found that "women are powerful agents of change and are ready to begin rebuilding and reworking their community configurations if given the space and some resources to do so." Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Volume Three: Appendices Title 1: Women and the Conflict." <https://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final> [Accessed 1 July 2011].

⁹³ Ibid, 56-58.

⁹⁴ Anu Pillay, Marpue Speare and Pamela Scully, "Women's Dialogues in Post-Conflict Liberia," *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 5, No. 3 (2010): 89-93.

scribbled note: When women speak, particularly about peace and healing, do we listen?⁹⁵ This woman's concern that the dead were not being memorialized – and that this was at the center of many women's inability to heal from what they have been through – and the ways that these religious sensibilities were glossed over by the later comments and panels speaks to the invisibility of women's religious lives in particular rights-based conversations.

While human rights instruments and frameworks carry a great deal of power and are able to harness a certain global critique of injustice to women, in their overarching view, they can neglect to see the ways women's religious lives affect the ways they understand and practice peace and healing.⁹⁶ As Veena Das points out in her article “Violence, Gender and Subjectivity,” women's strategies of resisting, speaking or embodying violence might emerge far from the expected contexts of truth commissions or the halls of the United Nations. Instead, she argues for a turn to the “everyday” to chronicle and understand the ways that violence and recovery happen in real life.⁹⁷ Das's reminder to look beyond the traditional arenas of justice asks us to expand what “counts” as human rights practice, opening the discourse to others who have been denied

⁹⁵ As Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Dina Francesca Haynes and Naomi Cahn argue in the introduction of their book *On the Frontlines: Gender, War, and the Post-Conflict Process*, attention to gender and women's perspectives on peace and conflict can ensure that the gender transformations harnessed during conflict are carried through in the post-conflict period. They write, “Women are the group most historically marginalized and excluded from the peacemaking and peace building process across all jurisdictions and conflicts. A gender-centered lens of analysis, followed by practice, enforcement and oversight, has the possibility for transformative effect on women's lives in post-conflict societies.” Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Dina Francesca Haynes and Naomi Cahn, *On the Frontlines: Gender, War, and the Post-Conflict Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

⁹⁶ As Talal Asad writes, “True, the ‘proper domain of religion’ is distinguished from and separated from the state in modern secular constitutions. But formal constitutions never give the whole story. On the one hand objects, sites, practices, words, representations – even the minds and bodies of worshipers – cannot be confined within the exclusive space of what secularists *name* ‘religion.’ They have their own way of being. The historical elements of what come to be conceptualized as religion have disparate trajectories...The unceasing pursuit of the new in productive effort, aesthetic experience, and claims to knowledge, as well as the unending struggle to extend individual self-creation, undermines the stability of established boundaries.” Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 201.

⁹⁷ Veena Das, “Violence, Gender and Subjectivity,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 37 (2008):283-99.

participation (because of their inability or refusal to speak a human rights language), or look toward things that have been denigrated as “culture” or “tradition” as valuable paths for reconciliation and justice. An expansive view of what constitutes human rights work might not only provide a useful corrective to how we think about violence itself, but it might widen our views of practices and strategies of healing as well.

Where is Religion?

Perhaps the first question that could be asked of this dissertation is why religion? Why not situate such a conversation about women, peace and violence within its more traditional disciplinary bounds: feminist theory and women’s studies? The first, and perhaps most honest answer to that question is because for the women I have worked with, *religion matters*.

A better picture of the ways religion functions for women who have experienced violence is important for two reasons, the first of which is that in Liberia, religion played a significant role in women’s mobilization for peace. As is evidenced by the work of the women of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) of Liberia, highlighted in the film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, religious practices can be mobilized in an effort to bring about justice in the face of violence, and religious communities can prove significant outlets for exploring the nature and process of healing, justice and peace. Peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Leymah Gbowee writes in her memoir *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer and Sex Changed a Nation at War* about the importance of religion in the women’s peacebuilding work. Gbowee recounts in the book a vision that she had in 2001, while sleeping in the WIPNET offices:

I didn’t know where I was. Everything was dark. I couldn’t see a face, but I heard a voice, and it was talking to me – commanding me: “Gather the women to pray for peace!”

Gather the women to pray for peace! I could still hear echoes as I woke up, shaking. It was 5 a.m. What had just happened? What did it mean?...

In some ways, that dream, that moment were the start of everything. We knelt down on the worn brown carpet and closed our eyes. “Dear God, thank you for sending us this vision,” said Sister Esther. “Give us your blessing, Lord, and offer us Your protection and guidance in helping us to understand what it means.”

My dream became the Christian Women’s Peace Initiative.⁹⁸

Gbowee’s narrative goes on to tell about how women worked together across religious lines to broker peace during and after the Civil War. The narrative is replete with accounts of the significance of prayer, hymns, religious practices, and scriptures in the women’s work. Additionally, researchers have noted the presence of widespread religious networks that encouraged cross-class cooperation among women before the Civil War.⁹⁹ Additional research on the resurgence of these movements is necessary in this post-conflict period.

In addition to understanding the role religion plays in women’s peacebuilding movements, focusing on the ways religion matters for women who have survived violence also prioritizes the voices of survivors themselves. As I have heard from women in Liberia and in the Liberian community in Durham, the sense that “God was there” in the moment of violence or that “only God” can help Liberia to heal speaks to the ways that for many survivors of violence, religious practices and beliefs and a sense of healing and reconciliation are intimately intertwined. As Marie stated, it was “faith,” that enabled her to survive the rape she experienced at the hands of family members before the war and by strangers during it. To get through what she has been through

⁹⁸ Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 122.

⁹⁹ Mary Moran and M Anne Pitcher, “The ‘Basket Case’ and the ‘Poster Child’: Explaining the End of Conflicts in Liberia and Mozambique.” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2004): 501-519.

entails, “just letting God. You know, you have to trust [God].”¹⁰⁰ These harrowing experiences of violence make us wonder how women are able to, as Veena Das states, “make the everyday inhabitable”¹⁰¹ despite experiences of violence and trauma. And for some women, “making the everyday inhabitable” is only possible through their religious practices, beliefs or a sense of divine care or healing. While I acknowledge that this is by no means the case for all women, I argue that we must pay attention to what the appeal to religion or spirituality does for women who are responding to or who have experienced violence.

Although hotly debated among scholars of secularization and religion, the question of what “counts” as religious becomes all the more complicated when in conversation with scholars of African religion. Theologians like Laurenti Magesa and theorists like Kwame Gyekye, and Jacob Olupona have argued that in an African context, religion is infused into all aspects of life, including the legal and political systems.¹⁰² As researchers involved in the African Religious Health Assets Programme (ARHAP) have noted, in some African contexts, it is impossible to separate what is meant by “religion” and “healing,” because for local actors, these two terms are used synonymously.¹⁰³ As Magesa writes, African religion is far more than a system of beliefs that informs life. It is, rather, a “‘way of life’ or life itself, where a distinction or separation is not made between religion and other areas of human existence.”¹⁰⁴ If religion is a part of life itself

¹⁰⁰ Marie’s story is told in more detail in Chapter three.

¹⁰¹ Das, *Life and Words*, 16

¹⁰² See Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997); Kwame Gyekye. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra, Ghana: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996); Jacob Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang. *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honor of John Mbiti* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993).

¹⁰³ Paul Germond and Sepetla Molapo. “In Search of Bophelo in a Time of AIDS: Seeking a Coherence of Economies of Health and Economies of Salvation” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 126 (2006).

¹⁰⁴ Magesa, *African Religions*, 25.

– “constitutive,” rather than “incidental” to who we are as human persons – then a more complicated picture of the intersections of religion, violence, rights and healing is necessary.

Given the fact that the focus in much of feminist theory, theology, and women’s human rights practice has been on the institutional functions of religion,¹⁰⁵ and the above points regarding the presence of African religions in all aspects of life, my project probes the ways that activists and survivors navigate and define religion, human rights and healing at a more local, practice and narrative-based level. While understanding the ways that religious organizations function and intersect with human rights work is important, my project focuses on the ways that people navigate religious systems, institutions and communities and the ways that religion emerges in the stories that they tell about their own experiences of violence. In other words, I investigate the ways that people *live* their religion in the local and individual context, and the ways they negotiate their own survival and healing as a process of integration that emerges over time.

Theology birthed of women’s experience has long been a central tenet of feminist, womanist and mujerista theologies; however, what is meant by drawing on women’s experience varies by author. Drawing on “women’s experience” can mean using case studies, citing sociological studies, doing archival and historical research, and developing composite “examples” of women’s lives based loosely on real experiences (pastoral, counseling, or otherwise).¹⁰⁶ While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore

¹⁰⁵ See Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence*, 44; Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁶ Early feminist theologian Mary Daly wrote of her method that, “It would be a mistake to imagine that the new speech of women can be equated simply with women speaking men’s words. What is happening is that women are really hearing ourselves and each other, and out of this supportive hearing emerge new words.” Mary Daly, *Beyond*

what feminist theologians mean when they write about women's experience (and this, it must be noted, is contested between and among various feminist, womanist and mujerista theologians and ethicists), this orientation toward women's lives as valuable sources for doing theological scholarship grounds this dissertation project, and places it within the larger feminist/womanist/mujerista theological conversation. For my part, I draw on women's experiences of violence as they are remembered through narrative-based interviews and in small groups, and re-remembered, through practices of peace and healing that women engage in their local community in Durham. To do this, I conducted seven interviews with women in this community, participated in worship, education and prayer practices for nine months at a Liberian church, and helped to create and observed a six-week women's empowerment group that dealt with issues of trauma and healing.

Thus far, this chapter might seem to speak only to the one of two conversation partners that I set out to address at the beginning of this dissertation. I have written much about feminist theory and international women's rights work, without talking much about theology. However, this discussion has begun what I see as the practical theological task. As Emmanuel Lartey writes, "Pastoral theology is reflective activity that brings together action and reflection in dialogically and mutually critical ways...Pastoral theology, then, entails critical, interpretive, constructive and expressive reflection on the caring activities of God and human communities."¹⁰⁷ Lartey employs, and I follow, a praxis methodology that moves from: concrete experience – social analysis – hermeneutical

God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 8. Emilie Townes writes of womanist theology that it is meant to "challenge, as it remains a part of (and issues from) the African-American religious community as well as traditional academic discourse. It is both descriptive and prescriptive in light of the real life and death struggle that Black women wage, individually and communally, in seeking to shape a just social order." Emilie Townes, Ed. *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 2.

¹⁰⁷ Emmanuel Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 28.

analysis – pastoral praxis of liberation.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, an intercultural pastoral theological paradigm extends to the global community, not merely resting in individual, church or community concerns. As Lartey affirms, such a pastoral theology reveals that “Something can be known about both the divine and the human through an examination of the caring activities of human communities.”¹⁰⁹ This includes the ways that women experience violence and the healing practices they engage as they seek to re-create their lives.

Indeed, pastoral theologians like James Poling, Christie Neuger, and Pamela Cooper-White have argued, based on their experiences as pastoral counselors, that to bring about justice for women affected by violence, women’s voices and experiences of violence must be heard and validated.¹¹⁰ Additionally, they argue that perpetrators must be held accountable in the Christian Church if it is to be an inclusive, justice-seeking community. However, these authors have focused much of their work on the United States, and as pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey has noted, there must be an acknowledgement of the role the West has played in pastoral theology and a shift to recognize what might be learned in a global, “intercultural” theological conversation. As he writes, this paradigm, “extends the communal-contextual into a global nexus and asks questions concerning issues of global justice specifically including matters of race, gender, class, sexuality and economics... This approach is polylingual, polyphonic and polyperspectival. Many voices need to be spoken, listened to and respected in our quest

¹⁰⁸ Emmanuel Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 2nd Ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003), 123.

¹⁰⁹ Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 18.

¹¹⁰ See Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); James Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991); Christie Cozad Neuger, “Narratives of Harm: Setting the Developmental Context for Intimate Violence,” in *In Her Own Time: women and Developmental Issues in Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000); Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

for meaningful and effective living.”¹¹¹ This echoes the work of African feminist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who pushes for theological work that is attentive to practices of resistance and activism that occur at a local and global level. She notes that although women have become “culture’s bondswomen” in Africa, bearing the load of cultural and traditional identity, women are also resisting these attempts to define/confine them in both subtle and profound ways.¹¹² This type of theological engagement encourages theology built out of women’s practices of resistance and healing as they occur in everyday life.

Oduyoye’s work helps us to think not only about the concrete (social, political, religious) practices of justice that must be brought to bear in the world, but she also reminds practical theologians that the resources of our traditions (both “religious” and so-called “secular”) are vast and wide. We might look for practices of peace that exist outside of the more traditionally recognized arenas – for practical theologians, this might be the church; for feminist theorists, this might be the state and the law. A feminist theological activist praxis is thus attentive to practices of healing wherever they exist. It is alert to the political as well as the religious realms of healing, noting that women’s participation as full members of the divine community in the world is not limited to their participation in the work of the church. It is aware of the ways the women I worked with for this dissertation are increasingly widening the space for women to participate in the work of peace: by telling their stories, by providing spaces and practices that offer healing, by being a shoulder to cry on, and by setting the example for what women can and will do to work for peace and justice in the world.

¹¹¹ Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 124.

¹¹² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 82.

I begin this dissertation with an argument to hear “what the women say,” despite the fact that women’s voices and practices are often ignored in international women’s rights and peace work.¹¹³ As Hellena Moon has argued, practical and pastoral theologians are apt contributors to international women’s rights conversations, because of their inherent care for “dignity for human beings.” She goes on to write that they are particularly gifted for contributing to human rights work, in that their attention to “story-listening, mutuality, reciprocity and advocacy” can contribute to the continued democratization of global women’s rights work.¹¹⁴ The work of practical theology is not only work done on behalf of those within the walls of the institutional church; instead, it is work done for the world. As such, this dissertation argues that the women’s voices included here encourage us to widen the space for conversations about the ways religion matters in international women’s rights conversations about peace and healing.

Guiding Assumptions

This dissertation is based on several assumptions which ground the theological work that is done. They include the following: 1) that we should look for the ways healing and peace emerge beyond the “traditional” avenues of redress or power; 2) that women’s religious lives are multiple and layered; and 3) that research with communities should begin with a participatory stance from the researcher. In this section, I elaborate upon each of these assumptions.

The first grounding assumption of this dissertation project is that peace and healing often happen beyond the purview of traditional or institutional sources of power.

As a recent issue of the *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* notes, issues of post-

¹¹³ International Civil Society Network and MIT Center for International Studies, “What the Women Say: Participation and UNSCR 1325,” http://web.mit.edu/cis/pdf/WomenReport_10_2010.pdf [Accessed 25 June 2011].

¹¹⁴ Hellena Moon, “Transforming the Paradigm of Wo/men’s Human Rights Through Intercultural Pastoral Care,” *The Journal of Pastoral Theology* 20, no. 1 (2010), 61.

conflict transformation and transitional justice have recently emerged as a vital concern for feminist scholarship.¹¹⁵ Much of this work has focused on the role of the state in mediating justice for women. However, feminist historian Pamela Scully has argued that “there is a fundamental conceptual misfit in terms of trying to secure women’s rights in transitional justice in terms of the state and the law only.”¹¹⁶ In line with this, I argue for an examination of the ways that healing and transformation happen outside of these traditional avenues of redress of the state and the law. While the Liberia TRC report recommends memorialization practices and rituals on a larger scale in Liberia, I focus on the ways that healing and peace are negotiated among Liberian women living in North Carolina.¹¹⁷ These practices include such “everyday” occurrences as women meeting to talk about their experiences during the war through trauma healing workshops and the ways that they rebuild their lives through practices of faith. Drawing on work with women in the Liberian community in Durham, as well as from published memoirs about women’s experiences of the Liberian Civil War, I argue for an understanding of healing as a process that happens often not in any grand public way, but as women go about their everyday lives. Informal women’s conversation and church practices might seem insignificant given the considerable international attention on rebuilding the Liberian government and justice mechanisms. However, I argue that the narratives and healing practices of Liberian women demands an attention to women’s peacemaking and healing work that exists beyond formal mechanisms of justice.

¹¹⁵Helen Scanlon, “Foreword,” *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Special Issue on Gender and Transitional Justice in Africa, 2009. Volume 9:2. See also Pamela Scully, “Should We Give up on the State? Feminist Theory, African Gender History and Transitional Justice” *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2009. Volume 9:2, 30; Christine Bell and Evelyn O’Rourke, “Does Feminism Need a Theory of Transitional Justice? An Introductory Essay” *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 2007, 1.

¹¹⁶Scully, “Should We Give Up on the State?” 30.

¹¹⁷ See, “Women and the Conflict,” 57-8.

The second assumption that grounds the theological work of this dissertation is that women's religious lives are multiple and layered. For many women, religious identity is not a fixed category. Instead, multiple religious practices and traditions inform what we come to understand as a person's religious life. Tracey Hucks defines this as women's "multiple religious allegiance," whereby women blend together traditions and practices "for accessing spiritual power and for obtaining alternative modes of healing and recovery."¹¹⁸ She comes to this understanding based on her ethnographic work and interviews with African-American women who practice African-derived religions. As she found, often practices and traditions focused around particular issues, like "healing" or "empowerment" were more important to the women than a sense of orthodoxy of belief.¹¹⁹ They created a bricolage of healing practices and beliefs that allowed them to experience healing in their lives. As Hucks notes, the women saw no conflict between practices derived from various religious traditions; each, instead, helped them to feel closer to God. For Hucks, a fixed sense of boundaries for African-American women's religious lives precludes an actual understanding of their religious lives, which are defined by fluidity.¹²⁰

Like Hucks, womanist theologian Monica Coleman understands that women's religious experiences often defy traditional systematic theological categories. She begins her text *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Process Theology*, by elaborating upon two stories. The first story is of a women's sexual assault survivors group. The women in the group are braiding the hair of one of their members, who has just been assaulted by her partner. The hair braiding serves as a practice of care for the woman

¹¹⁸ Tracey Hucks, "Burning with a Flame in America: African-American Women in African-Derived Religions." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 17, no. 2 (2001): 90

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 105.

who is bleeding and crying, allowing her to feel a divine embrace through the loving gestures of her fellow group members.¹²¹ The second story Coleman brings is of a Yoruba-based dance class she attends, where women experience healing through the movement of their bodies and the pulsing rhythm of the drum.¹²² Noting that womanist theology has traditionally been written out of the Christian tradition, Coleman seeks to develop a theological position that is able to speak to both of these groups: the sexual assault survivor and the women in the African dance class.¹²³ She does this drawing on process theology and womanist theologies. In this text, Coleman develops a theological framework that is expansive enough to encompass the various religious traditions women profess. Coleman argues that the postmodern womanist theology she develops is “a verb,” it is active and moving.¹²⁴ It is a metaphysical theology that starts with experience and endeavors to form a system of ideas that explains our experience. It represents “our best ideas given what we know.”¹²⁵

Coleman elaborates upon this idea of theology as an activity (a verb) when she states that:

Not only can practices be shared but, for many, religiosity is located in the practices; it is sacramental. To be religious is to *practice* one’s religion. In this sense, we are not born into a faith, nor do we adjust our beliefs in order to belong to a particular faith; nor might we know our faith by our justice-ethics. Instead—or more aptly—in addition, the Womb Circle asserts that our activities reveal our faith.¹²⁶

Drawing on work with a women’s “womb circle,” a group of women who gathered together to address reproductive health issues using African traditional religious

¹²¹ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 1-3.

¹²² *Ibid*, 3-6.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 8

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 169.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 43.

¹²⁶ Monica Coleman, “The Womb Circle: A Womanist Practice of Multi-Religious Belonging,” *Practical Matters: A Transdisciplinary Journal of Religious Practices and Practical Theology*, Issue 4, www.practicalmattersjournal.org [Accessed 25 June 2011].

practices, Coleman, like Hucks, finds that women's religious identities are often capable of adapting to and incorporating from multiple religious traditions. Because this is the case, she argues that "activity is primary, with meaning ascribed *after* practice."¹²⁷ Like Coleman and Hucks, I argue in this dissertation that it is helpful to develop an understanding of women's religious lives that is born out of their own practices and narratives. This is in keeping with anthropologists of religion like Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, who argue for an indigenous understanding of religious practice. As Flueckiger found in her work with Amma, a Muslim healer in Hyderabad, India, rather than understanding Amma's work in terms of some conception of "true Islam," a more nuanced understanding of the particularities of a religious tradition (and the blendings women make between and among traditions) can be found when this claim to authenticity is bracketed.¹²⁸ Like these anthropologists, religious studies scholars, and theologians, I argue that before placing an analytic or systematic theological lens on a practice or belief, we might listen to and observe how women narrate and practice their sense of what it is to be religious, to experience peace, and to find healing.¹²⁹

The third assumption that grounds this dissertation project is closely related to the second. Given the argument that we should begin with how women experience and express their religious lives, I adopt a participatory stance toward research that puts the community at the center of the research project. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People*, notes that research with indigenous peoples has often been research *on* indigenous peoples. Rather than beginning with the concerns, desires and issues of indigenous communities, researchers

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006). 11.

¹²⁹ I elaborate on this more in Chapter two.

often approach a community or society with their own questions that they have developed independent of any conversation or dialogue with those among whom they work. Smith encourages researchers to “decolonize” their methodologies by adopting a more participatory model of research, which includes: asking members of the community to serve on the research team, designing research protocols in concert with the community, and sharing theoretical constructs and findings with the community.¹³⁰ Smith advocates sharing research as an active dialogue between researcher and community; it is a reciprocal relationship where each contributes something to the eventual “product” (the research, community development plan, health intervention, etc.) that is created.¹³¹ I would likewise argue for theologians working on issues of violence, peace and healing to take this participatory stance. Rather than assuming the causes and remedies for violence, we might talk with communities and individuals about their experiences of gender violence and the ways violence, healing and peace are defined. Additionally, we might begin to map out the places in the community where individuals seek out redress, reconciliation, healing and justice, including religious institutions, traditions and practices. As I will elaborate in Chapter two, I do this through interviews and participant observation methods that draw on both feminist ethnographic methods and feminist pastoral care.

In this dissertation, I contend that by paying attention to the ways that women define and practice peace and healing (in their words, on their terms), we might learn a great deal about the ways that peace is lived and learned despite the traumatic horrors that violence imposes upon a life. Tracing women’s narratives and faith practices helps us to

¹³⁰ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999), 142-161.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

see the ways that religion matters for women who have survived violence. As these women's stories and practices demonstrate, religion matters in remarkably ordinary ways – in the prayers women say as they express hope for the future, in the ways they turn to God in an effort to survive and “make a way out of no way,” and even in the ways they imagine and create new families. As I explore the ways that religion matters for women, a theological understanding of healing emerges in and through the women's words and practices. This theological understanding of healing is non-linear, it is emergent and it cannot be measured, quantified, or even reached. However, I argue that understanding healing in this seemingly chaotic way offers a vital alternative to the ways that health and peace are often described and measured internationally. As such, this complicated understanding of the ways religion matters as women negotiate healing provides us a necessary and vital part of the larger conversation about women, violence and peace.

CHAPTER TWO: BRIDGING CARE AND RESEARCH

Reflecting on her ethnographic work in India around post-partition violence and the 1984 Sikh massacres that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination, anthropologist Veena Das writes, "When faced with the kind of trauma that violence insists upon us, we have to be engaged in decisions that shape the way that we come to understand our place in the world."¹³² For Das, anthropology bears a certain public responsibility to mark the "systematic acts of making evidence disappear, but also witnessing the descent into the everyday through which victims and survivors affirm the possibility of life."¹³³ This question of responsibility – what is the role of the researcher – has haunted me as well, in work that I have done with homeless women in Atlanta, among domestic violence survivors in a shelter in North Carolina, and in my dissertation research with a Liberian church in Durham, North Carolina. Working with communities affected by violence necessitates, as Das notes, a response. But what, I wonder, is the appropriate and just response, particularly for those of us who walk the often precarious lines between researcher and practitioner?

This chapter describes the ways my own approach to research shifted as a result of my encounter with the violence endured by the women with whom I worked for this dissertation project. I chart a method for doing research with trauma survivors that is sensitive to these questions: How do you "hear" trauma that goes unspoken? How can we respect a person's request for privacy while also helping them to heal? What is the ethical and appropriate response to survivors of trauma and violence? These prickly questions of research and practice drive the work in this chapter. I illustrate the approach

¹³² Das, *Life and Words*, 210.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 221.

and method to research that I have taken over the course of nine months of ethnographic and participatory research with a Liberian community in Durham, North Carolina.

Because remembering violence does not – and in some cases cannot – always happen through speech and narrative, I embrace methods drawn from both feminist pastoral care and feminist ethnography. Doing so allows me to “hear” violence as it emerges both in the context of spoken stories, anecdotes and interviews *and* as it permeates the practices and gestures that are part of women’s everyday lives. This method is also inherently a practical theological method.

Practical theology as a discipline is necessarily interdisciplinary. Drawing on multiple sources in scholarship – theological, sociological, historical, biblical, psychological, etc., practical theologians explore the ways faith is lived, expressed and practiced.¹³⁴ Theory, theology and practice meet in a discipline that aims for both theological and practical transformation. In other words, the aim for practical theology is that in investigating and bringing together the insights of lived practice, theory and theology, that each might be changed and enhanced through conversation with the other.¹³⁵ Although the discipline began tied intimately to traditional categories of

¹³⁴ In her chapter “Feminist Theory and Pastoral Theology” Bonnie Miller-McLemore argues that a feminist perspective on pastoral and practical theology necessarily encourages interdisciplinary work that asks critical questions of practical theology (including: who is doing practical theology and what does it mean to participate in a marginalized discipline?). See Miller-McLemore, “Feminist Theory and Pastoral Theology” in Miller-McLemore and Gil-Austern, Eds. *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*

¹³⁵ As James Woodward and Stephen Pattison write in their Introduction to the *Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, Pastoral or practical theology can be defined as a “prime place where contemporary experience and the resources of the religious tradition meet in a critical dialogue that is mutually and practically transforming. See Woodward and Pattison, Eds. *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2000), xii.

ministry (preaching, pastoral care, education, liturgy), practical theology has taken on multiple trajectories both tied to and disparate from its origins in ministerial fields.¹³⁶

As noted previously, practical theological method entails a process of engagement with communities and texts that starts with lived practice, moves to examination of that lived practice through theoretical and theological lenses, and then returns to practice to explore the shifts and transformations that occur when putting conversation and theory/theology in conversation. The ways practical theologians put theory, theology and lived experience into conversation vary widely, but often share an interdisciplinary, praxis-oriented, and dialogical commitment. The ways communities and individuals are engaged in practical theology are never neutral, and as such it is important to explicitly name how we work with and study lived practice.¹³⁷ For my part, I draw on methods that are both narrative-based (listening to and hearing women's stories) and ethnographic (observing and participating in faith practices). As I will elaborate more fully, for many women affected by violence, telling one's story to an empathic other is an important part of the healing process.¹³⁸ For this reason, I drew on narrative-based methodologies of story-sharing from feminist pastoral care. However, as I illustrate, for some women talking about violence is problematic or painful, so I also look to feminist ethnographic methods to explore the ways life and practice reveal the ways women grow and heal after violence. As I see it, to understand how women heal from violence both methods are

¹³⁶ As Woodward and Pattison note, contemporary "pastoral/practical theology is a place where religious belief, tradition and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming." Ibid, 7.

¹³⁷ See Edward Farley's essay "Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology" in Woodward and Pattison's collection.

¹³⁸ It is important to note that the stories women want to tell as part of their own healing process are often markedly different from the stories they are forced to tell in order to receive particular services or legal protections. In my interviews, women often did not want to talk about their experiences of violence during the conflict, but instead wanted to talk about how they were able to heal and persevere despite all they have been through. For more on testimony and women's healing, see Fiona Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

necessary because women heal in both verbal and non-verbal ways. This interdisciplinary methodology of working with communities forms the basis of my theological and theoretical engagement that I employ in Chapters three and four, where I look more closely at women's narratives (Chapter three) and their practices (Chapter four).

This chapter begins with an overview of my research methods, including a description of the seven women I interviewed for this project. I then move to describe my approach to research, which draws on methods in feminist pastoral care and feminist ethnography. Drawing on feminist pastoral care methods as well as feminist theories of violence, I explore the ways that healing can happen for some through the rebuilding of hopeful and hope-filled narratives. However, I note that for some women, telling stories of violence is difficult at best and impossible at worst. Because this is the case, I turn to feminist ethnographic methods in order to understand the ways that peace and healing emerge through practices, gestures, and in the midst of everyday life. Bringing these two methods together – narrative based and observational – allows for a nuanced understanding of the ways that peace and healing can emerge from violence.

Research Methods

The research that grounds these theological insights begins with a small Liberian church in Durham, North Carolina. This church, Friendship Community Church,¹³⁹ is made up of about 70 – 90 Liberians (approximately 95% of the church is Liberian; other Africans and spouses of different nationalities also attend). It is housed in a small building close to downtown, a location that literally escapes the notice of most people who pass by. There is no large sign out front announcing the location of the church, just

¹³⁹ The name of the church has been changed to protect the anonymity of its parishioners.

a small sign that reads “Friendship Community Church,” partially hidden behind the only (barred) window in the church. Coming to this country from a span of time that begins in the late 1980s and continues up until just a few years ago, this small community of Liberian Christians comes together every night of the week to worship, to pray, to read scripture, to share stories, to eat, and to repair and restore hope and life. The pastor, Aletha Meah and assistant pastor, Felicia Jones, provide leadership, comfort and support to their parishioners, along with a large leadership team made up of about a dozen Sunday School administrators and teachers, deacons, missionaries, and other appointed leaders.

The members of the church community come to Durham from Liberia, from refugee camps, or from other locations in the United States. As I heard from a program coordinator at Lutheran Family Services (LFS), an organization that worked with Liberian refugees up until 2004, it is difficult to estimate the numbers of Liberians currently living in the Triangle area (comprised of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill) of North Carolina. Most of the Liberians I talked with at the church estimated the size of the community between 2,000 and 4,000. Most Liberians resettled by LFS came in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, coming to North Carolina for a number of reasons: family members already lived in the area, the presence of LFS as a resettlement agency, and directions from national offices (like those of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services) that seek to place refugees in communities with economic growth and opportunity.¹⁴⁰ As I learned, the issues faced by Liberians coming to the United States are in many ways typical immigrant and refugee issues: adjusting to a new culture, finding a job and income, dealing with transportation and language barriers, and missing family

¹⁴⁰ Jason Payne, interview by author, Raleigh, North Carolina, March 2, 2012.

members back home. When I first started interacting with the members of Friendship Community Church, I asked people how they came to live in Durham. For the individuals who came to the area directly from Liberia, most came through the LFS refugee services program, where they were greeted at the airport by a volunteer family who offered them a hot meal and some sense of social support. They were also placed in an apartment, given some spending money, and placed in job training or language classes. With the assistance of their case manager, they figured out how to find a job, put their children in school, enroll in school themselves, connect to the larger Liberian community and vital services like healthcare and food assistance. As the refugee program coordinator at LFS told me, much of what they do is about “empowerment,” helping refugees to “translate their dreams and desires into what will work in the US.”¹⁴¹

In addition to the issues they face as recent immigrants, Liberians coming to Durham also enter a community that is rife with conflict. As Pastor Meah related to me, people coming to Durham think that it is so great in America, but “there is still a war here! You come from war, you go into a war.” The reality is that gang violence, intimate partner violence, poverty and other forms of systemic and personal violence continue for Liberians in the Diaspora, even after peace has been declared at home in Liberia.¹⁴² This continued state of conflict is what brought Laura Paynes and Pastor Meah, two strong community leaders, together. When I attended a meeting held by both organizations (Laura’s non-profit and FCC) in January of 2011, the assembled group decided that the biggest hurdle facing the Liberian community in Durham was the trauma that lingers after the war is over. The groups decided to begin by organizing trauma healing

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² For more on the experiences of Liberians in New York, including experiences of gang violence, poverty and disenfranchisement, see Jonny Steinberg, *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York City* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011).

programs – informal, small group discussions where men and women can talk about and process what they have been through.¹⁴³ As Laura told me:

Look at the faces of the women and you tell me that these people have not been through a whole lot and...something is not going on in their lives... when you look at the faces of the women you should know that deep within they are - some of them you know [fighters] killed their entire family? They were the only person who survived. Some of them have one child, they killed that child. You know all those things. Mentally look at the women's faces and tell me, that there is not something going on with them. And those are the things I think, OK, how can I help these women? To be able to move forward with their lives, mentally, to not think about the things. I know it is difficult, but we could help, there's a way that if they could talk about it, there's a way that would help them to move forward.

Women like Laura see the impact of violence on their communities and they set about the task of repair because, in her words, “Those kind of things [from the war], can you live with it? You know?”

Over the course of nine months in this community (January – September 2011), I attended many events held at FCC, including worship services on Sundays, Bible Study on Wednesday nights, Women's Prayer Services on Monday, as well as a funeral (for the church's secretary) and a graduation (for the pastor). Additionally, I spent almost four months (from January – April, 2011) attending weekly meetings between Laura Paynes's organization and the leadership of Friendship Community Church. As I mentioned above, the two groups came together in January 2011 to work on programs that would address the persistence of trauma in the community as well as help to empower the youth in the community to attend school, find jobs, and build healthy relationships and families. Out of these community meetings, two programs emerged: 1) a six-week trauma healing group with women, which is the subject of Chapter five of this dissertation and 2) youth empowerment events, like a kick-off event with motivational speakers and career

¹⁴³ These trauma healing groups serve as a significant research site for my dissertation project, as I elaborate more fully in Chapter five.

planning workshops. I attended and participated in these events as part of this research as well. Finally, I conducted interviews with seven women I met through both the church and Laura's organization, although only six of these interviews are featured prominently in this dissertation. In what follows, I offer a brief introduction to each of the women. Their stories and practices are the subject of Chapters three and four.

Interview Participants

Aletha Meah

Pastor Meah is 65 years old and the Senior Pastor of Friendship Community Church. She moved to Durham, North Carolina in 1992, after spending two years in Ivory Coast as a refugee. She knew as a young woman that she was destined for leadership. She remembers the white Baptist missionaries in her town in Grand Gedeh county growing up, and told me that it was this Baptist influence that led her to join that denomination (albeit a Liberian Baptist denomination) as a young woman. She soon became Assistant Pastor of a Liberian Baptist Church in Monrovia, where she moved as a young woman. After Samuel Doe established himself as President in 1980, later bringing other Grand Gedeh residents into his political circle, Pastor Meah became Assistant Deputy Minister for Post and Telecommunications, a position she held until she was forced to leave Liberia in 1990 at the start of the Civil War. She eventually settled in Durham because she had some family members there (although most were in Philadelphia) and because she liked that she could drive her car, rather than relying on public transportation. Along with Felicia Jones, she founded Friendship Community Church in Durham in 1999. Her dream is to build a sanctuary for the church on some land they own outside of downtown, providing a worship space and community center for

the growing Liberian community in Durham. Until this vision is fulfilled, she feels she cannot return home to Liberia. Her two interviews focused on her role as pastor and leader of this community, including the ways she helps community members to heal, given the trauma they have been through.

Laura Paynes

Laura is 50 years old and came to the United States in 1992, after working at the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia. She is from Caldwell, Liberia, a small town outside of Monrovia. Laura has three children, two in their mid-twenties and one in high school. She first lived in Atlanta after moving to the United States, where she met her husband. Laura started a community foundation in the mid-1990's, at the height of Liberia's Civil War, while she was a student at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) in Durham. The organization, which raised money for food and medical supplies for Liberians, eventually caught the attention of the school's administration. With support from staff at NCCU, Laura developed this fledgling effort into a non-profit organization that now provides healthcare training, basic services, and a beauty school for young women in Liberia. She also partners with Friendship Community Church on youth empowerment events for Liberian and other African youth in Durham. At the time of this writing, Laura was in New York, presenting on her work at a parallel NGO event for the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women meeting. Laura's interview discussed her experiences of the Civil War (some of which were highlighted in Chapter one) and her work in Liberia and in the Liberian community in Durham.

Ella

Ella is in her mid-50's and resides in an apartment in Durham, North Carolina. She is recently divorced and has two children, a middle school aged boy and a son who is in his early 20's and currently in the U.S. Navy. She came to the United States in 1985, first moving to Texas. Ella grew up in Monrovia, the daughter of "Congo people" (descendants of the settlers of Liberia). She was in nursing school when Samuel Doe took power in Liberia through a coup, and she watched her mother get arrested during this tumultuous time. She currently attends a Baptist church in Durham (not Friendship Community Church) because she grew up Baptist in Liberia and feels most comfortable there. Ella's interview discussed her views of peace, which she describes as "like a baby," and her memories of the family and friendship ties that were broken due to the war in Liberia.

Marie

Marie is in her late 30's and came to the United States in 1999 from a United Nations refugee camp in Ghana. Marie's family was able to leave Liberia in the early 1990's, but she was not able to join them on the flight out, so she was forced to stay behind with her uncle, a man who sexually molested her. She left her uncle's home in the mid 1990's, fleeing to Ivory Coast and then Ghana, from where she was able to come to the United States. Marie lived in Maryland until just a few years ago when she moved to North Carolina. A city planner by training, she started a shelter for abused women and children in Liberia in 2005. In addition to this work in Liberia, she has worked with the Liberian community in Arizona, where in July of 2009 a young girl was sexually assaulted by four young boys.¹⁴⁴ Marie has two young daughters, both in elementary school. She and her husband live in Morrisville, North Carolina. Her interview focused

¹⁴⁴ Doug Gross, "Arizona Girl's Attack Sheds Light on Rape in Liberia," CNN, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-07-29/world/liberia.sex.crimes_1_sexual-violence-liberia-boys?_s=PM:WORLD [Accessed 8 March 2012].

on her work with the women's shelter and her own experiences of "breaking the silence" about sexual assault and rape.

Evelyn

Evelyn is a 29-year old mother of three young boys. She sings in the church choir at Friendship Community Church along with her husband. She told me that the other women at church call her "Mother Theresa" because she acts so old for her age. Evelyn came to the United States in 1991, following her mother who came first, fleeing both the war and an abusive partner. They moved to Boston, along with Evelyn's sister and brother (another sister stayed behind in Liberia). Evelyn went back and forth between her mother's homes in the Northeastern part of the United States (between Boston and Philadelphia) and her aunt's home in Ghana. She was alone a lot as a child because her mother worked two jobs to support her family. Evelyn is close with her family members, although she thinks of herself as something of a "black sheep" among her siblings because she is so focused and determined. Her sister passed away in Liberia just after our interview, and the fact that she was unable to go home for her burial compounded her grief. Evelyn and I met at church. Her interview focused on her struggles to provide for her children and get an education herself, while also enduring all she has been through in her life.

Joyce

Joyce, like Evelyn, is one of the younger generation of women who participates in and leads events at Friendship Community Church. She is a prayer warrior, a member of a select team of women who pray with the ministerial staff by phone each night for concerns in the congregation. She is also a leader in the women's ministry and regularly leads the praise and worship time before Sunday church services at Friendship

Community Church. Joyce found much comfort in the women's empowerment workshop conducted at the church because it gave her an outlet to grieve for her father. She lived through the entire Civil War in Liberia, although, as we will hear later, there are parts of the war that she can't remember. Joyce has six children and lives in an apartment in Durham close to the church. Joyce's interview focused on her experiences of the women's empowerment group and her desire for more story-sharing sessions among the women of Friendship Community Church. Her interview is not given prominent focus in Chapter three, but her story is told in more detail through her participation in the women's empowerment group in Chapter five.

Ruth

Ruth is in her mid-60's and is one of the missionaries at the church. The women and men designated as missionaries sit at the front of the church during each service, and are responsible for its leadership and guidance. They are the elders of the church community. Ruth moved to the United States in the early 1990's, living first in Staten Island. We began our conversation by talking about the large Liberian community there, but it soon moved into her remembrances of how difficult it was to live in the United States at that time while her children were still in Liberia or scattered in refugee camps in West Africa. Although Ruth did not discuss much about her journey to the United States, much of her interview was about how her religious faith has helped her to get through the toughest parts of her life. A recovering alcoholic, Ruth credits God for her miraculous cure from addiction. Her interview discussed her views on healing and peace, in addition to the role that her Christian faith plays in overcoming struggles.

Research Methods

Each of these interviews evolved in a unique way, in part due to the open-ended interview style I utilized. In each interview, I opened with a general question related to a concrete event that connected me to the women, whether that was the women's empowerment workshops (both Evelyn and Joyce were interviewed after the workshop), an experience at church, or a conversation that we had at an event. I then delved more deeply into the women's stories, allowing them to guide the interview by providing information that they thought was pertinent to my questions about healing or peace. Women were interviewed in their homes, for the most part, with the exception of Pastor Meah, who spoke to me two times at the church.¹⁴⁵ Interviewing is a delicate skill, one that takes a good deal of patience and care. It also, I believe, requires significant investment in the community, building relationships and helping people to feel comfortable talking about the intimate details of their lives. I built these relationships by attending community meetings, being present at weekly services and events, and by engaging people in conversations about their everyday lives. In what follows, I describe the approach that drove these research methods, an approach that draws on both care-based and ethnographic methodologies.

My theological and theoretical methods of proceeding in this dissertation mimic the collage work that I describe in Chapter five, in that I bring together several disciplines - feminist theory, feminist and womanist theology, practical theology, anthropology, trauma theory and human rights discourse - to understand the ways that religion matters

¹⁴⁵ This research was approved by Emory University's Institutional Review Board on August 5, 2011. A copy of the informed consent form is included as Appendix A. A copy of the interview protocol, upon which each of the interviews was loosely based, is included in this dissertation as Appendix B. Written informed consent was obtained by each woman who was interviewed. As per the IRB protocol, I obtained verbal consent for the participant observation research that I conducted in the women's empowerment group. Additionally, both Laura's organization and Friendship Community Church provided written documentation approving my participant observation research with their organizations.

as women find healing after experiencing violence and war. In addition to the interviews and nine months of participant observation research with Friendship Community Church in Durham, I also draw on the memoirs of women from Liberia like Leymah Gbowee, Helene Cooper, and Agnes Fallah Kamara-Umunna. Weaving these varied sources and conversation partners together, I carve out a way of writing about healing that speaks to the often bricolage-like nature of practical theological work generally.¹⁴⁶ Such work is necessarily interdisciplinary and yet, at the end of the day, this is a theological work.¹⁴⁷ I begin from women's experiences and practices, culling a theological vision of healing that reflects their "everyday theologies." These sources come together to create a collaged-picture of healing that is a mere snapshot of a phenomenon that is (as I will illustrate throughout these pages) continuously emergent.

Working with Communities Affected by Violence

I have spent a good part of the last five years talking with women who have experienced some form of violence, whether that be violence in the home, self-inflicted violence, violence through war, or structural violence like poverty and homelessness. In each of these situations, my method of research have been driven less by a formal commitment to a school of research methodology and more by my approach to being with communities. In other words, I often go into the field or into an interview less with a finite set of questions or objectives that I wish to accomplish and more guided by my

¹⁴⁶ As Elaine Graham writes, "In keeping with the postmodern spirit of bricolage – enquiry which proceeds by piecing together fragments, eschewing elevated theoretical schemes, aware of the provisionality and fragility of knowledge – I suggest that the key hermeneutical criterion for a reconstructed Christian practice is the 'disclosure' of alterity. In practical terms, such a perspective would favour strategies which encourage empathy and solidarity with others, open up enlarged horizons of understanding and commitment and foster pastoral encounters which engender new perspectives on human experience and divine reality." Elaine Graham, "Practical Theology as Transforming Practice," *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 106.

¹⁴⁷ As Emmanuel Lartey so aptly describes, pastoral and practical theology "are theology – not simply rationale for technique, nor again merely 'application; of theory: pastoral theology is theology in essence and not merely derivative of or parasitic upon 'real' theology." Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 13.

sense of how people should be treated as research subjects and human beings. In what follows, I chart out my approach to research with survivors of violence, building on the two primary fields of study that guide this approach: feminist pastoral care and feminist ethnography. One might ask what these two seemingly disparate conversation partners might have to say to one another; however, I find that they offer a way of working in communities that acknowledges the transformative power of sharing one's story, while also bringing to light the limits of narrative-based methodologies. Additionally, an approach drawing on feminist ethnographic methods allows us to see the ordinary, or vernacular, language and practices through which women live their lives and help to cultivate a reflexivity between researcher and subject that encourages the research process itself to be transformative.

Feminist Pastoral Care: Hearing Stories of Violence

It was the third meeting of the "women's empowerment group" at Friendship Community Church. As Angie, the trauma counselor, and I sat down with the group to begin our time together, talk turned on its own to "World War I" and "World War II" in Liberia. One woman, Ruth, talked about her experience being mistaken for a government minister on the side of the road in Monrovia. As she described what it felt like to be held by a rebel soldier, waiting for him to confirm whether he would kill her or not, she explained that it was moments like this, "when you think you might die," that you most feel the movement of God in your life. When the soldier came back to where the woman was waiting, she assured him again she did not work for the government. He shook his head, agreeing, and said that she could go on her way. Ruth walked away, "faster than I ever walked before." "Praise God," she said, for being able to survive with her life intact. "The Liberian Civil War was like nothing you could imagine," another woman chimed

in. Others went on to describe things that happened to them during the war, including being taken hostage, imprisoned, and watching friends and loved ones die. Some women, “their whole families died,” Laura said, shaking her head.

Angie looked around the group and asked them how it felt to share these stories about what they have been through. “I feel relieved to talk about it,” Ruth said, because “the almighty God has carried me through.” Because God has gotten her through it, Ruth reflected that it was “a little easier to talk about it,” even though she hasn’t completely “overcome it.” Pastor Meah followed Ruth, saying that when she hears about what other countries, like Libya, are going through, it “brings back memories...When you see other countries [going through war] it reminds you of yesterday.”¹⁴⁸ As the conversation continued, the role of faith in helping a person to overcome trauma was a recurring theme. When talk turned to how one can live in a community where perpetrators and victims exist side by side (and where the lines between these two are complicated and blurry), Laura noted that this is “where faith comes in,” faith that forgiveness and peace are possible, even in a new country and homeland where violence continues. Pastor Meah agreed, echoing a theme that she had mentioned to me months before, “War is right here in America. People are killing people.” The group talked about how the church – and an individual life of faith in God’s power to overcome violence – was what made it all bearable. The talk, which began on a horrific note, ended with a resounding chord of affirmation. Ruth closed her eyes and bowed her head slightly, her soft speech doing nothing to mitigate the power of her words: “We will rise again.”

¹⁴⁸ The women’s empowerment group, which ran from August – September 2011, occurred during the same time as the Libyan revolution, something that came up often in sermons at the church during these months. See *The New York Times*, “Libya – Revolution and Aftermath,” <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/libya/index.html> [Accessed 2 February 2011].

A chorus of “Amens” echoed around the room.

For many trauma survivors, talking about what you have been through is a powerful healing mechanism. As Mary Clark Moschella writes,

Listening is indeed a great service, a primary duty of love; it brings honor and recognition to the speaker. Listening gives another the chance to experience his or her inner knowing. Listening can be a means of grace, as it brings forth stories through which people make sense of their lives and become aware of a larger reality.¹⁴⁹

Several of the women in the empowerment group found that telling their stories about the war had a positive influence on their life, despite the fact that it was often difficult and painful to do so. They reflected (in the same meeting I described above) that telling their story had the following effects: 1) Hearing another person’s story reminds you that you are not alone in what you have been through; 2) Telling one’s story allows you to see the areas where you were empowered (in many cases, by faith in God) to persevere and survive; and 3) Talking with others allows you to regain a sense of control over the memory and experiences. As I will elaborate below, these positive effects of sharing a narrative rely on the presence of an empathic other, or group of others, to hear and affirm that story (and thus, that person). Therefore, cultivating communities of care that are able to hear and support women as they share their narratives is imperative.¹⁵⁰

Coming to Voice

Philosopher Susan Brison writes that in addition to telling one’s story to an “imagined other” (through writing, to a photograph), talking to other survivors of

¹⁴⁹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 144.

¹⁵⁰ It should be noted that talking about experiences of violence is not always helpful or healing for women. When this kind of testimony is encouraged in order to obtain political, legal or judicial benefits and supports, the testimony that is obtained might appear to be frozen or forced rather than healing and empowering. See Brison, *Aftermath*; Das, *Life and Words*; Ross, *Bearing Witness*. However, talking about what one has been through – when the woman sets the term for what she will talk about – can be incredibly freeing and healing for some survivors of violence, as I experienced with the Liberian women with whom I worked. See, particularly, Chapter five.

violence can be immensely healing, “in ways that go beyond the capacity of individual therapy.” She goes on to say that talking with a group:

can not only enable a survivor to feel empathy for her traumatized self (by first feeling it for another who experienced a similar trauma), but also make possible appropriate emotions, such as anger, that she was not able to feel on her own behalf. By first feeling empathy with other survivors and getting angry with their tormenters, she is better able to get angry with her own. Hearing others’ narratives can also help trauma survivors to move beyond unjustified self-blame.¹⁵¹

Feminist theologian Serene Jones echoes Brison when she writes that for healing to take place, “it is crucial that the events of traumatic violence are testified to and then witnessed and believed by others... This healing involves, at least partially, the creation of a jointly authored story exposing the event of violence, which had been previously silenced, and then integrating this event into a broader life story... In an event of speaking, hearing and believing, a new future unfolds.”¹⁵² By sharing stories of the war together, overlapping each other’s experience, and building a group narrative, the women in the group felt supported and empowered. They expressed that they felt a sense of camaraderie and support when hearing what others went through. Being able to share one’s story and hearing it validated is a crucial aspect of trauma recovery and healing. As Leymah Gbowee recounts of her days doing trauma healing prior to her peacebuilding work in Liberia, “Does it sound like a small thing that the women I met were able to talk openly? It was not small; it was groundbreaking... Everyone was alone with her pain... But holding in that kind of misery was as crippling as holding on to rage. I had found a way for us to squeeze it out.”¹⁵³ By hearing what others have been through, our own stories are woven together with theirs. This relational quality of healing, according

¹⁵¹ Brison, *Aftermath*, 73.

¹⁵² Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 79.

¹⁵³ Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 106-7.

to Susan Brison, “reveals the extent to which the self is created and sustained by others and, thus, is able to be destroyed by them. The boundaries of the will are limited, or enlarged, not only by the stories that others tell, but also by the extent of their ability and willingness to listen to others.”¹⁵⁴

In addition to providing a shared story and a sense of common ground among the group, telling stories about experiences during the Liberian Civil War provided a narrative of resistance in the group. As Ruth’s comment affirmed, it endowed the women with a sense that they will “rise again.” Additionally, the women named God’s presence at the moment of threatened annihilation as a moment of redemption – a positive and uplifting occurrence in a traumatic and terrible event. The group was able to recognize and claim an alternative narrative to the one that is often given about women’s experiences of conflict – that of the victim. This is not to say that the women I worked with were not victimized (they were), but it is to say that their healing process involves reframing that narrative of victimization so that resistant and liberating strands are also present.

This process of reframing narratives of victimization is central to pastoral theologian Christie Neuger’s method of short-term pastoral care with women. Neuger argues in her book *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* that a feminist narrative approach to pastoral care and counseling can help women to resist narratives of harm and oppression and to create new narratives of resistance and strength. Neuger develops a four-fold model of pastoral counseling with women that includes the

¹⁵⁴ Brison, *Aftermath*, 62. Here Brison also argues that it is crucial to survival that a testimony be heard by others. She writes, “It is not sufficient for mastering the trauma to construct a narrative of it: one must (physically, publicly) say or write (or paint or film) the narrative and others must see or hear it in order for one’s survival as an autonomous self to be complete.” This is a crucial point in having empathy for oneself, Brison argues. “In hearing and supporting others’ stories, we are more able to hear and be empathetic towards ourselves.”

following steps: coming to voice, gaining clarity, making choices and finding community.¹⁵⁵ She argues that this method of narrative therapy is helpful for many women who do not have the resources or the ability to take time away from their lives for more long-term therapeutic encounters. The first stage, coming to voice, occurs when the caregiver helps the woman to tell her own story, encouraging her to speak out of her silence and of her own experiences.¹⁵⁶ This coming to voice phase is followed by gaining clarity, where the caregiver helps the woman to examine the narrative she has offered, looking for practices of resistance in the narrative and also examining the dominant patriarchal motifs that are inherent in the story.¹⁵⁷ In other words, she comes to examine the gender expectations inherent in her story, and also her own strengths and practices of resistance embedded in her story. By bringing strengths and practices of resistance to the forefront of the narrative, the caregiver can help women move into the third phase, which is making choices. In this phase, the caregiver helps the woman to see that her narrative does not trap her, but rather she has options for creating a new (strength-filled) resistant narrative into which she can begin to live.¹⁵⁸ As Neuger rightly points out, the cultural narratives women have inherited do not magically go away at this point in the therapeutic process. Rather, they become “thickened” by new narratives of resistance, strength and empowerment.¹⁵⁹ The woman comes to realize that the cultural narratives and tropes in which she was living are not completely confining. She has options to live into an alternative narrative or story of change and liberation.

¹⁵⁵ Christie Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 64.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 65.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 129.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 179.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 190-1.

Through the experience of sharing stories in a group setting, the women who participated in the interviews and the women's empowerment group were able to create together a narrative stream that resisted the dominant narrative of harm and loss. Additionally, the flow of the empowerment group mirrored Neuger's methods, although not always intentionally. The old story of fear and abuse does not disappear, "it is, after all, part of the whole story – but one does want to lay alongside it a rich and detailed version of the new story so that it is available for generating new options and less pain."¹⁶⁰ New and old stories exist side-by-side in a "thickened" narrative that envisions hope out of hardship.

Weaving Counternarratives

Developing counter stories is "an important part of feminist-oriented pastoral counseling – helping to support counselees as they name and claim personal and communal counterstories that better guide them through life as whole and authentic people."¹⁶¹ For the women I worked with, most of whom were members of Friendship Community Church, this thickened narrative was imbued with elements of faith and redemption: it echoed a story of salvation in which God saves God's people from hardship and affliction. This is not to say that the women believed that God allowed them to live while others survived (that they were special or more faithful than family and friends who died). Rather, I would argue, placing faith in God's saving powers allowed for a sense of control over the narrative itself. They were able to survive, to make a way, despite their intense hardships. As Monica Coleman writes, "'Making a way out of no way' is sometimes experienced as release and joy; other times it is

¹⁶⁰ Neuger, *Counseling Women*, 190.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 138.

experienced as resources in the midst of oppression without release. Either way, it disrupts the past from continuing on as it would without the possibilities offered by God.”¹⁶² In this way God, presents liberating and sustaining resources for women’s lives, allowing them to see new possibilities, stories, and options where once there was only violence and despair. As Neuger affirms, this is the role of the counselor as well, helping women to see liberative possibilities out of their own narratives. This is a crucial part of “making choices,” the third phase of her pastoral counseling method.

This process of narrative “thickening” then requires an element of faith – a trust that there can be good in a world where the worst evils have been known and experienced. Faith in God’s ability to “make a way” as I heard over and over again at the church plays a crucial role in this narrative re-weaving. As Brison writes:

One hopes for a bearable future, in spite of all the inductive evidence to the contrary. After all, the loss of faith in induction following an unpredictable trauma also has a reassuring side: since inferences from the past can no longer be relied upon to predict the future, there’s no more reason to think that tomorrow will bring agony than to think that it won’t. So one makes a wager, in which nothing is certain and the odds change daily, and sets about willing to believe that life, for all its unfathomable horror, still holds some undiscovered pleasures.¹⁶³

Making a wager, or being willing to see a new future, is possible for these women by feeling the presence of God. As Laura noted, “faith, that’s what keeps us going.”¹⁶⁴ The women in the group presented a non-naïve hope in the future – one that was grounded in and remembered all that had been lost – while still looking forward to the future. This hope was rooted in faith in a God who would provide opportunities for survival and

¹⁶² Coleman, *Making a Way*, 35.

¹⁶³ Brison, *Aftermath*, 66.

¹⁶⁴ This faith is rooted not only in remembering God’s presence in the moment of violence, as I will elaborate upon in Chapter three, but also in the practices of faith that inform the life of the community (which are the subject of Chapter four).

resilience where none seemed to exist. By telling “thickened” stories, they were able to envision a future in which they will “rise again.”

This notion of gaining control over one’s narrative is often a crucial element of dealing with trauma. Brison articulates that regaining control over her narrative and her life was a crucial part of her healing process after being raped. As she writes:

It is only by remembering and narrating the past – telling our stories and listening to others’ – that we can participate in an ongoing, active construction of a narrative of liberation, not one that confines us to a limiting past, but one that forms a background from which a freely imagined – and desired – future can emerge.¹⁶⁵

This process allows trauma survivors to transform their stories and envision new futures. Although violence often robs survivors of their sense of who they are, the ability to tell one’s story in a way that a new future is imagined can be empowering and healing. It allows a renewed sense of control over a life that has been rendered senseless through violence. African feminist theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye describes this as a creative process of beadwork, where women are continuously taking in what has come before them (their traditions, histories, contexts, material realities) and creating new visions for the future.¹⁶⁶ As she writes this is a process of “shredded lives being bound together by intertwining them.”¹⁶⁷ It is a process of rebuilding the self by discarding that which is not helpful (from culture, from our religious background, from our own painful past) in an effort to move forward and create something new.¹⁶⁸ Arguing, like Neuger, that women

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 98-99.

¹⁶⁶ Oduyoye, 209.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ This understanding of the self relates to Catherine Keller’s process exposition of the distinctions between the person (our public persona) and the soul (the “loose sense of the unity of the person”). As she writes, “What I become now arises out of all my previous moments of experience (and out of all the occasions of the nexus that are my world); it will then contribute its influence to all future occasions of my personal life (and to all future occasions of the world). The image arises of an individual stream among ocean currents. Everything, and most intimately my soul, flows in and out of the present occasion, which is myself. This is a light and loose sense of the unity of the person. Why would we need more?” See Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 197.

must take on the work of creating a new future out of our pasts, she forcefully asserts at the close of her text *Daughters of Anowa*, “Myth, history, and faith agree: people can change.”¹⁶⁹ This type of storytelling is creative work – but not in the sense of being abstract or “made up.” It is creative in the sense that it allows women to remember the past and envision their future in a way that is geared toward survival, resilience and liberation. This is healing for violence survivors in that it promotes a renewed sense of control over one’s life and story. As Evelyn noted, while remembering the hard times with her mother and reflecting on her death was difficult, it helped her to “feel okay. It felt good.”

While telling stories of violence in a way that envisions hope out of horror can be an important part of healing for many trauma survivors, for some people, speaking of violence is impossible. As one woman recounted during the same group conversation where other women shared stories of the war, “it’s just too much.” Because this is the case, I also draw on feminist ethnographic methods in order to “hear” violence that goes unsaid. In the next section, I elaborate on these methods, focusing on the ways healing and peace can emerge through rituals, gestures and embodied practices that do not rely, necessarily, on speech. What the above section illustrates is that for many women, talking through their experiences of violence – importantly, on their terms – can be an incredibly healing experience. When women are allowed to set the terms of how they talk about what they have been through, focusing on creating counterstories of hope and survival out of these narratives, what emerges is a picture of healing as a process in the life course. As I note below, this is not the only way that women heal from violence.

¹⁶⁹ Oduyoye, 218.

They also draw on non-verbal practices to bring about healing when it is “just too much” to talk about it.

Feminist Ethnography and the Limits of Narrative

In a conversation I had with a women’s rights and peacebuilding activist in Liberia at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women meeting in 2010, I learned that Liberian women’s organizations are increasingly turning toward everyday practice in their own healing and post-conflict recovery programs, in light of the overwhelming violence experienced by women during the war. One program offers gardening and small farms training to women who have been affected by gender-based violence and conflict. As its organizer, Mary, told me, the women in the program often do not want to talk about the violence they have endured. Instead, by working together on the farm, they build relationships and begin a healing process through embodied movements and gestures of love and friendship. After some time, they may find the ability to speak of their experiences – or they may remain silent. Either way, they begin to reconstitute their lives through the cultivation of the earth and the rebuilding of human relationship. Being attentive to healing and peace as they are lived and practiced is particularly important, given what I have heard from women in the Liberian community in Durham about it oftentimes being “too much” to talk about violence.

To bear witness to violence we must be attentive to what “remains.”¹⁷⁰ Despite, or in some cases because of, the reality of violence, for some women this violence is remembered in a way that facilitates healing. In other words, the pain of trauma is not all that remains. To grasp these healing practices, I draw on ethnographic methods that

¹⁷⁰ As Rambo writes, “‘What remains in the aftermath of death’ is the central question of witness,” *Spirit and Trauma*, 44.

allow for a glimpse of the “everyday” ways peace and healing are lived and experienced. These methods are attentive to the ways healing and peace emerge in the midst of relationships, practices and everyday life. As Veena Das argues, all violence embeds itself in relationship, and it is the task of the anthropologist to both bear witness to violence that is hidden and to explore the ways that violence is not an event, but is entrenched in the recesses of life.¹⁷¹

For my work, drawing on ethnographic methods in my theological scholarship offers the following three benefits: 1) It allows for a glimpse at the local practices and vernacular understandings of violence and peace, and the role religion plays in bringing these to bear; 2) Ethnography challenges the assumption that healing from violence and trauma happens through speech; and 3) Feminist ethnographic practices allow for a shift in our theoretical and theological categories, if we let them.

Religion and the Vernacular

Flueckiger’s poignant ethnographic narrative, *In Amma’s Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India*, introduces her readers to Amma, a female Muslim healer in Hyderabad. As Flueckiger notes early in her text, there are two significant aspects to Amma’s healing room: 1) the fact that Amma is a female Muslim healer, and as such, her authority must constantly be reaffirmed (and yet, it is because she is a woman that many turn to her for healing), and 2) the emergence of Amma’s healing room as a *caurasta* (“crossroads”) where those of different faiths meet over their shared religious cosmology of belief in spiritual healing (despite their religious differences in

¹⁷¹ Das, *Life and Words*, 218-19.

practice and tradition outside the healing room).¹⁷² Flueckiger's close attention to the vernacular practices of one Sufi community, led by a healer (Amma) and a *pir* (Abba) whose healing and ritual authority paradoxically depend on one another, uses a performance studies lens to explore the ways that Amma's stories and healing practices continuously create her authority in the healing room.

Flueckiger tells us of how she meets Amma (or, as Amma would put it, how Flueckiger was "called" to her), coming to her healing room after seeing the ritual flags that fly above it marking it as a sacred space. Although initially Flueckiger set out to explore the ways that patients in the healing room take and use the information and prescriptions written and given by Amma in their homes, she ultimately realizes that it is Amma herself who emerges at the center of the ethnographic project.¹⁷³ Flueckiger argues that attention to the ways that Amma's healing room is both a site of the performance of her ritual authority (which is constant, because of her gender) and the crossroads where multiple faiths, traditions and personalities meet and are healed allows us to better understand the ways that individuals live into, exert authority within and resist the contexts, structures and traditions in which they live. Flueckiger's close connection to and narrative focus on Amma allows us to see the ways that a community of healing is, in effect, formed around her.

Flueckiger articulates what she names as "vernacular" versus "universal" religious practices. She argues for attention to the vernacular practices of Islam in an

¹⁷² Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁷³ Flueckiger makes a case for case studies by arguing that they allow researchers to analyze "sites and processes of negotiation available to an individual, examining how Amma articulates and negotiates gender, authority, and religious identities and how these shift over time. The possibilities for the flexibility inherent in vernacular practice are not inherent to Amma, but they are often observable only by working with specific individuals over time. Analyzing these possibilities helps us be aware of and look for similar possibilities in other contexts," p. 22.

effort to understand the ways that individuals are constantly making and remaking the universal traditions in which they live and to which they relate. As she writes:

one of the purposes of this book is to bring this level of practice and experience – what I have called ‘vernacular Islam’ – to the study of Islam and, by writing ethnographically of a particular place, to remind us that ‘universal’ Islam is lived locally. Here, on the ground, vernacular Islam is shaped and voiced by individuals in specific contexts and in specific relationships, individuals who change over time in social, economic and political contexts that also shift. To study vernacular Islam – in this case, through the lens of a specific female healer in South India – is to identify sites of potential fluidity, flexibility and innovation in a religious tradition that self-identifies as universal and is often perceived to be ideologically monolithic.¹⁷⁴

She notes that when giving presentations on Amma, individuals often question Amma’s authenticity, noting that this is not “real Islam.” Flueckiger’s portrait of Amma allows us to see the ways that Islam itself is not a unified tradition. Questions of the “realness” or universality of Islam prevent us from seeing the ways that it is actually practiced, and neglect the self-identification of the practitioners with whom we work.¹⁷⁵ Through a lens of performance theory, Flueckiger’s ethnography points to the ways that religious and healing practices are performed across time in a shared space. This ethnographic narrative of one healer provides a much broader examination of the ways that health and healing are enacted out of and dependent on relationships. Additionally, Flueckiger’s decision to be attentive to the practices of one Sufi healer, allows us to see, over an extended period of time, the ways that tradition itself is flexible and constantly recreated. Flueckiger’s work helps us to see the ways that religion is lived in a particular time and context. This is especially important for this dissertation given the ways that religion matters for the survivors of the Liberian Civil War with whom I worked.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 2.

¹⁷⁵ As Flueckiger writes, “Amma sees herself and her practices not as peripheral but at the very center, a center through which multiple axes of religious identities meet and cross...I take seriously Amma’s self-identification as Muslim and seek to understand how and when this identity is shaped, enacted, and articulated at this site of vernacular Islam,” p. 13-4.

As this dissertation demonstrates, religion matters for the survivors of the Liberian Civil War that I worked with in Durham. It also matters, I would argue, for thousands of others of women who have survived violence.¹⁷⁶ Despite this fact, religion seems to be a topic that is seldom addressed in conversations around gender violence, particularly in international women’s rights discourse. Martha Nussbaum acknowledges that many secular feminists are uncomfortable with talk of religion. This is because “there is no doubt that the world’s major religions, in their actual historical form, have been unjust to women both theoretically and practically.”¹⁷⁷ When religion is described as neutral at best and oppressive at its worst, it becomes difficult to recognize or understand religious motivations and practices of survivors of violence. As is evidenced by the work of women featured in this dissertation, religious practices can be mobilized in an effort to bring about healing in the face of violence, and religious communities can prove significant outlets for exploring the nature and process of healing, justice and peace. Indeed the argument that religious institutions, traditions and practices can be harnessed for peacebuilding work is not a new one.¹⁷⁸ However, often when it comes to

¹⁷⁶ This has become all the more apparent to me through several other research projects I have participated in, including the Religion and Reproductive Health Project (sponsored by Emory University’s Religion and Public Health Collaborative) and my own year of research with a domestic violence agency in North Carolina.

¹⁷⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 177. Nussbaum, arguing against secular feminists, sees that religion is important both because it upholds moral norms and because each person (including religious people) should be treated as ends. She focuses on the ways that religion is/can be regulated by the law, arguing that as long as individuals have an opportunity to choose (and to leave) their religion and that the religion does not impinge upon the capabilities, that it is not problematic. However, what is problematic in Nussbaum’s arguments about whether or not a religion can impinge upon the capabilities is her belief that those outside of a religion (not the courts – she says this is a project of social debate) should be able to decide whether the offensive aspect of the religion is indeed central to it. Nussbaum both argues for the protection of religion and argues that when it fails to protect its members those non-essential (“cultural”) aspects of a religion can be dropped. See p. 236.

¹⁷⁸ In their important text, *Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen write in their chapter “There is No Aftermath for Women,” that the question of the role of religious institutions in post-conflict reconstruction must be considered. However, their response to the question suggests that religion (and here they mean only institutional religion, not religion as it is practiced or lived in local vernaculars), is a key perpetrator in reinscribing patriarchal gender norms post-conflict. They state, “Religion is just one of the institutions that determine whether old ways will be consolidated or new ideas will be diffused in the aftermath” (15). While this is certainly the case, in my dissertation I hope to point to the multiple roles that religion plays in women’s lives, including the ways that many women turn to religion as a survival mechanism when faced with violence. Others are working on these

issues of gender violence from a development or human rights perspective, religion is seldom recognized as a legitimate frame of reference for women who are dealing with these issues.

Because of the absence of a conversation about the ways religion actually functions in women's lives in much of feminist post-conflict literature, by learning about the ways that women navigate and negotiate various systems (including religious institutions *and* religious practices) we might come to appreciate local understanding of the ways healing and peace are understood and lived. This might help us to think about communal practices, acts of remembering, and rituals of healing that can be incorporated in feminist peacebuilding work, as it happens at both local and international levels. Practically speaking, attention to the ways women navigate their local contexts and religious identities can illumine these alternative arenas of peacebuilding that exist in the "everyday" shadow of more public, institutional arenas of justice. I draw attention to these gaps here in order to point toward work in feminist ethnography that can illumine these everyday arenas of healing and peace.

Following Flueckiger, I examine the religious practices that women engage in order to bring about healing in their lives, families and communities. As Chapter Three demonstrates, some of this work happens in the recovery of a narrative. I look at how being able to see the presence of God in a moment of trauma years after the event took place allows women to begin to paste together a new, healing narrative despite experiences of great harm. This work continues through the practices of faith that are illumined in Chapter Four, where women's prayer practices provide a model of

issues, and the recent Carter Center Human Rights Defenders Forum in May of 2011 on Religion, Belief and Women's Rights represents one NGO organization working at these intersections. See www.cartercenter.org/peace/human_rights/defenders/forums/2011/.

communal narrative rebuilding that helps to memorialize what has been lost, while looking forward to a new life. These religious beliefs and practices are part of a universal tradition of Christianity; however, they represent their vernacular expression, as illustrated by Flueckiger. If we only look to institutional or universal forms of religion, as has often been the case in international women's rights discourse and practice, we would have an incomplete picture of the ways women understand and practice peace. This idea of vernacular, or ordinary, religion is compelling and useful for those of us working with and for survivors of conflict related violence.

Hearing Beyond Words

In addition to providing access to the local ways religion is lived, drawing on ethnographic practices also allows us to see the ways that healing and peace emerge out of violence – but not always through conversation and talking. While some survivors of violence are able to heal through narrative-based dialogic practices, for others, this healing work happens through daily life and ritual practice. Veena Das reflects on this fact in her anthropological work, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Everyday*. Drawing on ethnographic experiences in India around post-partition violence and the 1984 Sikh massacres that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination, Das argues that violence is not merely a one-time event that ruptures the everyday. Rather, the violent “event [attaches] itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary.”¹⁷⁹ Violence reminds us that we can never truly have control over our lives or ourselves (we are always vulnerable to one another), and yet there is a hope we can find in relating to others that tells us that we are more than a victimized

¹⁷⁹ Das, *Life and Words*, 1.

subject.”¹⁸⁰ This work of reconstituting the self, which she likens to “the delicate task of repairing the torn spider’s web,” happens not through an “ascent into the transcendent,” but rather in the midst of “everyday life.”¹⁸¹ This complicated, “everyday” work of “repairing” takes time and cannot always be articulated through speech and language. This resonates with theologian Marcia Mount Shoop’s discussion of re-membering for trauma survivors. As she writes, “The body feels and is constantly processing experience in ways we cannot begin to characterize as extensions of rational thought. Our consciousness is often not the focal point of this processing of pain.”¹⁸² Re-membering is present in the women’s sense that “we will rise again” despite experiences of trauma. What Das and Shoop here point to is the ways that these re-membering practices are embedded in the body. They are not always spoken. In this way, looking toward the everyday practices of life that women embrace in order to survive and recover, are crucial for those who work with survivors of violence.

While many individuals are able to find healing through talking about their experiences of violence to an “empathic other,”¹⁸³ for some talking about violence is not possible, so practices of remembering and mourning became important ways of showing rather than speaking of violence. In terms of healing, “there is no pretense here at some grand project of recovery but simply the question of how everyday tasks of surviving – having a roof over your head, being able to send your children to school, being able to do the work of the everyday without constant fear of being attacked – could be

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 14.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 15.

¹⁸² Marcia Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 49.

¹⁸³ See Brison, *Aftermath*; Annie Hardison-Moody, “Getting this Off My Chest: Ethnography as Disruptive Theological Practice” *Practical Matters: A Transdisciplinary Multimedia Journal of Religious Practices and Practical Theology*, Issue 3. <http://www.practicalmattersjournal.org/issue/3/analyzing-matters/getting-this-off-my-chest> [Accessed December 10, 2011].

accomplished.”¹⁸⁴ Although it is often assumed that to heal from violence requires speech, Das reminds us that assuming that agency consists in forging the link between experiencing the pain of violence and talking of that pain is problematic. Rather, she points out that agency can also be seen in the “descent” into the everyday, where women are able to show, feel, recover and resist violence through concrete, embodied relations and practices.

For Joyce, one of the participants in the women’s empowerment groups, one way this happened was through the creation of a memorial box for her father, who died during the war. During one session in the women’s empowerment groups, we discussed loss and mourning. Angie, the counselor we worked with, asked each member of the group to create a memorial box for someone they lost. After decorating these small, cardboard boxes with pictures, flowers, drawings and poems, we each wrote a prayer remembering that loved one. This was a particularly emotional session (and will be described in more detail in Chapter five), but I point it out here to say that when I visited Joyce several weeks after the group, she showed me the box for her father, which was set out in her living room. While she hadn’t been able to talk much about her experiences before, even in her interview (as I will elaborate in a later chapter, she felt like Jonah, who was swallowed up by a whale for refusing to speak), she found a great deal of comfort in being able to memorialize her father. The reminder of the box in her living room meant that she was able to remember him whenever she passed by, creating a daily practice of memorialization. These small moments of recovery mark the non-narrative practices of healing that are not visible if we only think of healing from trauma as a recovery of voice.

¹⁸⁴ Das, *Life and Words*, 216.

It is not through an “ascent into the transcendent” (or faith in a God who is above and beyond us), but rather through the recesses of everyday life that we learn to experience the healing power of this newfound hope.¹⁸⁵ For some women, bearing witness to what remains after violence means being attentive to the ways everyday life continues (miraculously) after trauma.

Reflexivity in Research

Finally, drawing on feminist ethnographic methods necessitates a certain reflexivity in the researcher that can lead to transformative effects on both the theoretical and theological outcomes. In other words, the field can change us and it can change our work – if we let it. For anthropologist Saba Mahmood, suspending the lens of secular feminist political theory (and its assumptions about what it means to be a political subject) while working with women who are part of the Mosque movement in Egypt led her to adopt a “mode of encountering the Other which does not assume that in the process of culturally translating other lifeworlds one’s own certainty about how the world should proceed can remain stable.”¹⁸⁶ She turns to the bodily practices women adopt in order to cultivate a particular form of pious subjectivity, arguing that these are forms of agency that must be understood in and on their own terms.¹⁸⁷ Arguing that our assumptions about what is meant by the political, agency or a subject might change given our encounter with Others, she pushes her readers to “embark upon an inquiry in which we do not assume that the political positions we hold will necessarily be vindicated, or provide the ground for our theoretical analysis, but instead hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics that a whole series of questions that seemed settled when

¹⁸⁵ Das, *Life and Words*, 15.

¹⁸⁶ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 199.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 34.

we first embarked upon the inquiry.”¹⁸⁸ Mahmood’s research asks us what might happen if we begin our work by paying attention to – and being willing to be changed by – the ways the women we work with actually speak and practice.

Bracketing our theological and theoretical assumptions in an effort to be attentive to what women actually care about (instead of inscribing our cares and desires onto them) is difficult work. In fact, in the women’s empowerment groups, I came head to head with this research dilemma as the groups were being planned. Laura had talked to me about her hope, along with Pastor Meah, to carry out some trauma healing workshops to deal with what women experienced during the war. My research seemed to align with this, since my project was originally designed to focus on women’s experiences of the Liberian Civil war, including how they were able to heal in its aftermath. However, as we met over the course of many months to discuss the groups, the focus on trauma became problematic for the women and men in the community. In addition to concerns about perpetrators and victims sitting side by side and fear of any type of “counseling program,” Laura, Pastor Meah and the men and women in their organizations expressed their desire for a program that focused not on trauma but instead on “empowerment” and moving forward, which to them meant getting an education, finding financial security, and securing a steady job. Adopting a participatory stance to this research,¹⁸⁹ I listened to what community members thought was important and moved the research in the

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 39.

¹⁸⁹ Many of these models are based on Freirean educational methods, which put communities at the center of the research agenda. As Freire writes, “We must never merely discourse on the present situation, must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears – programs which at times in fact increase the fears of the oppressed consciousness. It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their situation in the world. Educational and political action which is not critically aware of this situation runs the risk either of ‘banking’ or preaching in the desert.” See Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2007), 96.

direction that they discerned. Rather than focusing on talking about traumatic experiences of the Civil War (despite the fact that I needed to write my dissertation about this!), we agreed to focus on strengths and visions for the future. Working with Angie, the counselor, we designed a program that would focus on these strengths, naming the group an “empowerment group” rather than a trauma healing group, and incorporated art therapy as a way to participate without having to talk. This desire to move forward, to move beyond (without forgetting) traumatic experiences through the ways they saw God’s presence in their narratives and practices of healing became the theme of my dissertation.

This desire reflects what anthropologist Rosalind Shaw found in working with survivors of the Civil War in Sierra Leone, where she argues that not talking about the war in worship and by creating faith-inspired plays is an act of agency, an attempt to recreate life out of death and its effects. Although the youth Shaw worked with did not talk about the war in their plays, seeking, she writes to “displace their war memories by the Holy Spirit,” the reality of what they have been through is not lost. These practices of “forgetting” or swallowing¹⁹⁰ trauma help them instead to rewrite their own narratives. Rather than pushing this off as an occurrence of “false consciousness,” Shaw sees in these forgetting practices the transformative work of healing that the young people carry out.¹⁹¹ Like Mahmood, who argues for bracketing our Western, liberal, secular and

¹⁹⁰ Veena Das records such embodied practices of taking in trauma in her text *Life and Words*, where she recounts the mourning practices of women after riots and murders in Sikh areas of Delhi, after Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984. A group of women refused to speak, forming their mourning gestures as political action. Das writes, “more powerful than even the words, though, was the way that the women sat in silence outside their houses refusing to bring mourning to an end. As the civil rights groups and journalists began to visit the area to collect stories, the women were often scared to speak out, but their gestures of mourning that went on and on and on showed the deeply altered meaning of death,” 194.

¹⁹¹ As she writes, “The displacement of harrowing experiences from the past into other, transmuted forms is often viewed as synonymous with repression or false consciousness. But just as the physical displacement of GP youth is not an entirely negative condition, their displacement of violent memory is enabling rather than constraining. From the

feminist assumptions about agency, Shaw found that this “forgetting” of the trauma was an intentional act that was formative in the life and narrative of Sierra Leonean youth. I point this out here to say that my own work and the narrative shape of this dissertation was changed by my experiences with the Liberian women with whom I talked and worked. Their desire to move beyond their experiences during the Civil War, and in some cases, their refusal or reluctance to talk about it, shapes the way I understand healing.

When understood from a Western, psychotherapeutic perspective, “talk therapy” models are often assumed as the best method of healing from trauma. While the field of trauma studies has disrupted these assumptions, I would argue that they are still operative in terms of how the international community responds to situations of conflict, with a focus on processes that emphasize testimony and narrative. As Shaw recounts, “Through this genealogy, explicit verbal recounting has become such an exemplary mode of memory that its link with healing and empowerment appears ‘natural.’ Yet the work of memory in other places and times may draw on different genealogies.”¹⁹² Like Shaw, I argue that healing also happens in and through these occurrences of daily life, where practices of faith like worship and prayer as well as community-building work serve as a crucial part of healing. I trace the ways that healing from trauma happens outside of these assumed categories of healing – whether they be Truth Commissions or Western-based talk therapies. In other words, I look to the ways healing is negotiated in and through daily life. In this way, my dissertation has been shaped by the ethnographic

silence surrounding the Civil War in their plays, they retrieve a different kind of memory and voice, creating a more life course in which they are much more than weak dependents,” 89.

¹⁹² Shaw, “Displacing Violence,” 67.

stances taken by anthropologists like Mahmood, who argue for a particular type of theoretical bracketing in their work.

This reflexive stance is important for theologians because it pushes us to consider the “messiness” of the real world. It also tests our theological presuppositions in ways that are not always comfortable. As Mary McClintock Fulkerson writes:

Theological framing can easily miss or obscure this worldliness. From overly cognitive and orthodox definitions of Christian faithfulness to concepts of practice that ignore the contribution of bodies and desire, prominent theological options risk overlooking both the worldly way that communities live out faith and the worldly way that God is among us. The very conviction of God’s redemptive presence tempts the theologian to map sense and order onto the worldly. The zeal to find good news can slip easily into the desire to smooth out the tangle called ‘community,’ rendering it amenable to the correct theological categories.¹⁹³

This dissertation is an attempt to let the field – and the women who live in it – have the first say. It is my hope that the theological reflections imbedded in this dissertation will flow from what I have heard, seen, experienced, felt and learned. Reflexivity, a key component of feminist ethnography, is a useful reminder to theologians as well.¹⁹⁴ What would happen if we let our theologies – and, perhaps most radically, our theological categories – emerge out of experience, practice and life? The following three chapters of this dissertation tackle these questions head-on by looking at the ways religion emerges in women’s narratives, practices and in the work of the women’s empowerment group. The approach to research described above allows us to see the ways religion matters to women by hearing their narratives, observing and participating in their practices, and by creating – dialogically and reflexively – a trauma healing program that speaks to women’s desires and needs rather than assuming the researcher knows best. These

¹⁹³ Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 6.

¹⁹⁴ The turn, in practical and liberation theologies, toward ethnographic practices reflects some of these desires. See, for example, Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum Press, 2011).

methods allow us to see the ways violence is remembered, healing is attended to, and peace is practiced at a local level, beyond speech only, and in ways that shifts and changes our theoretical and theological categories.

Bridging Care and Research: Research in Practice

As I got to know the church and women in the Liberian community better, I realized that my research methods bridged care work and ethnography in important ways. Drawing on feminist ethnographic methods allowed me to see the ways that violence is remembered in local communities and through the often non-verbal practices of everyday life. Reflexive methods of feminist ethnographers allow for an understanding of peace and healing that emerge from life and practice – often in unexpected places. Building on this, I also turned to feminist pastoral care and narrative-based practices to consider how I and others might provide appropriate, supportive and care-based practices with and for the women with whom I worked.

In conclusion, this chapter has described the approach I have taken in working with the Liberian community in Durham, North Carolina. Working with survivors of violence has an effect on those with whom we are working. Sometimes our “care work” is more explicit (as mine often is) than not. Regardless, feminist pastoral theology has much to offer in terms of the ways we think about the effects of telling one’s story, even if only in the confines of a confidential interview. Additionally, feminist ethnographers remind us as practical theologians or social scientific researchers that our theories about the way the world works can change as a result of the communities with whom we work. Both of these fields of research illustrate the fact that research is reflexive: we change the field and the field changes us.

CHAPTER THREE: NARRATIVES OF HARM AND HOPE

At the end of my interview with Ella, a woman I met through Laura, but who is not a member of Friendship Community Church, we talked about the role faith has played in her own journey toward healing. There is no illusion, for Ella, of being able to forget what she has been through. “People don’t forget, you move on, but you don’t forget,” she said. Ella left Liberia shortly after Doe’s coup in 1980 because her family (“Congo” Liberians) became a target of Doe’s indigenous government. Even though what she experienced during Samuel Doe’s coup happened over, “30 years ago,” she “still remember[s].” So how then, I asked do you heal from these experiences? Where do people go next? For Ella, people are able to heal once they “can grow and accept the situation.” So much of this is dependent on their own sense of self, and their understanding of the role faith plays in the healing process. As she told me, “When war was going on, [you] pray more, [you] look to a higher power for peace.” Echoing what other women have said about the presence of God in life’s toughest moments, Ella reflected that, “Religion [gives me] peace of mind, the only thing to fall back on. My savior is right there with me. It’s ok, everything that I go through.”

Ella’s reflection that religion offers her something to “fall back on” reflects what other women told me in the course of their interviews. They are able to see God’s presence in and through their lives in the telling of their stories. By talking with others – either through the interview or in the women’s empowerment group – women’s stories were transformed by seeing God’s presence in the moment of hardship or trauma. Healing becomes possible because “God was there” in the moment of trial. As I explore

in this chapter, this understanding of God's presence is a significant way that religion matters for the women from Liberia. By seeing God in and through their stories of hardship, they are able to see healing as a real possibility in their lives, communities and the world. This is not a naïve vision of healing; rather, it is complicated by the realities of violence and trauma they continue to experience as immigrants in North Carolina. This chapter develops a theological language of healing that speaks to the ways religion matters in and through the ways women re-craft their narratives and selves in the aftermath of conflict.

Telling the Stories

Marie's Story

Marie and I met through a mutual friend at a domestic violence and sexual assault organization, InterAct, in Raleigh, NC.¹⁹⁵ I heard about her work for gender-based violence survivors in Liberia and set up a time for us to meet over breakfast at a local café in Raleigh. At our first meeting, Marie and I discussed her work with Liberia Shelter for Women, but spent most of our time talking about how difficult it is to get funding for the work that she does.¹⁹⁶ She hoped to be able to partner with organizations like InterAct to work with the Liberian community here, but also to have InterAct staff travel to Liberia to help her to set up standardized shelter procedures. As she explained to me, the government and other NGOs in Liberia do not understand the need for

¹⁹⁵ InterAct of Wake County is a non-profit organization dedicated to ending sexual abuse and domestic violence. They provide counseling, shelter and prevention services to residents of the county. I have served as a consultant with InterAct, volunteering to help them integrate spiritual and religious services for shelter clients, as well as connect local faith leaders to InterAct programs through their Circle of Faith initiative. Find out more about InterAct at: www.interactofwake.org.

¹⁹⁶ The lack of funding for the work that the three women highlighted in this chapter do is something that came up regularly in my conversations with all of them. I have some experience in grant writing, through my former profession in public health, so I held a grant writing course for some of the members of Friendship Community Church. I also reviewed and helped to revise several grant applications for Laura's foundation. I connected Marie with other local organizations working on issues of women and violence, in the hopes that her work could gain a more public audience in the Triangle area, increasing her fundraising efforts. I saw these tasks as part of the reciprocal research relationship, but wish that I could have been more strategic in helping each of these women to pursue funding opportunities.

confidentiality among shelter clients, and they ask Marie for information about her clients that she feels is unsafe to give. She hoped that InterAct staff would be able to travel to Liberia with her to train her staff, along with government officials, about shelter protocol, confidentiality, legal issues, and safety for clients. As Marie began to talk about these issues, however, her own story began to come out as well. A survivor of sexual assault who fled the war in its early days, only to become a refugee, Marie does the work that she does because, as she said, she has “been there.”

A few weeks after this meeting, I went to Marie’s house for a more formal interview. Marie and her husband moved from Maryland down to North Carolina about a year ago, into a two-story house in suburban Cary, North Carolina. During the course of our conversation, her two daughters came home from school. Boisterous, adorable girls, they showed me the dance moves they had been practicing and told me about what they wanted to be when they grew up (“a doctor, or someone who helps people,” like her mom, said the oldest, while the youngest hopes to become a dancer, comedian, actress – anything where she can be on the stage!). Marie shooed the girls back upstairs, with a good deal of hugging and laughing along the way, and we settled down to talk.

We began by talking about how she started the Liberia Shelter for Women, one of the only shelters for gender-based violence survivors in Liberia:

The Liberia shelter actually, the organization Liberia Shelter for Women started in 2005, officially 2005, but like in the early 90’s, you know, [I was] advocating as an individual, because at that time I was going through my own personal struggle you know as a survivor and also surviving the Civil War. I planted the seeds in the early 90s that, you know, I wanted to open the shelter. Because [of what] I was going through, surviving, there wasn’t a shelter at that time, so it was a seed I always had to get planted...It was important to open it because there was no shelter, and you had survivors who had been raped during the Civil War and also after the war...There was an alarming rate of children who were seven to thirteen

who needed a place where they could go to because the community would you know, shun them, you know, so they needed a place.

This “place” that Marie created is not always a physical location. Instead, survivors are linked up to volunteers via cell phones in several communities. Along with her all-volunteer staff, she has educated several communities in Monrovia and beyond about the importance of “breaking the silence” about gender-based violence. By giving women in these communities the courage to speak about what they have been through, and then connecting them with the mobile number for the crisis center should they need it, Marie’s organization is able to provide support for women who have survived violence, and who are in some cases rejected by their communities. When a survivor calls one of the ten to sixteen volunteers who work for the Liberia Shelter for Women, sometimes all that they need is someone to talk to about what they have been through. Because of funding restraints, “we can’t [always] provide the level of services we want to, [sometimes] all we can provide is that shoulder to cry on.”

Despite this lack of funding for more broad-scale programming, the Liberia Shelter for Women volunteers are able to:

accompany [victims] to the court, or they need transportation, or they need to go to the hospital, or the clinic at MSF [Medecins Sans Frontiers]... We’ve been a shoulder, we rescue them and take them out of their environment when there wasn’t a place where they could go, when the community says we don’t want to have them. They cannot stay with us for a long time, because we are not funded, but it is a place you can go whenever you need to.

Unlike shelter systems in the United States, which serve as its model, the location of the Liberia Shelter for Women is not confidential. In fact, just over two years ago there was a jailbreak in Monrovia that led to a serious emergency situation for the volunteers. One of the escaped prisoners had been imprisoned for raping one of the shelter clients, a ten

year old girl.¹⁹⁷ When volunteers heard about the jailbreak, they called Marie and began evacuating the clients: “When the jailbreak took place, everyone knew where we were, the whole community...So we had to take all those children and put them with our women in places. So that’s how vulnerable the situation is.” Because of the lack of confidentiality, Marie has had to create underground shelters for many of the women and children they work with. These underground shelters are the homes of volunteers, friends, and even Marie’s family members. There are:

Well they cannot stay with us for a long time, because we are not funded, but it is a place you can go whenever you need to get away from home...there are special cases where we put them with someone, or they will stay with one of the women, or they will even stay with my parents. We had a little girl who was so traumatized, wherever she went after her trial, she would run away you know she would just go off to a place. Or sometimes she would get so violent in school and she would take knife, and in school she was being teased. You know, [with kids saying,] “You are a woman now, because you were raped”...and then a couple of months ago, the Justice Department had a case, it is so bad where you can’t even protect what you call it witnesses or what you call it vulnerable victims, and you do that underground shelter. So we do have underground shelters, we started that a couple of years ago. That actually worked, when the justice ministry came to us, there are big organizations on the ground, but they came to us to protect one of their victims. Here they call it witness protection, we provided witness protection.

Although organizations and government agencies are beginning to understand the importance of confidential safe spaces for victims of violence, Marie reminds me that “this shelter thing is a new idea for Liberia. People thought that anyone could just come, but no, not anyone can just come [into the shelter.]” She hopes that one day the shelter will be housed in a confidential location, saying “that’s my dream that in the next 5 years, we will have a place where people can come...we will get there.”

¹⁹⁷ For more information on the jailbreak in May of 2009, see A. Abbas Dulleh, “Liberia: Another Jailbreak – New Batch of Central Prison Inmates Escape,” *New Democrat*, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200905181369.html> Accessed 7 March 2012 [Accessed 3 March 2012]. For more on why development and human rights practices that rely solely on the state and the law are not effective in women’s human rights work see Pamela Scully, “Should We Give Up on the State” and Pamela Scully, “Expanding the Concept of Gender-based Violence in Peacebuilding and Development” *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 5, No. 3 (2010): 21-33.

In addition to the challenges faced by a lack of confidentiality, Marie's organization struggles financially as well. She has not received any grant funding for the program, instead relying on donor funds, her own contributions and an all-volunteer staff. She recently completed a 300 mile run across Liberia, coinciding with Liberia's first marathon, to raise money for and awareness of the issues of gender-based violence survivors. She is increasingly working with the Ivorian refugee population at the border between Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire, providing support to the women who have escaped the Ivorian conflict that erupted in 2010 after the elections in that country. According to a report by Amnesty International, titled "We Want to Go Home, but We Can't: Cote d'Ivoire's Continuing Crisis of Displacement and Insecurity," the peak of the Ivorian crisis saw between 700,000 and 1,000,000 people displaced from Cote d'Ivoire, with most migrating to Liberia.¹⁹⁸ Some of these women have been forced into sex work because they lack money to buy food and supplies for their children. As one woman, who was raped by three men in Cote D'Ivoire stated:

I have five children to look after and the food here makes them ill. I have to make money for other food. During sex with men in Toe Town, they ask me to do things I don't want to do and say they won't pay me if I don't agree. I need the money so I have no choice and I do what they say.¹⁹⁹

In refugee camps, Marie has worked with the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) to address the needs of "double flight" refugee women, who have moved across borders twice to flee from violence.

Despite the difficulties of doing this work with no money and institutional hardships (particularly, a lack of confidentiality), Marie works with these women, in

¹⁹⁸ Amnesty International, "We Want to Go Home, but We Can't: Cote d'Ivoire's Continuing Crisis of Displacement and Insecurity," <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR31/007/2011/en> [Accessed 11 December 2011].

¹⁹⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Liberia: Protect Refugees Against Sexual Abuse," <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/20/liberia-protect-refugees-against-sexual-abuse> [Accessed 11 December 2011].

large part because of her own life story. Sexually abused by a family member she was sent to live with during the Civil War in Liberia, Marie worked up the courage to leave his house despite the fact that there were “flying bullets. It was war.” She went out on her own, fleeing the country with only her faith:

I said you know what, let me stay and go through this, I didn't know where my meal was coming from. It was an act of faith that I took, you know, because there was fighting, I could have said, let me stay I will still have food to eat, a roof over my head. it was a decision that myself and God made. I told him, sometimes you just have to have to let him take control. And I went, you know I went perfectly crazy. But I still held on. I hated him, I hated God, until I came to the realization that I was going through this and since I said that I was going, you know he would be there to take care of me, and you know he just started working, he started working.

In the aftermath of the violence she endured, Marie sees the presence of God in her eventual escape and healing process. At the time, however, Marie “hated God” for what she had been through. Like the survivors of gender-based violence that she works with in Liberia and in Liberian immigrant communities in the United States, Marie felt isolated, from God, from friends, and from her family:

I was an outcast by my own society, my own family being [not sure], being from an [family] it was a taboo to say you were raped or molested or that your uncle wanted to speak with you. Relating my personal story, I had everything...If I could walk and turn out the person I became, they also could have that hope...It doesn't take much, just showing that you are there and you care for them...And just let people know. They don't always come out like me. I had to come out. I had to explain my story. Some people came to rescue me. Some people did not know that I have been sexually molested, [but] you want to get out of that situation and you want a better future. Most of the time, you know, [the women we work with] are strong. You know, they are strong. Sometimes I see them as stronger than I am. Because at the time for me [the abuse] was a shock because I had everything. For them, with the little they have, [coming from a] community in poverty, to shun them. And [still they] just had the courage to come out.

During “Breaking the Silence” events that she held in over 35 communities in 2006, Marie was able to stand with other women who have survived sexual and gender-based violence. As she continues to do work on prevention, hosting events in schools and community organizations in Liberian and refugee communities, Marie sees this as healing work for the survivors she works with, and for herself:

But I think when they hear what you’ve gone through, I think that’s why we’ve been so successful, and we’ve connected a lot in these communities with mothers and just the children. [We’re saying] “Hey, I’ve been there, you are not alone.” It’s one thing when they hear, you know, “I’ve been there. “

By telling her story and breaking the silence around gender-based violence, Marie and her volunteers are able to support the women and children they work with:

Where we are right now, I just keep hoping that we can help them find true healing, you know, helping them concentrate and do well in school. We’ve done the advocacy part. We still live our nightmares, I still live mine sometimes. But everyday I’m getting better, I’m healing.

Pastor Meah’s Story

I met Aletha Meah in January of 2011, between Sunday School and Worship Service at Friendship Community Church. Along with Assistant Pastors Jones, Samuel Farley and Laura, we crowded into her small office in the center of the church’s worship space while the mood outside was kicking up thanks to the praise and worship music that had just begun. She and Laura were meeting to talk about whether they might collaborate on some programs for the Liberian community in Durham. Pastor Meah told Laura that it would be great to work together, for the good of the community, and that we could all sit down to talk more next week, after the worship service which she needed to prepare to lead. We prayed together, the sounds of the praise music swelling into the office space, and then we dispersed into the worship service.

The church's Assistant Pastor, Janet Jones, preached that day, and her sermon was on Psalm 51: David's prayer of forgiveness. She read the Psalm to us, expanding upon each line to offer some wisdom for the community. At the root of the sermon was the theme of forgiveness, which is illumined by David's pleas to God to "Have mercy on me, Oh God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions."²⁰⁰ David is just like us, Pastor Jones intoned; he sins repeatedly. Despite his sins, he continues to ask God for forgiveness for the ways he mistreats others. Heaven would not be granted to those who "stepped all over" their sisters and brothers, Pastor Jones warned the congregation. This happens in the church too, where we mistreat the ones we are called by God to love. Pastor Jones reminded us all that to serve God is to seek forgiveness for the wrongs we have done to each other. If they refuse to forgive, she admonished the congregation to keep praying: pray to God that they will forgive and pray that God will also forgive us. Additionally, we must change our ways, doing all that we can to "make things right" with others we have wronged. Forgiveness without change, she warned, is empty. She closed the service by telling us that, "Repentance leads to forgiveness leads to unity which leads to peace."

"Unity and peace." I heard these two words countless times during my fieldwork at Friendship Community Church. They form the mission statement of this immigrant congregation, and achieving unity and peace among the community and for the world is the goal of the pastors of the church. Pastor Althea Meah leads the congregation of approximately 100 Liberians at Friendship Community Church, located in an inconspicuous building near downtown Durham, NC. Back home in Liberia, in addition to her government job (see Chapter One), she served as an Assistant Pastor of her Baptist

²⁰⁰ Psalm 51:1.

church. It seemed natural, upon moving to Durham from Cote d'Ivoire where she was living as a refugee, to start an informal church for the growing Liberian population in her new home. Knowing that people's work schedules often prevented them from being at church on Sunday mornings, she started a prayer meeting on Sunday evening along with Pastor Janet Jones. These two women work together seamlessly, spending much of their time in and out of the sanctuary together. Their friendship dates back to these early church meetings, which lasted for several years in the mid-1990's.

The two women noticed that the prayer meetings continued to grow, and they decided (as they often do before making any major decision) to fast and pray about what to do next. At the fasting prayer, Pastor Meah felt God come upon her. "Get some paper, write this down," she told Pastor Jones, feeling that God was speaking to her about the future of this new church and community. The name, "Friendship Community Church," spoke to her during the prayer and she was enlightened as to what she felt as God's desire for the denominational standing of the church. "Although I am a Baptist," she said, this church would be for all people. As she told me, "If you love God, we all move together." She had a vision that like Solomon, who heard God say that he should build a temple and the people would come, she should also build a church for her people. "The Lord said he would make a way," for this to happen.

The two women officially founded the church in 1999 in Pastor Jones's basement, which although "very big," soon became too small for the still growing congregation. Pastor Meah resigned herself to wait for God's will to be done and hoped that they would find a more permanent place for the church. As she recounted to me of this time, "The Bible says don't rush, you have to pray...let it be God's will." At Reverend Farley's

wedding, however, things came to a head. There were so many people at the wedding that guests began parking on the Jones's neighbors' yards and across from neighbors' houses. These neighbors called the police on the Jones family, and they were presented with a letter that said they could not hold a place of worship in a residential neighborhood. Pastor Meah and the church members felt dejected, but the next day at her job at a convenience store, Pastor Meah found out about an abandoned school building on Holloway street that was being rented out by the city of Durham. The next day, she took two hours off work to visit the site that would become the second home of Friendship Community Church. They stayed in this space for four years, but were forced to leave when the building was bought by a developer who wanted to raise the rates. The space the church currently occupies used to house a cell phone store owned by a Liberian man, who negotiated the use of his space for the church after he moved away from the area. As previously mentioned, their current worship space is not the permanent home for Friendship Community Church. They are currently seeking funds from members for a loan payment on a piece of property the church purchased several years ago. The church leaders would like to build a Sanctuary and community center, but are having a good deal of trouble scraping together the funds to pay off the loan. Like her parishioners, Pastor Meah wonders when this will come into being, but knows that "[God] has his time." She wants to go back home to Liberia, but can't do that until this vision is fulfilled. If she goes home before then, she will be "like Jonah, and you know what happened to Jonah when he tried to run from God." Knowing that she must stay in the area until God's vision is realized, Pastor Meah continues to recruit Liberians to help to pay for the new building. "The number of Liberians in the community," she told me, "if they all were to

come, we would have built our church a long time ago, because there are many. A lot of Liberians, a lot. Raleigh-Durham, wow. A lot.”

This church is the only Liberian congregation in Durham, which means that Pastor Meah and the ministerial staff are intimately aware of the issues facing this community. As she told me, one of the most difficult aspects of this ministry is working with Liberians who have come over here during and since the Civil War. So many people have a hard time getting started as immigrants to the United States. They had homes, businesses, jobs in Liberia, but here it “is hard.” Their families would give them space and help for a little while, but they are also trying to get by themselves, so they can’t offer too much assistance. She counsels people often, telling them that it was “God who sent you here, it was not a mistake...God who has brought you here will make a way.” As she told me:

For me, I didn’t really experience the war because I left when the war was getting worse, because we were the target. I was an official in the government, so we were a target. So when I left most of the government officials had left, I was one of the last! So when I left, the killing had started. Bodies were lying all in the street, but God lifted me up. But these people [at church], they went through the war. They went through bullets, walking on dead bodies, as by the grace of God, people were putting guns to them. They went through a lot. And the only person who can heal their wounds is God.

The church has become a family for its members, many of whom lost family and loved ones in the war, or who have had to leave these people behind in Liberia. Pastor Meah and the ministerial board try to create a supportive environment for those who come here, helping them with both physical and spiritual needs. She describes a family who recently came to the United States from Liberia:

When they come into the ministry we pray with them. The last kids that came, the group that came, the husband and wife and the three kids, they come to church every Sunday. I told the church whatever we can do to show love, we should do

it. And people are taking them things, taking things for the children, essential things that are needed. When they came, they didn't come with a lot of clothes.

Perhaps the most important guidance the Pastor offers is related to immigrants' "new"

life in America:

I've been a couple of times to encourage [this new family] to [teach] them what America is all about. America is how you want it and how you take it. There are good things here and there are bad things. A lot of our young people who came, they are deported. [They come] from different states because they come and they don't know their reasons for being here, [and] they come and join the wrong group. You came to America, you have been through war, and your parents brought you here from Liberia then you are going to join the gang group, just to make quick money, to be involved in drugs and stuff like that? No. So when they come, we try to tell them what America is all about... I know this country is full of milk and honey...but you get what you want. The main thing you can do is to go to school and keep out of trouble. So those are the kind of things we are doing when they come.

The harsh realities of life in Durham are not lost on Pastor Meah, who has counseled members of her congregation when young lives have been lost to gang violence. The community center the church hopes to build would be a safe space where young people can come after school to learn and experience the safety and support of a loving community.

For a community so wounded, knowing that they are loved and appreciated is critical, according to Pastor Meah. The church, in this way, is like a new family:

Some came and they lost their children, some came and they lost their husbands. They had a program called resettlement, and that brought a lot of them. That's what we do, we encourage them...Most of them don't have a lot of relatives over here, so the church can serve as family over here. That's why we have the baby showers. The last one we had, she had a lot of gifts, a lot. So those are the things we do to encourage our people.

By attending important events in people's lives, Pastor Meah aims to show her community the love of God. That's what it's all about. Love. God is love." She helps

people to see hope offered through this community, although it is “difficult” to minister to those who have come from the war. I asked her how she continues to help people heal – the older people who still deal with scars from the war and the younger people who are scarred from the violence that continues here in Durham? It is through education, she believes, that people “get healed.” “Without knowledge, people perish.” She uses herself as an example. She doesn’t need her degree to be able to preach (she preached in Liberia and preaches here), but she finished her degree to provide an example to her community and because she “wants to learn.”

At this point in our conversation, Samuel Farley, one of the ministers at the church, called to ask how the pastor was feeling and to see if she was doing better after being hurt for a bit. When she hung up, I laughed and said that the pastor’s job is never done; she is always talking with her people. She agreed, and said that much of what she does is to “appreciate” the people in her church. She goes to birthday parties, events and anything else that she is asked to do so that she can make her congregation feel special and loved. “God has no respect of persons...we need to appreciate them.” “Life is just happiness, you give it to God. To be healed, you have to change the mind. You need to make somebody feel that they are worth living.” As she told me on a different occasion:

Human beings like to be treated like human beings. Don’t be too proud, too pumped up. It’s not my style of leadership. The word of God says humble yourself and God will lift you up...Let your light shine among men that they will see your good work.

Laura’s Story

On a chilly winter afternoon, Laura and I met for lunch to talk about her work and about the youth empowerment workshops she was planning for the Liberian community in Durham, in partnership with Friendship Community Church. She hoped that these

youth events would help young people to feel invested in the future of Liberia, by focusing on the upcoming elections and political process. As we discussed this, Laura noted that it is often the young men who talk about politics in Liberia. She sees them regularly at parties, huddled together in corners, discussing the candidates and the future of their home country. Laura hopes to get women more engaged in the political process. As she told me, men often (but not always) think that their opinions are the ones that matter while women are often (but again not always) the ones doing the work:

when you talk to each and every Liberian woman who is doing the work I am doing...the first focus of these people are how can we protect our children...or how can we develop them, change their mindset, or help them to educate themselves. Those are the things we think about. We don't think about how much money can I make? Or who's going to be in power? I know myself I just want the work to be done.

As she went on to say, for many men in her community, politics is the most important avenue for change. But for Laura, and women like her, sometimes this talk of politics is just that – talk. For her, the work of repairing the community is the priority. It is about getting beyond, the “talk, talk, talk” of politics:

I mean, really, I could [care] less about being in the Liberian government, about who will become President...I don't care, it's just that those people should focus on the things that really need to be done – education for the Liberian children, therapy included in health [care]...those are the things that we really need to focus on.

Laura runs a non-profit organization in North Carolina that “focuses on the rehabilitation of immigrants who survived the brutality of Civil War in Liberia and surrounding African countries.” Laura’s work has focused on healing the wounds in her community suffered as a result of what happened to them during the war:

But I never hear about any [trauma healing] program [here]. You know, these people came up from the war too! You know? Most of them just came up from the village and they were brought here. They have their own issues that have not

been addressed. Nobody addressed those issues. Mentally [there are] a lot of things going on with their children. You know? And then some of them were abused. So many were in Liberia [during the war], and...no one has taken care of that. They are just put in the community to fend for themselves.

Working with a local church, the “pillar of the Liberian community here,” Laura wanted to organize trauma healing programs – informal, small group discussions where men and women can talk about and process what they have been through.²⁰¹ As she told me:

Look at the faces of the women and you tell me that these people have not been through a whole lot and...something is not going on in their lives... when you look at the faces of the women you should know that deep within they are - some of them you know they killed their entire family? They were the only person who survived. Some of them have one child, they killed that child. You know all those things. Mentally look at the women’s faces and tell me, that there is not something going on with them. And those are the things I think, OK, how can I help these women? [I want to help them] to be able to move forward with their lives, mentally, to not think about the things. I know it is difficult, but we could help, there’s a way that if they could talk about it, there’s a way that would help them to move forward.

As Laura was well aware, many women in Liberia found comfort in sharing their stories with other women during the community dialogues organized by WONGOSOL as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Process.²⁰² Laura wanted to carry out a similar project in North Carolina, to help women begin to heal.

Laura’s commitment grows out of her own experiences during the first Civil War in Liberia, and her experiences of being stranded with her family in the early 1990’s. Her story of survival echoes the discussion in the introductory chapter of this dissertation of women’s multiple roles during conflict:

During the Civil War, 1990... I was stuck; I was with my family and my mom. My dad was somewhere around the market. My mom and all the children...were in Caldwell. The first 1990 war was May 4th...when the first rebels came to our town.

²⁰¹The way these trauma healing groups were structured and carried out was described more fully in Chapter two of this dissertation.

²⁰² See, Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “Volume Three: Appendices Title 1: Women and the Conflict.” <https://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final> [Accessed 11 December 2011].

The rebels captured us and they took us... [The rebels] would look at you and think that you worked for the government and they would slaughter you....The brought me out, I was sitting in front of my grandmother, in front of my mom...we didn't know where the rest of the younger people [were]. I could hear my grandmother asking my mom, because she was deaf, what happened? And my mom was so scared [because], she had already lost one of her kids...[The rebels] asked me a couple of questions, If I worked for the government...I never worked for the Liberian government, I was just a student...one of the guys, he said she doesn't look like anyone who could work for the government, "she [is] struggling"...I was really dirty, I hadn't taken a bath...[So] for nine days I was held hostage with my family [by these rebels]

[Annie] How did you get out? They left?

No, after nine days of being captured...they heard that Prince Johnson and his group were coming...they were afraid of Prince Johnson...According to them Prince Johnson's group would kill anybody they would come across. So we could not go back because the Doe soldier[s] [were] looking for people who were rebels, and the rebels [we were with] were afraid of Prince Johnson...so they started pushing us back [away from Doe's and Prince Johnson's soldiers]...and [one night,] in the middle of the night...we heard gunshots... [so] the rebels left [and left] us in a church by ourselves. For three days, no food no water. We couldn't go outside; they just left us in that building.... [Finally,] someone came up with the courage [to leave the church]...then me my mom and my little brother we decided to go to the city, and that's how we got separated.

Laura was, at different times, forcibly abducted and held by rebel forces, displaced from her home and separated from her family. Despite these events, she also found shelter and food for a dozen young children left homeless and orphaned on the streets of Monrovia: "And that was, you know, the beginning of some of the things that I do. And since I came here [to the U.S.]...some of the kids most of the kids we had they all grew up. You know, they grew up." She pulled out an enormous suitcase overflowing with photographs – pictures of her family back home and of the children she helped during the war, recounting:

I have a whole suitcase, this is my suitcase full of pictures. Most of the kids were in the street, they lost their parents, their family. And I wanted to, you know, I wanted to do something because they would be hungry, hungry, and nothing to

eat. So I started going all around, asking the marines to give me MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] and I would give them to the children at night when I got off work. I would just give them for them to eat. And they would have to sleep on the street again.

She found the children places to stay, with friends she knew or even in her own apartment. Eventually, the American man who helped her get to the United States helped her to find an apartment to rent where the children could stay. Although she left for the U.S., they continue to call her on holidays and birthdays. Watching these children grow up, and hearing their healthy, strong voices when they call her today, keeps her going.

It was these memories of the war that Laura brought with her when she came to the United States in the mid-1990's. An undergraduate student at North Carolina Central University (NCCU), Laura began collecting money in 2003 to send back to Liberia through the Red Cross. The NCCU campus community quickly became involved, and a member of the staff there helped Laura to start a non-profit organization to increase her impact on Liberians back home in Liberia and in North Carolina. Although she has raised thousands of dollars to send to the beauty school she started in Liberia and to support the children and widows in her home town of Caldwell, the journey has not been easy:

It has been a difficult time. I don't want to lie to you. I have spent everything, including my own money that I don't have, you know. I have spent everything, but whenever I think about giving up, I think OK if I give up...But I just think that if I give up on these people, who's going to help them? That's what mentally I think about every day.

This work is happening on a small scale with limited money and without international fanfare. Despite these limitations, it continues. It happens, in Laura's words, because it must:

And I think that's the role that I want to play to be able to help these people. From the children, the women, the men, some of the things they've been through. They have anger problems, and you know they are very angry. Some of the young guys, I'm not talking about these older men. And maybe because of what has happened in their life, they are just angry at everybody. You know? And that's the role I see myself playing. I'm not there to talk about politics all day, you know. I'm the kind of person I like to see solutions. I don't like to talk, talk, talk, but let me see something going on. I've got to see something.

Women like Laura see the impact of violence on their communities and they set about the task of repair because, in her words, “Those kind of things [from the war], can you live with it? You know?” Hearing these people's stories, visiting her home village of Caldwell and responding to the local needs there – this is what Laura sees as her calling in life. Currently, she is working on a healthcare project, hoping to train young women in Caldwell on basic healthcare practices to prevent the “senseless” deaths, like that of her nephew who drowned a few months ago. She is struggling to find money for the project, having been denied grant funding. She has hosted house parties to raise funds, sent out donor letters, and is currently selling tickets for Duke University football games as part of a Duke/Non-profit partnership. Laura's regular trips home to Liberia keep her connected to the needs and issues of the women she works with there. These are her constituents, these women and their children, and it is to them she holds herself accountable. As she does in Durham, Laura goes “around the villages [to] listen to these people's stories and think about the way how to help them.” It happens slowly, without any fanfare, but it continues. As Laura says, “I mean those are the work that we need to be doing as women and the people of Liberia. This is the work that the women do.”

Evelyn's Story

I met with Evelyn on a fall afternoon to talk with her about her experiences in the women's empowerment group that we both participated in at Friendship Community

Church. We met at her home, an apartment within walking distance from some of the shopping centers on a main highway in Durham. Her three children ran in to see me when I got there, showing off their latest school projects and new DVDs. We began our conversation by talking about the women's group, which Evelyn found to be "nicely organized." She said that participating in the group, "[made] you think about the past," which, for her, is alright. It is "not just a bad moment because someone died, you remember that person." We then started talking more generally about Evelyn's life since coming to the United States in the mid 1990's from Liberia. Her childhood was marked by the war; she came here a young girl of eight, going from her mother's house in Boston to a relative's home in Ghana, then to Philadelphia between the span of eight and eighteen. Reflecting on her childhood, Evelyn sometimes wishes that her own children "would have gone through the war." Not because she wants them to remember the horrible moments during the conflict, but because it is important "to know where you came from." Knowing where you came from, for Evelyn, means knowing about Liberia – namely about the Civil War that devastated the country. All societies are like that, she notes. "It's everybody," we all want to "connect with [our] people."

For Evelyn, the memories of the war and what she went through back home in Liberia are a part of who she is today. It connects her to home, to the place she "came from." What you have been through and where you have been is, for Evelyn, a key component of who you are today. As our conversation progressed, she told me about how difficult life has been for her since moving to the United States as a young girl. Now, a mother of three, 29 years old and married, Evelyn is in school at North Carolina Central University, studying to be a teacher or a social worker. She also works full-time

as an in-home aid in order to pay the rent and bills for the small apartment she shares with her husband and children. Evelyn's drive to work two jobs and finish school derives, in large part, from watching her own mother leave school early to escape to the United States during the war. Her mom was leaving not only the violence of the war but also an abusive relationship. When Evelyn was able to join her mother in the United States, she watched her mother work until midnight each night to provide for her family. This has made Evelyn determined to get an education and to provide for her children and godchildren. Evelyn said that the other girls in the church call her Mother Teresa because she does not get involved in their talk about sex, and she acts "so old" for her age, despite being only 29.

Evelyn works night shifts as a medical assistant for elderly patients, coming home at 7:00 in the morning, getting her children ready for school, going to school herself, and then meeting the children again when they get home from school only to start the cycle over again with work that evening. Looking back on what she has been through and where she is now, Evelyn is proud, but acknowledges that life is hard. However, she refuses to complain about it, saying, "Why complain? It's gonna be. Everyone will die." This mentality, of continuing to struggle despite intense hardships reflects her mentality of survival in even the worst of circumstances. For Evelyn, remembering these difficulties is a part of her own healing process. As she told me when reflecting on what she has been through, "you came from somewhere to get to where you are now."

Ruth's Story

Ruth and I met at Friendship Community Church, where she is a missionary and elder. She attended most of the women's empowerment groups as well. We met for our

interview at her home in Durham. While we chatted at her kitchen table, her grandchildren and children came in and out of the house, making snacks after school, picking up food, and chatting with their mother and grandmother. Ruth and I started by talking about healing, a broad concept that could include physical, spiritual and emotional healing. For Ruth, to receive healing you must trust in God. As she told me, the healing process is a partnership with God. “When you want God to help you to do something,” she said, “you got to do it with all your mind, your body, your soul....You don’t doubt Him, knowing that He will heal you. If you put trust in God to say He will do it, He will do it. Yes, He will. Don’t doubt it.” Ruth has felt this healing presence in her own life, notably in her ability to overcome her addiction to alcohol:

When I came to this country, me, I used to like pleasure. I used to drink, I used to do everything....I don’t care, when you tell me about church, I say I don’t care, I’m not going....but I was laying down one day in my house with my husband that passed away, my husband I been with 34 years, not this one I just married. I was laying down, in my house, I had went to a party. I was laying down, I had had a bottle of, cans of Heinekens. When I drank that drink, I was laying down in the house, and I see something in the room and I say “Aii!” It was white as snow, like a snow ball. I was between sleep and awake, and I said, “What is this?” I said, “Lord, what kind of devil coming to disturb me in my room?” So I turned my back because I didn’t want to see the thing. Then I turned, [and] I said, “What is this?” I said, “Please,” I said, “This is the devil, the devil is busy!” Then I went to sleep, but the thing came to me again, and I heard a voice saying, “Ruth, I’m telling you this.” I ignored it...but [then I] went to a party, drank a can of Heinekens and I was sick, sick sick. Since then, any time I sit by someone drinking I want to throw up. Since then I never drank again. Like that, like that. I never touched liquor again, and I just devote myself to the church. And it was sudden, but I wanted to go to church and understand the Bible, like that.

As Ruth went on to tell me, since that moment of healing she has been devoted to the church. She related that, “I have to go to the church before I feel good...I know there is a faith in the church that is good for me. You know, there is nothing on the outside [of the

church] that is good for me.” Ruth feels God’s presence in her life and talks about how she is always in communication with God. She recounted, “You know when God wants to call you, he call you like me and you talking...that’s how God comes to people.”

Peace, for Ruth starts from within; it is something that begins with forgiveness between two people. Although she acknowledges that this is a hard process, it is something that Christians are called to do. She related that, “If you have learned that Jesus Christ has forgiven your sins, who are you to not forgive the next person? You still have to make peace with the next person, yes I believe that.” We tied this in to our conversation in the women’s empowerment group, where we discussed how peace begins within, but must also live in the family, the church, the community and the world. This idea about peace connects, for her, with Jesus’ ultimate mission of spreading love to all humanity. As she told me, “Yea, to spread to another person, yes. That’s what the Bible said. Jesus came and the Bible said Go and spread these words.”

Ruth came to the United States from Liberia without some of her children, who came here later from Liberia and from refugee camps in West Africa. While she was in Staten Island, she knew that they were going through tremendous traumas. They told her about seeing dead bodies in their local river, watching pregnant women being mutilated, and other horrors of war. She found herself unable to sleep, instead waking up to nightmares filled with the visions of her children’s realities. Although she did not state this, Ruth’s alcoholism was most likely a symptom of the secondary trauma she experienced, worrying about what her children were enduring without her.²⁰³ Now, she

²⁰³ For those who are unable to “spontaneously dissociate” from traumatic events, they may use drugs or alcohol to numb the pain. See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 44.

tells me, her children are here in the United States with her – a daughter and a son, both fully grown. They participate in church life as well; her son is a pastor (not at FCC, but at another church) and her daughter sings in the choir. The church is, for Ruth and the other women I talked with from FCC, another family. As she said, “I like all my family to go to church, because why? We’ve got six days in the week to rest, to do what we have to do. What about the one day where we’re going to serve God for 2-3 hours? [It’s a day] just for you to say Lord, “Thank you.” Being thankful for what you have is something that came up repeatedly in Ruth’s interview, whether she was talking about her children’s survival of the war, her miraculous cure from alcoholism, or her more recent healing of a pain in her hands. Her sense of healing and peace derive from her sense of faith in God’s continued presence. As she told me, “You just have to have the faith that God’s going to do something for you, and He will do that for you.” This continued faith in God’s presence allows Ruth to be thankful for what she has – namely, the ability to wake up each day. As we closed our time together, Ruth reflected on this fact, saying:

When you go to sleep, it’s like you’re dead, and He touch you to wake you up. Wake you up and see the day and say, “Oh thank you Lord!” Some people they go to sleep and they don’t wake up. We are no better than them. But, you know, if you get up, you be the lucky one. [So you should] say, “Thank you.” That’s me.

Ella’s Story

One fall afternoon, I met Ella at her home to interview her for this project. Ella and I had met several times, at events Laura organized for her foundation. As we sat down together on the luxuriously overstuffed couch in the living room of her apartment, Ella told me about what it was like for her growing up in Liberia. It was nothing like her

life in America, but they “didn’t even know there was a different life here.” In Liberia as a child, Ella’s mother would leave for work in the morning, dropping Ella off with a neighbor. Everyone would “take care of one another.” These feelings of mutual support were ruptured during the war, and Ella’s tears flowed as she recounted, “When the war broke out, people acted like they never knew what it was to love or care for one another.”

Ella told me about how her family, “Congo people,” felt increasingly persecuted after Samuel Doe took power in 1980. Her mother was arrested. As Ella explained it to me, as a young girl during this time she, “felt like I saw too much.” She began to experience problems in school, trouble concentrating and lack of desire to participate in her regular activities, because she was worried about her family and what they might go through. As a young woman, Ella decided to leave Liberia and she was able to do so in the mid-1980’s to attend college in Texas. She left her family behind, not knowing that she would not get to Liberia again for over a decade.

When she got to the United States, Ella was frustrated by the lack of knowledge of Liberia that she met among her colleagues at the university in Texas. She recounted to me that her classmates asked her if she lived in a “tree house” in the jungle. Her quick witted response was that yes, she did, and in fact when U.S. officials visited Liberia they were placed in the nicest tree house of them all. One of her professors noticed her frustration at her classmates ignorance about both Liberia and Africa more generally, so he showed her a high school history textbook. When Ella realized that there was almost no mention of America’s sister country, Liberia, her frustration with her classmates diminished because, in her words, “they didn’t know.” America, she said, “is like a big brother. It’s like me in my family. You can’t do everything for everyone.”

We talked a good deal about peace, something that I describe in Chapter Five more fully, but Ella told me how proud she was of the work Laura was doing in the community to help people heal. “Some people,” she said, “are not over the trauma they have been through [but] if you only get to one person, you did something.” Ella herself calls home constantly, trying to help her family when she can. As she told me, although she has “not joined a group” that is formally addressing what went on during the Civil War, she is “not causing any war either.” In her own life, talking about what she has been through has been a powerful healing mechanism. As she told me, “I believe the more you talk, the less it becomes a weight on you...Talking is very good, but not everybody is able to talk, but they can move on.” However, moving on is difficult because “people don’t forget” what happened during the conflict. Of the memories of war, she reminded me that people might “suppress them, but it triggers and comes out. [What I went through] was 30 years ago, but I still remember.” Although these memories never leave us, Ella believes that people can “grow and accept the situation.”

For Ella, her own healing from what she went through was accomplished in large part through her faith. As she told me, “I wouldn’t be who I am if I wasn’t a Christian. It molded me a lot, my conscience, knowing right from wrong, being able to forgive.” After her mother was arrested and members of her family were harassed and harmed by Doe’s government (Ella did not share the details of what happened), she “went back to the same school” where she worked hard to forgive the people who derided and hurt her family. Difficult times reveal our faith, she recounted, saying that “when war was going on, I prayed more, I looked to a higher power for peace...Religion offers a peace of

mind.” As I narrated in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, for Ella, her faith offers a sense that “it’s okay, everything that I go through.”

I asked Ella how she feels about current prospects for peace in Liberia. She explained that, “when I left, it was the early destruction. There were not a lot of people in the cities. Then I went back after ten years and it was really shocking.” When you are in a situation, you “don’t see it as bad. I didn’t even know [at the time] that it could get worse.” She went back again ten years later, noticing that there were “too many people, kids, in the streets, but development had started.” Her hope for the future is cautiously optimistic, as she told me, “What do I wish? I would like to go back home, but I’m worried that someone will go crazy and disrupt [the peace.] I pray it doesn’t happen.” She hopes that Liberians will be able to disagree without having to “kill one another” over their disagreements. “We are all not going to agree,” she said, “we are human beings, we think we know everything!” Ella relayed her frustration with those who want a quick solution to Liberia’s problems. “You expect development in five to six years when it took so much time to destroy [Liberia?]” Instead, she argued, Liberians should focus more on the way of life they nurtured before the war – the times when neighbors watched out for neighbors, when family members lived close by, and when a sense of community was central. As she told me, “I don’t think we are taking care of each other like we are supposed to.” Peace develops out of this change of heart, this ability to see the other as a friend. In our final moments together, Ella summed it up, “Peace comes with love. If you can have love for your neighbors, you can find peace.”

Joyce’s Story

Joyce is a prayer warrior at Friendship Community Church. She meets five nights a week by phone with members of the ministerial board to pray for the concerns in the church. As she told me, from this work, they have seen babies being born, health problems solved, even people come back from death's door. When I came into Joyce's apartment for her interview, the first thing that she did was show me the memorial box that she made for her father during our women's empowerment group. The box was sitting in her living room, surrounded by family pictures and mementos. Joyce and I spent most of our time talking about the women's empowerment workshops. Namely, she was impressed with the fact that I wanted to hear so much about Liberia. Recalling Ella's comments in her interview, Joyce relayed to me her frustration with most Americans, who don't know anything – or care to know anything – about Liberia, America's "sister country." She appreciated that the empowerment groups allowed Angie and I to share our stories as well, and the ways that as a group we realized commonalities across cultures: dealing with family troubles, sharing responsibilities with spouses and partners, decisions about children.

Joyce's interview was not as illustrative of her story as was her participation in the women's empowerment group. For Joyce, being in a supportive group, helped her to tell her story and not feel "ashamed" because of what she went through during the Civil War. Despite her desire to tell bits of her story to this group – something we hear more of in Chapter five – when my digital recorder was turned on, Joyce's normal gregariousness became stilted. She talked mainly about the women's groups, saying how much she "appreciated" the time. With the recorder on, we didn't discuss much else. However, she and I did talk about the memorial she made for her father and her desire to

help other young women in the church to talk with each other about what they have been through. I include Joyce's narrative here to point for the need for participant observation research in addition to more formal interviews like those that I conducted. Had I only interviewed Joyce, rather than knowing her as a prayer leader, worship leader and a participant in the women's groups, I would not have heard about how her experiences of facing death in the Liberian Civil War helped her to see "what God can do" for a person.

On Telling Stories

The above narratives from the interviews that I conducted with seven Liberian women reveal the following three themes: 1) Healing is communal. Each woman relates, through her story, that being able to heal is related to a connection to others. Of particular importance is the role of the faith community in this healing process. 2) The presence of God in and through the women's narratives enables them to have hope that a new future is possible, one in which peace and healing can overcome violence and trauma. 3) In addition to talking through it, there are moments when forgetting, or "getting over" trauma is an important step in the recovery process. Faith in a God who participates in this life and world is central to being able to get through these difficult times. Of course, there are numerous other themes that abound in these women's remarkable stories and lives.

Healing Connections

The women describe healing in terms of the connections one is – or is not – able to make with others. As we hear from Ella, peace comes from recognizing the other as a neighbor. For Evelyn, "all people want to connect" with their community and their past in order to heal. For Marie, sharing her story with women who have also suffered abuse

is a way to experience healing herself. For each of these women, the process of healing is accomplished through their connections with others. The process of healing is just that – a process. Along the way, there are definite losses (something that we explored in the women’s empowerment group) – a loss of the self that once was, or of the idea of a coherent self at all. As Ella’s story recounts, she felt the loss of the communal way of life most acutely; the sense that neighbors cared for neighbors. This was echoed by Liberia TRC “Women and the Conflict” report, which notes that the long lasting effects of violence is its ability to weaken long-standing cultural and “value systems” of communities in Liberia.²⁰⁴

As the narratives presented here suggest, however, these losses can also lead to an awareness of the profound connection between each of us as human beings. As Laura stated about the importance of healing work in the Liberian community, “We are all connected in so many different ways.” The process of going through trauma can be, in this way, transformative. As Judith Butler writes:

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the “we” is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation.²⁰⁵

What Butler is here arguing is not a foreign concept among scholars of African religion, or indeed for the women with whom I have worked. The idea of a self that is intimately tied to others in its very being – to family, community, the ancestors – is central to African philosophy and theology. Because all of creation is imbued with the sacredness

²⁰⁴ “Women and the Conflict,” 15.

²⁰⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22-3.

of God, “all creatures are connected with each other in the sense that each one influences the other for good or for bad.”²⁰⁶ The interdependence of all of life reflected in these women’s stories derives from their experiences of violence (which remind us of our vulnerability, and thus, our susceptibility to others) and rests in a view of the self that is relational at its very nature. As Butler writes, “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.”²⁰⁷ The experience of violence brings this connection to light – painfully, sharply. Our wounding by the other reminds us of what they can do to us.

These women’s stories are reminders of another sort of vulnerability and openness to others – the love and support we can find there as well. As Evelyn told me about Friendship Community Church, it is like a family, a place where people can find support for what they have been through. Pastor Meah affirmed this, noting that the goal of her ministry is to “appreciate” the members of her congregation, people who have suffered so much. The women’s narratives bring to light the profound relationality we all share as human beings.²⁰⁸ They point to an anthropology that is markedly different from the individualistic, emancipatory subject often assumed in feminist politics and discourse.²⁰⁹ This relational self is, for these women, an inherently theological way of understanding what it means to be human.

²⁰⁶ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 46.

²⁰⁷ Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 23.

²⁰⁸ As Das writes, “In regions of the imaginary, violence creates divisions and connections that point to the tremendous dangers that human beings pose to each other...Human beings, however, not only pose dangers to each other, they also hold hope for each other.” Das, *Life and Words*, 14-5.

²⁰⁹ As Saba Mahmood writes, when describing women’s agency and freedom, there is a “tension within feminism attributable to its dual character as both an analytical and a politically prescriptive project,” 10. Recalling the ways that the Feminist Majority’s campaign against the Taliban undergirded President Bush’s call for war in Afghanistan, Mahmood writes that, “Many feminists, who would oppose the use of military force, would have little difficulty supporting projects of social reform aimed at transforming the attachments, commitments, and sensibilities of the kind that undergird the practices of the women I worked with, so that these women may be allowed to live a more enlightened existence...But the questions that I have come to ask myself, and which I would like to pose to the reader as well, are: Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms

This relational theological anthropology resonates strongly, as I noted early, with the ways scholars of African religion describe the self. It also has roots in the Christian tradition, as is poignantly traced by Christian mystic and philosopher Simone Weil, in her essay “The Iliad, A Poem of Might.” Written during World War II, the essay questions assumptions of what violence is and how it is enacted and felt in the body. According to Weil, might is that force by which we render those we encounter as radically other or as objects. As she writes, “when exercised to the full, it makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him a corpse. There where someone stood a moment ago, stands no one.”²¹⁰ It is carried out through violence or the threat of violence, and it has the ability to kill a human being or to turn the living into stone. Weil’s reading of *the Iliad* reminds us that each of us is vulnerable to the effects of violence, although “that is a truth to which the empire of circumstances closes [our] eyes.”²¹¹ In other words, although we are each of us capable of being violated, this is something that we resist, instead choosing to remain “ignorant of this.”²¹²

But this is not the whole of the story of might or violence. What Weil asks us to examine is the ways that as human beings, our relatedness opens us up to both extreme risk *and* humanizing potential. Although might blocks our vision of one another, that vision is not fundamentally stripped from us. There exist “brief and divine moments” in which the soldiers in the poem “find their souls” as a result of the “moments when they love.” These moments paint a broader picture of war and violence as more than a

so that ‘unenlightened’ women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I so passionately want to remake?” Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 197-8.

²¹⁰ Simone Weil, “The Iliad, a Poem of Might,” *Simone Weil Reader* (New York: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977), 154.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 163

²¹² *Ibid.*

“picture of utter, uniform horror.”²¹³ She writes that, “the purest love of all, the supreme grace of all wars, is that friendship which mounts up to brim the hearts of mortal enemies. This quells the hunger to avenge the death of a son, of a friend.”²¹⁴

For both Laura and Pastor Meah, working with young people who have been through the war is particularly important because many of them have seen, experienced or participated in violence, whether here or in Liberia. These women’s work illumines the difficulties inherent in what Weil might name as these “moments of grace” that “suffice to make what violence kills, and shall kill, felt with extreme regret.”²¹⁵ Some of these young men and women are tempted to turn to this violence today, as Pastor Meah reminds us, they join the “gang group” and take up violence in order to make “quick money.” Laura reflects on her work with young people:

Many of these children they were sent from Liberia to this country, and some of them to be honest, they never went through therapy, you see? And what do they do? Some of them end up in jail, some of them been sent back home, you know. Some of them are even committing suicide...[there was recently] a boy who committed suicide because he could not deal with all the demons he had from the war. I mean, those are the things that we think about. How can we go into the mindset of these children, because they are our future.

These women’s work is carried out with full awareness that it might fail.²¹⁶ Lives will be lost, but also hope can be found again. In Weil’s words, “whatever, in the secret soul and in human relations, can escape the empire of might is loved, but painfully loved because of the danger of destruction that continually hangs over it.”²¹⁷ As Pastor Meah told me,

²¹³ Ibid, 174.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 176.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Their work might be described in the words of Judith Herman as a “survivor’s mission.” In her words, “A significant minority, as a result of the trauma, feel called upon to engage in a wider world. These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action. While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others.” Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 207.

²¹⁷ Weil, “The Iliad,” 180.

“There will be some who will say we are not doing enough, and there are some who will see.”

It is perhaps because violence reminds us that to be human is to be connected that community support in the face of violence is so crucial. When we know what we can (and will) do to one another, to see the good in others feels incredibly healing and can be a source of hope. Indeed this was the case for the women who participated in the women’s empowerment groups. As Evelyn said, the groups made her think about the past, but not only the “bad moments because someone died.” We all want to “connect with [our] people.” This helps us to remember where we have been and to envision where we are going. The good and the bad times are a part of this. For Joyce, the groups were a time to voice things that she had a hard time sharing before. As she said, “I will no longer be silent.” As I noted above, Friendship Community Church serves this role for many of the women who attend. For Ruth, going to church each Sunday provides an opportunity to give thanks for what she has – even if that is only the ability to wake up each morning.

Particularly for Pastor Meah, Laura and Marie, providing spaces for Liberians who experienced the war to talk and think about what they have been through is helping to rebuild their communities. This happens through the mending of relationships between people, in the process acknowledging each other as human beings, worthy of God’s love and the community’s support. As the women featured here illustrate, this healing work happens through the telling and hearing of stories (“breaking the silence” about difficult and horrific subjects), being present with those who are unable to speak of violence (as we did in the empowerment groups), and by helping people to start a new

life (offering hope through religious practices or by helping with the concrete necessities of daily living). Sometimes, it is as simple as an act of love or kindness, a mere gesture that means the most. As Pastor Meah told me of the church members she talks with about their experiences of the war, often they “just need a word, just a word will do.”

While it is important to note that each of these women offer physical comforts to the people they work with as well (healthcare supplies, food, access to medical care, etc.), and two work explicitly for gender justice at national and international levels (Marie in Liberia, working with the government and United Nations, and Laura as a delegate to the United Nations UN Women organization), much of what they do consists of what Marie calls being a “shoulder to cry on.” As I heard from Laura (and from Ella), Laura serves this role in the Durham community as well. She doesn’t “talk about personal problems. That’s not my business. But I think sometimes they need someone to talk to about issues, when they call me, I’m somebody they can talk to and maybe point them in the right direction. Or maybe console them.” Laura, Marie and Pastor Meah have taken on the role of community leaders, helping others to tell their stories in order to heal. As Laura told me, “I get my healing from helping people.” For Marie too, “breaking the silence” by telling her own story was a key part in her healing process. As she told me, “Breaking the Silence came about because I had to explain my story in order for me to heal. The more I talked about it, the more I cried, the more I got it out, I became a better person.” Pastor Meah regularly tells her own story of escaping the Civil War in her sermons at church, letting her congregants know that despite hardships, “God will make a way.” These moments of reconnection are the simplest, yet often the most crucial for trauma survivors:

Repeatedly in the testimony of survivors there comes a moment when a sense of connection is restored by another person's unaffected display of generosity. Something in herself that the victim believes to be irretrievably destroyed – faith, decency, courage – is reawakened by an example of common altruism. Mirrored in the actions of others, the survivor recognizes and reclaims a lost part of herself. At that moment, the survivor begins to rejoin the human commonality.²¹⁸

Herman, in many ways echoing Simone Weil, notes that it is these simple moments of human generosity that bring the survivor back to a place where she can reclaim her own humanity. It is the seemingly simple notion that “human beings like to be treated like human beings.”

In each of the narratives presented here, a distinctly relational view of the self emerges. These women's stories present an alternative anthropology that challenges individualistic understandings of what it means to be human.²¹⁹ This theological anthropology is based on their understanding that healing is a shared endeavor, marked by the presence of God in and through their stories. The next theme I elaborate upon picks up on this, exploring the ways that women are able to weave new narratives of hope by seeing God's presence in and through their stories of hardship and struggle.

Weaving a New Future

Women draw on resources from their faith to weave new narratives of hope out of the difficult things they have endured. As Ella stated, although you can't forget what you have been through, you can “grow and accept the situation.” Difficult, traumatic times are made more bearable by faith. As Ella continued, “religion offers a peace of mind,” a sense that, “it's okay, everything that I go through.” Ruth echoed this when she talked of her ability to praise God despite all that she has been through. Each morning's

²¹⁸ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 215.

²¹⁹ As Catherine Keller writes, “The ongoing experience of relatedness cannot be attributed to patriarchal structures. Both male and female children enter life deeply connecting with the available parent(s). Relatedness is a priori. Disempathy and separation, not connection, are what must be explained.” Keller, *From a Broken Web*, 136.

awakening is an opportunity to give thanks for life. In fact, as she told the women's empowerment group, her experiences of being stopped by a rebel soldier during the civil war, fearing for her life, helped Ruth to see that we should be thankful for every moment that we are alive. "Some people," as she stated in her interview, "they go to sleep and they don't wake up. We are no better than them. But, you know, if you get up, you [are] the lucky one."

Despite experiences of trauma, there is, in these women's narratives, a desire to go on, to thrive. As Pastor Meah says of working with trauma survivors in her church, "Yea, it is difficult, but as the Word of God says, with God all things are possible." In this section, I explore this sense of self and narrative transformation, focusing on the role of faith in re-weaving of life and story.

In her book *And Still Peace Did Not Come: A Memoir of Reconciliation*, Agnes M. Fallah Kamara-Umunna writes of her work with former fighters in Liberia, "Our lives have a plan for us, even if we can't see it for a while. We search for our path, push and pull away from our destinies, either because they are too big or too incomprehensible or scary or simply don't make sense."²²⁰ Like Kamara-Umunna, the women I worked with are able to see their lives and work as part of something bigger than what they have been through. Some of them tell their stories – through "breaking the silence" events, in one-on-one conversations, in sermons, and in their published memoirs – to help others see that they are not alone and to move toward healing for self, community and country. As Kamara-Umunna writes in the epilogue of her text, "I hope that in sharing these stories with you, I've helped you understand the former child soldiers of Liberia a little better. To grasp that they are good boys and girls. Or rather, that they are good at heart and

²²⁰ Kamara-Umunna and Holland, *And Still Peace Did Not Come*, 238.

were forced to do terrible things.”²²¹ The traumatic experiences endured by the women I worked with are transformed, becoming a part – albeit a painful one – of a larger reality that goes beyond the evils they experienced. As Kamara-Umunna writes, “Everyone has a choice, that is what I believe, but most of us make poor ones along the way to making better ones.”²²² This communal healing process draws women into a new narrative out of which the world can begin to right itself again. “In this sense of reciprocal connection, the survivor can transcend the boundaries of her particular time and place. At times the survivor may even attain a feeling of participation in an order of creation that transcends ordinary reality.”²²³ The violence is understood as a part of a larger faith-filled narrative in which evil no longer has the final say.

For some, to engage this transformation process en route to recovery means speaking about the violence that occurred. In Marie’s story in particular, we hear that encouraging other survivors to “break the silence” about what they have endured is key to healing and social transformation. Herman writes that such “public truth telling” events, like the ones Marie has hosted in Liberia for gender-based violence survivors help survivors to feel that the violence they endured will not be forgotten:

Survivors understand full well that the natural human response to horrible events is to put them out of mind. They may have done this to themselves in the past. Survivors also understand that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it...Survivors undertake to speak about the unspeakable in public in the belief that this will help others.²²⁴

These sorts of public or communal testimonies help survivors feel that they are not alone.

Additionally, this type of testimonial work has a long history in the Christian tradition.

Drawing on Elizabeth Castelli’s work on martyrdom, Rambo writes, “witnessing, truth-

²²¹ Ibid, 301.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 208.

²²⁴ Ibid. See also Pillay, Speare and Scully, “Women’s Dialogues in Post-Conflict Liberia.”

telling, testimony...Perhaps the figure of the ‘martyr’ that we need to mobilize here is not the one who sacrifices him-or herself but the one whose compulsion is to witness and to provide testimony”²²⁵ While telling the story of what has happened is an important part of bearing witness, these women are also able to go beyond the horrific things they have seen or experienced to imagine a new possible future.

This element of witnessing can be “expressed aesthetically as the capacity to imagine beyond an ending.”²²⁶ To witness is to “imagine” a future that might be out of what is, including the harms and horrors of the past. Our narratives, our selves, are re-created in the process. Philosopher Susan Brison writes that as socially-constructed beings, we are made “in large part through our group-based narratives, the self is not a single, unified, coherent entity. Its structure is more chaotic, with harmonious and contradictory aspects, like the particles of an atom, attracting and repelling each other, hanging together in a whirling, ever-changing dance that any attempt at observation – or narration – alters.”²²⁷ In sharing stories, even in the confines of the confidential interview, the narrative and the self are reshaped through telling and hearing one’s story. This is something that we built on in the women’s empowerment group, where women were able to tell their stories in a supportive environment and create a shared group narrative that supported them in their healing process.²²⁸

This idea of a shared narrative is also central to international transitional justice mechanisms like Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Truth commissions “are efforts

²²⁵ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 16.

²²⁶ *Ibid*, 115.

²²⁷ Brison, *Aftermath*, 95.

²²⁸ As noted previously, it is important to point out that talking about violence one has endured is not always healing, particularly when this testimony is encouraged in order to obtain political, legal or judicial benefits or rights. It is imperative that women be able to tell their stories (or not) on their terms in order to facilitate healing. See Ross, *Bearing Witness*; Brison, *Aftermath*; Das, *Life and Words*.

to create a public and systemwide accountability for crimes and atrocities committed within the period of recent violence.”²²⁹ Although the international community is still in the midst of “exploratory and experimental efforts to create adequate public truth and accountability,” truth commissions represent the most current “social, political, and legal initiatives that attempt to bring into the public sphere a collective acknowledgement of what happened, who suffered, who was responsible, and how they are accountable.”²³⁰ These elements of collective storytelling are necessary, Lederach writes, and are the “sine qua non of finding place, voice, and story for the communities affected.”²³¹ In her text *Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission: Stages of Transition*, Catherine Cole cites Richard Wilson, who argues that human rights based forms of documentation are “too legalistic for adequately recording and reflecting upon past violations. The instrumental rationality of law and rights systematically transforms the lifeworld, rather than being a sensitive device for listening to subjectivity on its own terms.”²³² Cole disputes this claim, taking a performance studies lens to South Africa’s Truth Commission, noting that “in the 2,000 testimonies given at public hearings, the unruliness and specificity of the lifeworlds this testimony represents – as well as the idiosyncrasies of individual subjectivities – had a fuller expression in the TRC process.”²³³ In fact, she finds in her work that although the TRC held a notion of “factual/forensic truth” that “demanded a positivist approach – one that sought to combat a past record of lies and half-truths with ‘hard,’ authenticated, accurate and comprehensive data, or ‘cold facts’ – it treated

²²⁹ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 143.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), quoted in in Catherine Cole, *Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission: Stages of Transition* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), xv.

²³³ Cole, *Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission*, xv.

personal/narrative truth as innately expressive of complexity, multiple layers of experience, and emotional density and a way of conveying the dignity of the individual giving testimony.”²³⁴ Indeed the Liberia TRC drew on such alternative narrative practices, notably through the participation of women in community dialogues, therapeutic sessions and sensitization programs.²³⁵

While these acts of public remembering are crucial for community and national rebuilding, there are other elements of individual and collective healing that are often not addressed by truth commissions. As Tina Sideris has noted, while there are significant political benefits of truth commissions, they have “inherent limitations for psychosocial healing.”²³⁶ They do not address the long-term needs of survivors to incorporate traumatic memory into life and the ways they go about rebuilding and repairing life after conflict.²³⁷ It is these other, more ordinary modes of remembrance and repair that the women highlighted in this chapter undertake and seek out. Communities of faith, like Friendship Community Church, are places where women can find a group of people willing to bear the burden of suffering along with them. As Pastor Meah told me:

Most of us are from very big families, now we are on this side where we do not have a lot of our families. So the church is our family. I thank God for the church. We are an extremely loving church. A few years ago I lost my mother, and I had to go home to bury her, and the church was by my side.

As Marie told me, the presence of others who hear and affirm your life and your story can help women to know that, “they are not alone in what they are going through.” These

²³⁴ Ibid, 164. As she writes, “narrative was also a way that the commission connected individual stories to a larger collective narrative. While the TRC sutured together information from multiple statements to create a macronarrative of larger patterns of violence, personal/narrative truth spoke to the discrete, the particular, and the individual. The TRC’s personal/narrative truth was subjective and valued subjectivity as a valid form of knowing and knowledge.”

²³⁵ Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “Volume Three: Appendices Title 1: Women and the Conflict.” <https://www.trcofliberia.org/reports/final> [Accessed 1 July 2011].

²³⁶ Sideris, “Problems of Identity,” *The Aftermath*, 59; Ross, *Bearing Witness*.

²³⁷ As Veena Das writes, “Unlike the nostalgia for public space marked by the clear separation of the perpetrators and victims, most close studies of truth commissions have shown how much the notion of testimony has excluded certain other models of testimony and remembrance.” Das, *Life and Words*, 220.

religious communities help women to re-create their narratives, drawing on elements of faith, to envision – witness to – hope for the future. Their work is not done, then, out of a political need to rebuild or reconstitute the nation, but rather to rebuild and restore life. This is echoed in Laura’s frustration that the men “talk, talk, talk” of politics and nationhood while the women go about doing the work of repairing and restoring the community.

Marcia Mount Shoop’s eloquent description of re-membering after trauma has particular relevance here. She writes that:

re-membering is not simple recollection or memory; re-membering is reconnecting body parts that have been severed, blocked, trivialized, compromised. When we re-member we do not only access the narratives that define us or simply finally find publicity for some hidden pain we have experienced. When we re-member we begin to integrate the threads of the untellable into the narrative of who we are and where we have been and how we live with truth and with authenticity. Re-membering does more than recollect; re-membering re-collects bodies and their broken, ingenious, tenacious parts into the sphere of how we pay attention.²³⁸

Re-membering as a renewed act of attention speaks to the ways that the women cited here see their work and stories; they bear witness to others’ stories, sit with the complexity of their situations and our world, offer comfort through their words and practices, and they take steps toward the repair of the lives and relationships in their communities. These simple moments assist in the reparative actions a survivor takes to re-member the self that has fragmented as a result of violence. Healing happens as narratives are re-woven after violence. The element of faith, a sense that “God will make a way,” helps women to survive and thrive despite what they have been through.

“Moving On”: Going Beyond the Trauma

²³⁸ Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance*, 48.

An element of narrative creation that the women I worked with employ is accomplished by what Ella names as “moving on” from the trauma they have endured. As trauma theorists remind us, memory is inherently flexible and shifting. Trauma demonstrates that memory itself is “a roadway full of potholes, badly in need of repair, worked on day and night by revisionist crews...When encouraged to flesh it out, we readily engage in imaginative elaboration and confabulation and, once we have done this, the bare bones memory is lost forever within the animated story we have constructed.”²³⁹ Although we often think of memory as if our memories are “locked away” in a secret part of ourselves, able to be accessed and recalled at will, trauma demonstrates that memory itself is tenuous and fragmented. Indeed, as Rosalind Shaw’s work on the TRC in Sierra Leone demonstrates, forgetting and remembering can be conditioned by human beings who desire to actively control the effect traumatic memory has on their daily life.²⁴⁰ “Narratives do not merely represent suffering; they mold and shape it, recontextualizing intolerable experiences and producing new ways of remembering and forgetting.”²⁴¹ As Shaw recounts, sometimes forgetting is not just a reaction to the trauma, but instead it serves as an act of narrative agency in itself.

²³⁹ Laurence J. Kirmayer, “Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative and Dissociation,” in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), 176. He argues that trauma narratives are accepted differently in different contexts, pointing to the dissociative narratives of childhood abuse (forgotten information, gaps in knowledge) and the collective remembering of traumas like the Holocaust (public retellings). For those whose narratives are perhaps too difficult to hear/speak in public (rape, childhood abuse, domestic violence), the memories become dissociated and sequestered “in a virtual space shaped by the social demand – and personal decision – to remain silent, or to speak the unspeakable only with a voice one can disown.”

²⁴⁰ As Shaw writes, “In many communities, people sought to displace explicit verbal memories of this violence through a range of social and ritual practices – sacrifices, prayer, exorcism, funerals, ritual healing, church services – the purpose of which was to create ‘cool hearts’ that form the basis for life in a community....Directed forgetting, then is part of the post-war work of memory, continually practiced and therefore continually remembered in order to reach the ‘Archimedean point’ with which one can transform one’s world.” In Rosalind Shaw, “Memory Frictions: Localizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone,” *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 2007 (1), 195.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Trauma theory affirms that there are several type of forgetting that can occur related to traumatic memory: 1) Forgetting at the moment of trauma. This is what Judith Herman describes as “dissociation,” or the practice of separating oneself from the traumatic event, oftentimes by suppressing the memory. This type of forgetting is predicated on surviving the traumatic event.²⁴² 2) Forgetting in the aftermath of trauma. While this type of forgetting may initially be adaptive, it can become debilitating. This type of forgetting is an attempt to ward off the invasive memories that penetrate the presence, and can involve using alcohol or drugs in an attempt to block out traumatic memory. As I noted earlier, Ruth’s alcoholism might have been a symptom of this type of traumatic “forgetting.”²⁴³ The experiences I have had with the Liberian community in Durham point to a third type of forgetting: 3) Forgetting, or “moving on,” as an act of agency and self-creation.

Working with survivors of Sierra Leone’s Civil War, anthropologist Rosalind Shaw found that young people actively sought to forget experiences of the war through practices of prayer, ritual and drama in their Pentecostal church. As she argues, this type of remembering of violence is “enabling” rather than disabling, allowing the young people to revision a new life and world in which God’s power vanquishes the evil they have experienced.²⁴⁴ Thus forgetting itself is an act of agency rather than repression – forgetting leads to healing.²⁴⁵

²⁴² As Judith Herman notes, at the time experienced, traumatic events enter a body that is prepared for survival only – a body that is in a primal “fight or flight” response.²⁴² This can lead the survivor of trauma to feel that they are suspended from the event. They might block it from their consciousness, feel as if they are “floating” above the scene, or enact other forms of dissociation from the moment. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 34-6.

²⁴³ Herman notes that for those who are unable to “spontaneously dissociate” from the event, they may use drugs or alcohol to numb the pain. Ibid, 44.

²⁴⁴ As Shaw writes, “The displacement of harrowing experiences from the past into other, transmuted forms is often viewed as synonymous with repression or false consciousness. But just as the physical displacement of GP youth is not

This type of forgetting also was present among the young people affiliated with Friendship Community Church and Laura's foundation. As we met together over the course of several months to plan the trauma healing workshops and other events for young people scheduled for the summer of 2011, the issue of talking about trauma came up a lot. When we asked the young men and women gathered at one of the meetings about topics for speakers for a kick-off event, Laura's son Jacob spoke up, telling us that he would rather hear a "motivational speaker," not just someone who talks about trauma. As he went on to say, "if you say trauma healing, it will hurt people's feelings....they will think that you are going to point them out for stuff." I learned in a conversation with Laura later that "pointing them out for stuff" meant talking about what people did during the war. When one young man in our group came to the United States, he got into a fight with another young guy, who he knew to have been a fighter during the conflict. Other young men have been shot as a result of war-time conflicts that have transposed into gang warfare here in Durham, as I have been told by both Laura and Samuel. For these young people, sometimes talking through what happened is not healing – it can instead be dangerous. Additionally, like the young people Shaw worked with, the youth of FCC and Laura's foundation wanted to hear about how they could rebuild their lives and create something new – how they could go to school, get a job, create a family. Indeed this practice is encouraged by the leaders of the church, as I heard in a conversation with Samuel Farley, one of the ministers at FCC.

an entirely negative condition, their displacement of violent memory is enabling rather than constraining. From the silence surrounding the Civil War in their plays, they retrieve a different kind of memory and voice, creating a moral life course in which they are much more than weak dependents." Shaw, "Memory Frictions," 89.

²⁴⁵ Veena Das writes that to assume agency in speech is problematic, instead for some agency is seen in the "descent into the everyday." As she writes, "Even the idea that we should recover the narratives of violence becomes problematic when we realize that such narratives cannot be told unless we see the relation between pain and language that a culture has evolved...In the register of the imaginary, the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language, but also seeks a home in the body." Das, *Life and Words*, 57.

Samuel and I were talking over lunch about a conversation that occurred in one of the women's empowerment group meetings. In this session, we were discussing moments of which we are the most proud. Samuel told our group about his participation in the student movements that led to Samuel Doe's indigenous takeover of the Liberian government. While Samuel proudly described his role in this indigenous movement in Sinoe County, several of the older women present looked on and shook their heads, sucking in their teeth with displeasure. Despite this disapproval, Samuel continued to talk about how proud he was of this work and what he had done to move toward increased indigenous participation in the Liberian government. When I asked him about this apparent discord between him and the women at the women's empowerment group, he told me that they don't talk about issues of the political foundations of the war in the church, instead keeping silent. They "just don't talk" about these sensitive political issues. Instead, as leaders in the church, they put these differences behind them to work with young people who have come to Durham from Liberia or refugee camps, particularly those young men and women who participated as "fighters." Much of the work of the church is through counseling, helping young people to understand that they can have a new life that they don't have to turn to drugs, that they can "make something out of their lives." They help them to create a new narrative of hope, one that can be layered over the horrific narratives of violence they experienced and perpetrated during the war.

Although this is not something I intentionally explored in my fieldwork (since I did not interview other men for this project), there seem to be both gendered and generational differences in these ways of forgetting trauma. Joyce and Evelyn, both

members of the younger cohort of members (in their 20's and early 30's), have a much different perspective on talking about trauma than the young men who often spoke up at the weekly meetings between FCC and Laura's foundation. During the women's empowerment groups, these younger women wanted to talk about what they have been through. As I explore in Chapter five, Joyce recounted for our group how empowering it was to talk about what she went through during the war. Comparing herself to the Biblical Jonah, she said she would no longer remain silent or ashamed about what she went through. In a parallel instance, when it comes to responsibility for the war and rehashing political conversations, the older women like Ruth, Pastor Meah, Ella and Laura do not see the point, unlike the younger men, in continuing to "talk politics." As Laura told me, this kind of "talk, talk, talk" can only breed more instability:

I just feel that if we only dwell upon this we will never move forward. We will still be bitter. This is what happened to a lot of the men in Africa, the men in Liberia as a whole. They just think about what used to be...

You will listen to a lot of the men, sometimes when you listen to the men they are always talking, "there will be another war in our country." You know...when they talk about stuff they will be like, "we're going to fight, again."

Ella echoes this when she told me that she hopes people can move forward and forgive, despite what they have been through. She wants Liberians to return to the times when they took care of one another. Many women want to forget the "politics" that drove a wedge through their country and created instability and chaos, instead focusing on the rebuilding of the country and its citizens. This response to the war represents a third type of forgetting. For some of the younger women, it is important to talk about what they endured during the war in order to harness their strength in building a new future. For the young men, rehashing what happened during the war is more difficult (in part because of

the roles some of the young men might have played during the war). However both groups harness a type of forgetting in order to work toward a new future. As we can see from the interview materials, for many of the women their desire is to move forward despite all they have been through, giving thanks to God for being alive. In this sense, their narratives often elide over the particular traumas of the war, instead focusing on what they can do to create a new life and story. This forgetting, or “moving on” is, I argue, another practice of narrative reweaving, where the story of the “stuff” that happened during the war is layered with positive and affirming stories of potential growth and transformation.

In the next section, I develop a theological language to describe how this process of narrative and self-recovery is accomplished. For many of the women I worked with, this happens by and through the presence of God they see in their stories. God’s presence during horrible events speaks to a narrative re-weaving in which the future that emerges is hope-filled and yet not naïve. This new narrative that is ever emerging speaks to the process of healing described in this dissertation. It is not an event of healing, but a continued process that both encompasses tragedy and moves beyond it. In what follows, I elaborate a theological understanding of God’s presence in trauma, arguing that it speaks to and with the narrative re-weavings illuminated by these women’s stories. Through these women’s narratives of healing, we hear an understanding of self and story that both holds the trauma within (God witnesses it; God was there) and also goes beyond it (“making a way”). God was there. God is there. Life and memory are transformed.

Theological Visions: Seeing God in Healing Narratives

Seeing God's presence in a life story that is filled with trauma and harm offers a sense that the person is worth their life, that they are indeed "somebody" worth living, as Pastor Meah would put it. As Judith Herman notes, the moment of traumatic terror often is marked by an individual's turn to a source of comfort and care, which for many is God:

In situations of terror, people spontaneously seek their first source of comfort and protection. Wounded soldiers and raped women cry for their mothers, or for God. When this cry is not answered, the sense of basic trust is shattered. Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life...When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living.²⁴⁶

As Herman writes, reconnecting to others who care about you is one of the crucial tasks of healing for a trauma survivor. For some, as noted above, these fundamental systems of care have been broken because of the traumatic event. Several theologians recently have explored the intersections of trauma and theology, key among them feminist theologians Serene Jones and Shelly Rambo. Rambo develops a "theology of remaining" that emerges out of the ways "divine power and presence take the form of witness" in moments of trauma, where the presence of God seems unimaginable.²⁴⁷ Jones, in her text *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, looks to the cross as a way of seeing the "vast landscape of grace" that holds together the "fracturing of our lives" despite the presence of trauma.²⁴⁸ In this section, I explore these theological understandings of the presence of God in the moment of trauma, drawing on their insights to demonstrate the ways that remembering God's presence in the moment transforms the memory, making it more bearable and helping it to fit into an overarching life narrative that is able to see peace and healing out of trauma and harm. For some women remembering that "God

²⁴⁶ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 54.

²⁴⁷ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 13.

²⁴⁸ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 97.

was there” in the moment of trauma helps to weave a larger narrative that both encompasses the traumatic event while also going beyond it. The larger narrative is, like God, able to witness to the trauma while also helping to bring about the healing that emerged after it. I first turn to Serene Jones, whose theological reading of trauma through the cross helps us to see the multivocality of religious experiences and the ways God’s presence in the world is reflected for trauma survivors in multiple ways. I then look to Shelly Rambo for an understanding of “witness” to trauma that allows for an idea of resurrection and redemption that is capable of attending to the Spirit that witnesses trauma. As she writes, “this middle Spirit provides a way of speaking about the persistence of death-in-life; in this way, it testifies to the realities of traumatic suffering and survival.”²⁴⁹ Bringing Jones and Rambo together, I then look toward process thought to illumine a theology of presence that evokes both the multivocality of experience that Jones espouses and the importance of witnessing “death-in-life” from Rambo. I argue that a process vision of healing offers an apt theological language to describe the ways the women here narrate their stories and lives. Being attentive to (bearing witness to) the presence of God in the remembering of these moments of horror allows us to see the ways God’s presence transforms the event, making healing and peace possible, despite the immense horror of trauma experienced.

The Multivocality of God: Serene Jones’s Traumatic Christology

Serene Jones begins her “theological imagining” of the cross (part two of her text *Trauma and Grace*) with a discussion of the cross’s strange allure. She notes that although “the whole scene should repulse us,” those of us invested in the Christian story are instead attracted by it, in fact “obsessively committed to telling and retelling the

²⁴⁹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 139.

story...in the hope that people will comprehend it anew and be moved.”²⁵⁰ This reflection on the paradoxical allure of the violence of the cross then moves, in the next chapter, to a more concrete meditation on the potential for healing that is reflected by the image of the cross. By talking with women who attend a survival skills course after a Maundy Thursday service, Jones discovers that the women are able to connect positively to the cross, notably because it “mirrors” our own story of human suffering. As one woman says after glancing at the cross, “he gets me. He knows.” Another describes God cradling her in her arms while Jesus stands in for her, taking the abusive blows of her partner.²⁵¹

Relating the passion story to trauma theories, Jones first attempts to develop a theology of the cross “that would make redemptive sense” to the women in her self-defense class. What she finds, though, is that the two stories (the “trauma drama” and the passion story) do not neatly align.²⁵² Beyond the assertion that the cross “denounces evil” and “announces the reality of divine love, of grace”²⁵³ she finds that interpretations of the cross are (necessarily) as varied and mutable as stories recalled from traumatic memories. They must make space for the variations in interpretation that are necessitated by traumatic memory and the (often relentless) intercession of violence in a life. Jones notes that there is a “variability in the story of the cross” that is able to “[reflect] our story of suffering back to us.”²⁵⁴ Stories of the cross can be powerful and transformative for

²⁵⁰ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 73.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, 76-7.

²⁵² Jones explores trauma theory and the passion story to find the overlaps between the two. As she writes, “both stories – the trauma drama and the passion play – originate in exactly particular and insistently embodied events of violence that happen to individual subjects.” Additionally, they both “vex” the “relationship between self and other,” “grapple with the fragility of memory,” “recognize that poetry rather than straightforward tale-telling is often the best way to capture meaning,” and recognize that “healing involves, at least partially, the creation of a jointly offered story.” Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 78-79.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, 81.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 82.

those who have survived violence because they mirror our suffering back to us in complicated, often fragmented ways.

Given this multivocality of the cross, Jones next asks the crucial question of how these multiple stories can bring about healing for those affected by violence. She calls attention to the strange, traumatic (non)ending of the book of Mark, in which the women flee the empty tomb because “they were afraid.” By examining the strange silent ending at the close of the first ending of the book, Jones posits that we might preach this text using a turn to gesture as a way to interpret the movement of the divine in the midst of violence. In the silent space of the text’s conclusion, she reads a performed utterance that “brings us to the voids and chasms in our experience where gestures of grace are imagined and at long last embodied.”²⁵⁵ This silent gesturing is a reminder of the reach of the divine toward us, motioning to us in the midst of our fragility, pain and trauma.

Given this interpretation of the power of gesture in communicating the paradoxical intertwining of violence and grace, Jones helps us see that stories of the cross are reminiscent of the feelings of divine embrace, solidarity and compassion that the women I have worked with espouse. They reflect the complicated juxtaposition of divine love and extreme trauma, and therefore call for gestures of compassion and empathy from those who travel alongside those who suffer violence. What is important, then, is the presence that is implied in the cross: the presence of a God who knows, intimately, what it is to suffer and die. Jones’s turn to the cross as she works through trauma as a theological concept helps us to see the multivocality of God’s presence for women who have been through traumatic events. The cross reflects their pain, but also mirrors God’s presence in that pain and suffering. The gestures of love and compassion that are

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 97.

reflected in the cross are a reminder of God's presence in and through moments of death, which for trauma survivors, is an intimate reality.

For Mary, this presence continues in the work she does with sexual and gender-based violence survivors in Liberia. She told me that this work is far from easy, but through it all (including surviving rape and sexual assault herself), she feels God's presence. As she told me,

and you know we just pray, and to say what programs should I do? What is good? And sometimes the doors will close. Since I've started this a lot of doors have closed, but I still put my faith in God because I didn't have anything. Nothing. He's taken me from being through now, through war, now through somebody putting us on a ship where people were in lines waiting to leave Liberia, and you know I could have been in Sierra Leone.

Mary sees her escape from Liberia as God's work in her life, as a chance at life despite the continued threat of death. Throughout it all, God was there. It is to this presence in and through life and death that I now turn, looking to theologian Shelly Rambo's work on trauma through her understanding of the "middle" passage between the cross and resurrection, life and death.

Bearing Witness to Violence

Rambo focuses her theological attention on the times and moments after the cross but before Jesus' resurrection, the moments where life and death meet. As she writes, "If we look between cross and resurrection, we are directed to a new way of being, to a form of life that is not triumphant. Instead, it is life configured as remaining."²⁵⁶ Remaining, for Rambo signifies the ways that trauma reveals the continued intercession of death into life. Recalling trauma theorists like Herman, Rambo recounts the ways that for trauma survivors life is continuously interspersed with recollections and flashbacks of the

²⁵⁶ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 144

horrific events they have endured. Life begins to take on the flavors of death itself, as any sense of time loses its linearity. The past intersects the present, the future is difficult to see. For this reason, Rambo turns to the movements made between death and life, the middle space, as a theological resource. She writes, “The theological meaning cannot be found in turning away or turning to the cross, but, instead, in the turning itself, the movements between that acknowledge a more tenuous relationship between life and death.”²⁵⁷ Redemption is found not only in the cross, in the triumph of life over death, but in the movements between the two, in what “remains.”

The reality of this middle space is murky and complicated. Much like Jones’s cross, it is multivocal and reflects a multitude of experiences. It is, as I have noted earlier, not a naïve space. For a trauma survivor, there can be no more false illusions about the safety of the world. However, there can be joy and love in what remains. Leymah Gbowee writes of these moments of unexplained joy during her experiences doing trauma healing before she joined the women’s peace movement. In her memoir, she tells a story about a day when, accompanied by researchers from Manchester, the trauma healing team heard the story of their driver, Moses, who was held captive during the first stages of the Civil War. The men he was imprisoned with were all locked in a room and stripped naked. Over the course of several days, a guard would come in and play the nursery rhyme game “eenie meenie minie moe” when deciding which of the imprisoned men to mutilate each day. As Gbowee recounts:

“Every time they started that rhyme, I would *shrivel*,” Moses said, grinning. “By the end, I was practically a woman!”
We all howled and choked. A Swedish boy who was working with the Manchester researchers looked at us in horror. “You people are *sick*!” he shouted and ran off. We almost killed ourselves laughing.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 158.

You laugh instead of cry. You laugh because you survived and in an hour, something else might threaten your life. What else can you do?²⁵⁸

“What else can you do?” Recalling the ways life inexplicably asserts itself in places and moments of death, Rambo writes about the ways hearing a lone jazz trumpet in the midst of the wreckage of New Orleans, “Death hovers here; much has been lost. But the lone trumpet also sounds a note of something finding its way to life.”²⁵⁹ That jazz note, like the laughter Gbowee recounts, reminds us that in the movements between life and death, where trauma haunts us, are glimpses of joy, hope and love.

Rambo develops a theological understanding of trauma as a way to remind us that resurrection narratives, as they are usually told as part of the Christian tradition, tend to make swift and decisive movements of death conquering life, good triumphing over evil. However, as she notes, drawing on trauma theorists and her experiences in New Orleans post-Katrina, trauma poses a particular problem for these linear narratives.²⁶⁰ It disrupts a clear distinction between life and death, muddling the two. As she writes, “The undertow of a triumphant redemptive narrative is this: despite claims to victory and to overcoming, there are fragments – unintegratable aspects of suffering – that remain.”²⁶¹ It is to these remainders that theology must be attentive, despite the fact that they challenge our desire for an easier, more hopeful story. And yet, Rambo finds that despite these “unintegratable aspects of suffering,” the Spirit persists there, carrying out what Rambo defines as two movements: tracking the undertow and sensing life. As she recounts, the Spirit first moves to “witness to what remains of death.” Drawing on the

²⁵⁸ Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 213.

²⁵⁹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 152.

²⁶⁰ As Susan Brison writes, “As I use the term, a ‘narrative’ does not need to have a beginning, middle and end, unless that is taken to mean, simply, that it starts and ends, with something in between...It is a social interaction – actual or imagined or anticipated or remembered – in which what gets told is shaped by the (perceived) interests of the listeners, by what the listeners want to know and also by what they cannot or will not hear.” Brison, *Aftermath*, 102.

²⁶¹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 159.

image of tides and undertow, Rambo calls attention to the work done by the Spirit in attending to the often continued cycle of recovery and forgetting. The Spirit's work here is to remember, to witness to what has happened, even when others want to forget or to wipe it away with an easy story of redemption. As she writes, "tracking involves discerning what does not rise to the surface. It accounts for the force of institutions and persons that do not want certain truths to be told."²⁶² The second movement of the Spirit is sensing life. As Rambo recounts, sensing life is difficult after trauma because "the movements of life are less certain, less prescribed."²⁶³ Given the precariousness of life in this space, sensing life is an "embodied practices of imagination...For trauma healing to happen, the capacity to imagine one's life beyond a radical ending, to imagine life anew, must be restored."²⁶⁴ This healing work requires the imaginative capacity to see life out of death, and to see it in such a way that encompasses the difficulties within it. Rambo likens it to "trying to grasp a sense of things in the darkness, attempting to move toward life without knowing its shape. The spark, the faint glimmer that remains, is the movement of Spirit, witnessing to the depths."²⁶⁵ The Spirit, then, responds to trauma by witnessing to it, by refusing to gloss over it and instead by tracking its rough edges. It also seeks out what remains, what lives within these dark spaces. Rambo illumines a new concept of hope out of trauma – a hope that is aware of (that tracks) what has happened, but that also looks for the glimmers of life and love that remain.

A Process Orientation: Healing Continues

²⁶² Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 161.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

Whether they talk about God being there in the moment of rape or recognize God's presence in leading them out of harm, for the women I worked with, knowing God was there in and after the moment matters. God's presence, while it might signal different things to different women (steadfastness, divine order, and justice) allows for healing despite an experience so horrible the brain tries its best to block it from consciousness. Given what these women have said about the presence of God in and through their stories of hardship and trauma, a process orientation of God's movement in and for the world offers a compelling theological frame for understanding healing. Healing, in this vision, is a process; it is also able to hold within it elements of tragedy. In this way, it is a non-naïve kind of love, reflecting Ella's words about the future of Liberia. Although there is a constant worry that "someone will go and disrupt" the fragile peace that develops, Ella, like the other women cited here, is able to envision a peace that comes from love. "If you can have love for your neighbors," she says, "you can have peace." This kind of peace holds within it what has happened (knowing it), while also going beyond it, reminding us that there is more than the violence or harm experienced.

Whitehead's process theology helps us to see that we live in a world in which we are presented with seemingly limitless options at both a conscious and unconscious level. From the smallest decision (if the most infinitesimally small movement can be accurately described as a decision) to the large choices that affect our lives (who to love, where to live, what to do), the presence of God with us is continuously luring us to goodness, beauty and truth. As Whitehead puts it, God is the "lure for feeling, the eternal urge of

desire.”²⁶⁶ God is the “initial object of desire” of each being, presenting options that help us to envision and live into our own future becoming. This luring presence exists with us even in the midst of intense suffering and pain. As Wendy Farley describes in the

Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth:

Suffering and the overwhelming desire to be free from suffering cloud our senses and our minds. But we long not only for relief. We also long to know who we are... There survives in us human beings a desperate desire for truth. This desire is a burning light in us. It is the image of God in us.²⁶⁷

This desire to be free from suffering reveals the presence of God. The knowledge within that knows that affliction is not right is how we feel God’s presence:

The implacable voice in us that cries out so piteously and foolishly, ‘Why am I being hurt?’ arises from the image of God in us. Even when it can only be provoked by our own suffering, this cry testifies to the last remnant of awareness that to defile the loveliness of a creature defiles at that very moment the beauty of God.²⁶⁸

Out of apparent ambiguity and disorder, our recollection that things could be otherwise reflects God’s nature. Through participation in the potentiality of God, we come to be ourselves.²⁶⁹

Because God takes everything in, saving what can be saved, we feel that God knows our pain, joy, triumph and despair. As the women I have worked with have told me, “God was there.” God sees and hears it all. God *knows*. For those who survive trauma, the importance of another knowing or hearing one’s story is often paramount. As Brison writes:

Working through, or remastering, traumatic memory (in the case of human inflicted trauma) involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone

²⁶⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1978), 344.

²⁶⁷ Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 19.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 20-1.

²⁶⁹ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 40.

else's (the perpetrator's) speech (or other expressive behavior) to being the subject of one's own. The act of bearing witness to the trauma facilitates this shift, not only by transforming traumatic memory into a narrative that can then be worked into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world, but also by reintegrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood.²⁷⁰

As Brison goes on to write, psychological literature on trauma emphasizes the importance of telling one's story to an "*empathic other* in order for the telling to be therapeutic."

However, because this "empathic other" does not always exist, "some survivors are helped by telling their stories to *imagined* others – to potential readers, for example, or to others kept alive in a photograph."²⁷¹ For some, to begin to heal from trauma requires the presence – real or imagined – of someone who hears and knows what the survivor has endured. Although I am not discounting the need for real others who are able to hear stories of violence (the women I worked with, after all, did tell me their stories), I argue that for some women the feeling of the presence of God provides a sense that someone is watching, that someone knows what they are going through. God offers a "witness" to what happened.

The presence of God in these women's narratives offers us a glimpse of the ways that God's empathic nature takes in our fear, experiences of violence, traumatic visions, and feelings of pain. But these experiences of pain, violence, and affliction are, although taken in by God, transformed by God. Each of these moments is taken in by God and felt "for what it can be in such a perfected system – its sufferings, its sorrows, its failures, its triumphs, its immediacies of joy – woven by rightness of feeling into the harmony of the universal feeling."²⁷² God feels our pain and our joy, and what is more, God feels it for

²⁷⁰ Brison, *Aftermath*, 68.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 71-2.

²⁷² Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 346.

what it *should* be. The evils we have felt or feared do not become a part of God as they are. Rather, “the revolts of destructive evil, purely self-regarding, are dismissed into their triviality of merely individual facts: and yet the good they did achieve in individual joy, in individual sorrow, in the introduction of needed contrast, is yet saved by its relation to the completed whole.”²⁷³ The *facts* of the story are known, but they are not allowed to be all that is. Whatever can be recovered from the “wreckage” is saved. As Monica Coleman describes it in her text *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, “As God incorporates all the events of the world into who God is, God also evaluates the experiences of the world – saving that which can be saved, relegating the evil to the edges. Sometimes there is very little good to work with, but God can find it and preserve it.”²⁷⁴ The fact of the violence cannot be erased, but it can be transformed with time and care. As Brison writes of her own recovery and the hope that she has for her son:

What I wish most for my son is not the superhuman ability to avoid life-threatening disasters, but, rather, resilience, the capacity to carry on, alive in the present, unbound by dread or regret. Not the hard, flinty brittleness of rock, but the supple tenacity of the wind rocked bough that bends, the bursting of desire of a new mown field that can't wait to grow back, the will to say, whatever comes, *Let's see what happens next.*²⁷⁵

Looking forward to what might happen next represents a faith that good can exist again, despite intense pain and trauma. But, as Coleman asks, “How do we do this? In the midst of conflict, suffering, discord, and the challenges that prevent us from getting to the truth, how do we continue to seek out new possibilities? How do we manage to heed God’s calling when there are so many forces that can keep us stuck in the past or the pain of our experiences?”²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 61.

²⁷⁵ Brison, *Aftermath*, 117.

²⁷⁶ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 69.

As Laura told me when talking about her mother, there are things her mom has gone through because of the war that still haunt her today. Laura's family still doesn't know if her oldest sister is alive or not. "How can you live," she asked, "not knowing where your children are?" She went on to point out that this is where her family and friends turn to God. Her mother, she reminded me, prays "all the time." As she went on to say, "when people have gone through so much violence and suffering, they need something to lean on." God is there for them, Laura told me, when no one else is. God is there, even when the rest of the world turns away, as many people told me the world did during the Liberian Civil War. As Ella told me during an interview, she felt frustrated upon coming to the United States and hearing that no one here knew where Liberia was, let alone knew that her home country was in the midst of a bloody Civil War. The work of God is to remember and bear witness, even when no one else does. It marks a divine presence in the midst of trauma and lets survivors know that what they have been through is known, seen, remembered.²⁷⁷

Conclusions

The women I have talked to experienced these events years ago – for some, a space of nearly twenty years has elapsed since then. So what does remembering God in that moment do? Drawing on the theologians, philosophers and women's experiences I have cited here, I argue that remembering God's presence in the moment of trauma (or calling to God when that trauma is remembered, as Laura's mother does) transforms that moment. We can see that the presence of the divine in the moment of trauma both bears

²⁷⁷ As Claire Bischoff has pointed out to me, this is perhaps because God is not human, and therefore not capable of violating us in the way that other human beings are. As Serene Jones writes, the two faith claims that gird her text *Trauma and Grace* are, "First, we live in a world profoundly broken by violence and marred by harms we inflict upon each other. Second, God loves this world and desires that suffering be met by hope, love and grace." Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, ix.

witness to the event and it enables us to see the good that remains in and through those moments. As Jones recalls of the women looking to Jesus on the cross, “He gets it. He knows.” God was there. God is there, for these women who remember the horrible things they have been through, and yet remember them in a way that the hope and healing is preserved. This understanding of healing that comes out of knowing God was/is there in the moment of trauma is an emergent healing. It is an unfolding narrative that continues to be imagined and constructed. That imaginative capacity, the ability to look toward “what comes next” is, I posit, made possible by women’s remembrances of God’s presence in and after trauma.

This chapter began with women’s narratives of their experiences of the Liberian Civil War and their experiences since then. It illuminated the role that religion plays in these narratives, namely through the following three themes: 1) The role of the (faith) community in bolstering healing; 2) The transformative power of the presence of God in the moment of trauma or hardship; 3) The process of recovery as both telling and going beyond what you have been through. I then looked to feminist, womanist and process theologies to develop a theological frame for talking about healing as it emerges in these women’s narratives. This understanding of healing encompasses the tragic (it is not naïve) and acknowledges the relational nature of healing. This process-oriented discourse offers us a language to talk about healing as a process; it is not measurable or quantifiable. We do not know if we ever reach it. And yet, as these women’s narratives illustrate, it is a process that occurs in large part due to women’s sense of a divine presence in their lives. By hearing women’s narratives, we are able to see the ways that

religion matters for women's healing, but it matters as a process, not as an instrument or an outcome.

For some women who have experienced trauma and violence, they are able to incorporate the trauma into a larger life narrative, one in which evil does not win. The presence of God in the moment of trauma changes the event, allowing an understanding of healing to emerge that is able to both hold the trauma and go beyond it. The memories of violence and war become, then, a part of a larger story of who we are. This narrative – which is more than just the verbal stories we tell, but our embodied experiences of them – weaves together the tragic aspects of life, and for some, these are woven together with counterstories of peace and healing that refuse to give violence the last word.

CHAPTER FOUR: TRANSFORMATIONS THROUGH PRACTICE

After church one Sunday, I went with Reverend Farley to visit one of the older women in the congregation who had not been in church for several months because of her glaucoma and advanced diabetes. As Reverend Farley told me on the drive over, one of the ministers of the church visits these shut-in members whenever the larger congregation celebrates communion, in order to ensure their continued participation in the life of the church. We arrived at the woman's house, a small house in a relatively new neighborhood a few miles away from downtown Durham. The woman, Mrs. Taylor, lives with her daughter, who answered the door when we got there. She seated us in the formal sitting room, which was darkened by the heavy curtains on the windows. Mrs. Taylor came into the sitting room, assisted by her daughter, and sat in a chair across from the couch upon which Reverend Farley and I sat. Reverend Farley then brought out a small box that held the pre-made communion set that the members of Friendship Community Church used during communion. It is a small plastic cup of grape juice, covered with another sealed container containing the communion cracker. We talked with Mrs. Taylor for a bit, asking about her health and updating her on some of the goings-on of members of the church.

Reverend Farley then started communion with a prayer, which focused on Mrs. Taylor's health. Healing, he told us, does not always come quickly or easily. Instead, it comes in God's time. Because of her eye condition, Mrs. Taylor's milky eyes teared up as he talked, and she softly repeated, "Yes, Yes" after each of Reverend Farley's sentences. We prayed for healing in Mrs. Taylor's life, and Reverend Farley reminded her that God was always present. "Oh Yes," Mrs. Taylor remarked, "[God] has not

forgotten me.” Reverend Farley administered the communion, opening the little pouch with the wafer that sat above the small cup that held the grape juice. As she ate and drank what was offered, Mrs. Taylor thanked us for being with her. I offered a prayer as we closed, and after some small talk, Reverend Farley and I left.

Practices of faith reveal the ways that religion matters in the lives of the women from Liberia with whom I worked. As Mrs. Taylor told us above, these practices of faith help women to know that God and their community “has not forgotten” them. Like the memories of God being present in violence highlighted in the last chapter or the work of the women’s empowerment group that I describe in the next chapter, these faith practices create new narratives in which women who survived the Liberian Civil War can live. As Reverend Farley told me the afternoon that we left Mrs. Taylor, the members of Friendship Community Church know they have been given a “second chance” at life. They have lived through immense hardships both in Liberia and here in the United States. The practices of faith that follow are but a few ways that the women I have worked with aim to live into that second chance, to re-imagine life out of fear and death.

Worship practices at Friendship Community Church help the women I worked with to create new narratives of hope and life out of hardship and harm. “Transformation is the core promise of Christian life. And transformation is an actual change in form, not simply a new outlook on life or a welcomed assurance of an eternal reward. Our bodies change in an incarnational faith – our individual bodies and our corporate bodies.”²⁷⁸

Thus, the narratives we create that allow healing and peace to emerge are not only spoken narratives; they are stories that we inhabit and create with our bodies. This chapter

²⁷⁸ Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance*, 129. As Mount Shoop writes, these transformative changes themselves take practice. She notes that, “like a creek bed slowly changing course, practice is the trickling current that creates transformation in time. Practice is the wind, the push in the current.”

explores practice, arguing that it is not only through narrative and story that women experience the healing impacts of faith in their lives. Practices, gestures, and bodies – like narratives and stories – reveal the ways that religion matters as women seek out healing.

Religious Practice: Setting the Terms

I observed and participated in three religious practices during my time at Friendship Community Church. They are: worship, parenting and prayer. Two of the practices are, at first glance, markedly religious practices; they happen within the confines of the faith community building and align with the particular theology of the church itself. Parenting, I argue, is another significant religious practice for the women with whom I worked, although mothering and parenting practices are not often thought of as specific ministerial practices of the Christian church.²⁷⁹ But first what do we mean when we talk about religious practices? Alasdair MacIntyre defines them as:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence that are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.²⁸⁰

This definition of practice seems to fit with Pastor Meah's desire for her church congregation to be formed in the ways of faith through participating in worship, Sunday School and Bible Study at the church. As I noted in Chapter Three, she believes that it is through "teaching that people get healed. Without knowledge, people perish." Pastor

²⁷⁹ Feminist and womanist theologians have rightly pointed out that many "women's practices" have been left out of the theological canon in terms of what counts as religious practice. They work to reclaim these practices as vital spiritual resources for women's lives. See, for example, Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan's essay "African-American Spirituals: Confronting and Exorcising Evil Through Song," in which she draws on spirituals as a source for doing womanist theology. In Emilie Townes, Ed. *A Trouble in My Soul*, 150-171. Also, Mary McClintock Fulkerson draws on "homemaking" practices in her theological ethnography *Places of Redemption*.

²⁸⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 204-5. Quoted in Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 39.

Meah told me this as she was explaining why it is important for people to participate in the life of the church; she sees her ministry as a pedagogical intervention, encouraging right thought and behavior in the life of her parishioners through the practices of the church.²⁸¹ Particularly in the discussion of worship and parenting practices, the focus of the ministerial staff is on developing practices that teach their members how to be strong in their faith, to believe that “God will make a way,” to focus on a future of hope and prosperity. In this sense, they are practices of the form that MacIntyre describes, aimed toward cultivation of “standards of excellence” among the Friendship Community Church members as Christian believers.

However, practices of faith often do not align with the particular goals and aims that either tradition or leadership might desire.²⁸² In other words, practices can be as discontinuous or chaotic as the people who participate in them. It is important to recognize, in addition to the pedagogical impetus inherent in some religious practices, there are other practices that in fact shift or even contradict the standards and ideals compelled by a tradition of faith. Practice both shapes and forms the people who participate in them. For example, –sermons about parenting create models that women can live into as mothers; the iteration of “God making a way” provides women with a performative script to narrate their lives – as well as the ways that practices participate in the creation of new faith traditions. As such, the practices that I describe below – worship, parenting and prayer– provide a compelling description of the ways that religion

²⁸¹This reflects the Aristotelian notion of habitus that Saba Mahmood draws on in her work with the women’s mosque movement in Egypt. As Mahmood describes it, the women who participate in the mosque movement do so in order to train their bodies – and by effect, their minds – to achieve piety. See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 139.

²⁸² As Fulkerson writes, “While it is in some sense the ends of Christian tradition that open up the possibility of discerning its inadequacies, my point is that the very definition of faithfulness and tradition must include a way to think about continuity as more than the repetition of tradition,” McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 42.

matters for women who have survived violence. They also encourage us, as theologians and scholars, to imagine ways that these practices might shift the ways that we imagine and describe healing.

Worship and Praise: Making a Way

Over the course of nine months, I attended worship at Friendship Community Church, where I heard sermons from Pastor Meah, both Pastors Felicia and Jackson Jones, Reverend Farley, Reverend Gaye and guest preachers. We sang hymns, took communion, read scripture, offered songs of praise and worship. The services lasted anywhere from an hour and a half to three hours, sometimes spilling over into a late lunch in honor of one of the events at the church. I came to know many of the members of the congregation, which swelled and contracted depending on who was preaching and who was traveling that weekend.²⁸³ Babies were dedicated, weddings were celebrated, and graduations (including Pastor Meah's) were honored. These practices created a community, a community that many members value as family. One such Sunday, Pastor Meah encouraged her congregation to "have hope for tomorrow."²⁸⁴ Her sermon that day is indicative of the ways that the community that is created at Friendship Community Church centers on the ways worship practices create narratives that help women to live into the belief that "God will make a way" despite all they have been through.

A Sunday Service: A Thick Description

²⁸³ About once every two months, the Pastors would travel to other churches in Philadelphia or neighboring cities in North Carolina. On these days, the congregation was always a bit smaller.

²⁸⁴ As anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes in his seminal essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," "if anthropological interpretation is constructing a reading of what happens, then to divorce it from what happens – from what, in this time or that place, specific people say, what they do, what is done to them, from the whole vast business of the world – is to divorce it from its applications and render it vacant. A good interpretation of anything – a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society – takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation." Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 18.

On a sunny June morning, I arrived at church a little after eleven, late for me, but at the point in the service when the praise and worship team was getting the congregation ready for the service. Songs of praise resonated through the small worship space, and I could hear the sounds of drums and tambourines from outside the church doors. Always trying to be a bit more inconspicuous (although that was nearly impossible in this church because of both how I look and because everyone else seems to know one another), I tried to sit in the back of the sanctuary. As usually happened the usher spotted me and moved me to the front, in a spot of high honor for the ministers, but not great for an ethnographer who would like to see the whole congregation. The seats reserved for special guests at Friendship Community Church are just in front of the jugged out space in the sanctuary where the pastor keeps her office. They afford a front row view of the ministers, pulpit and choir; however, much of the congregation lies hidden behind the walls of the pastor's office. As I made my way up to these seats, shaking hands and hugging the men and women I knew along the way, I noticed two other European-Americans sitting in the front row. Eric and Emily, I later learned, are both students at nearby Duke University. Emily met Pastor Meah while she was working at Duke (Pastor Meah works as a security guard there), where the two became friends. Emily's friend Eric spent last summer in Sierra Leone and planned to go to Liberia this coming summer to help start a rice farming co-op with some former fighters just outside of Monrovia.

As we said our hellos, the praise songs slowed down, shifting to more reverential worship music in preparation for the service that followed. Reverend Farley was leading the service, so he was dressed for the occasion in long, flowing robes. He read the Call to

Worship, Psalm 118:24,²⁸⁵ and led the call to worship from the used Baptist Hymnals that ushers distributed throughout the church. Seeing these hymnals reminded me of growing up in my Southern Baptist Church in Raleigh, NC, where these maroon hymnals sat in the back of each chair every Sunday. Mid-way through the service, Sister Bryant stepped forward to make the announcements, as she does each week as church secretary.²⁸⁶ This week the big announcement concerned the upcoming Women's Workshop, and she distributed envelopes for each of the women in the congregation. We were each instructed to offer \$25 to help pay for the event, which would include a weekend-long schedule of speakers, prayer, praise and workshops. After the regular announcements, Pastor Meah took the pulpit for her weekly pastoral announcements, where she reiterated the importance of the upcoming women's event and encouraged the church to support their work. The usher then came forward to collect the weekly offering, and we all joined in for the hymn, "The Solid Rock." Once the offering was completed, the choir sang a selection in preparation for the Pastor's message, which serves as the central part of the service and the time when most members of the church would be in attendance (people continued to trickle in during the earlier parts of the service, so by the time Pastor Meah spoke, the entire congregation numbered close to 60 or 70 people).

The message for the sermon was, "I have hope for tomorrow." As she had done several months before, Pastor Meah related this message to the Civil War in Liberia and struggles Liberians have been through both back home and here in the United States. She said that Liberians have suffered, but they still maintain hope for tomorrow, "Thanks to

²⁸⁵ The Psalm reads, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Psalm 118:24, NRSV.

²⁸⁶ As I was editing this chapter, I learned that Sister Bryant passed away. While I was attending FCC, her husband had been seriously ill and recovered. I describe my experiences at her funeral in the conclusion. I'm on the listserv for the Liberian Association in the Triangle, where Sister Bryant's passing was marked over an email exchange that included several songs and poems (as attachments).

God.” At the time, Ivory Coast was going through a brutal power struggle between supporters of past-president Laurent Gbagbo and the winner of the November 2010 elections (by international observers and standards) Alassane Ouattara.²⁸⁷ Pastor Meah denounced the violence, preaching that it reflected a “problem in Africa” with leaders refusing to hand over power democratically, instead being “greedy.” This, she said, is “wickedness” and evil. Despite the presence of leaders who refused to give up power and the harsh conditions that emerge out of such conflicts, she reminded the congregation that people still have hope to go on. They still hope that things will be different.

Pastor Meah began then to talk about her own hope, and the hope of other elders in the community, to be able to go home to Liberia. However, for Pastor Meah this hope is tempered with her sense of God’s injunction for her to firmly plant the church here in Durham before she leaves. This includes building a permanent church on the land that is owned by Friendship Community Church, a plot of land located away from downtown in a more residential area.²⁸⁸ Once this is accomplished, Pastor Meah will leave the United States, feeling that her mission for God is fulfilled here. She will not stop ministering, instead, as she told us that Sunday, God has given her a vision that this church is to expand to Liberia as well. She would then be a Bishop, but presiding over the two churches. The office of Bishop requires this, she shared with us, laughingly telling the

²⁸⁷ At the time of this service, in May of 2011, forces loyal to newly elected President Ouattara were narrowing in on Abidjan. From an NPR report on April 3, 2011, “And while there is still continued fighting, we hear the explosions of mortars and the sort of rat-tat-tat of automatic gunfire. The city’s still being fought neighborhood-by-neighborhood, and I guess most importantly, the President, Laurent Gbagbo still controls the television and both the presidential palaces.” National Public Radio, “Ivory Coast Violence Turns to Massacre,” www.npr.org/2011/04/03/135087144/ivory-coast-violence-turns-to-massacre [Accessed 15 January 2011].

²⁸⁸ This is something that I have heard the Pastor say almost every time she and I talk, her desire for there to be a permanent home for Friendship Community Church, one that is not at the whim of landlords and limited to the small worship space they now have. Instead, she and other leaders of the church want a church home, a place where young people can come after school for homework help, or where children can come each summer for camp (this camp happens once a week in their current location, but there is nowhere for the children to play outside in the gritty industrial complex the church now resides in), and a place where funerals and weddings can be held (because the current sanctuary is so small, they often have to hold these events at other local churches).

congregation that, “You go to some churches and the man says, I am the bishop of this church...and he only got one church!” Pastor Meah told her gathered parishioners that when she went home to Liberia she could return to the work she did before the war and “drive around in a big car.”²⁸⁹ However, this would not serve her people or fulfill God’s mission for the church and for her life. She could take the easy way out, leave her people here at FCC, work in the government, and make money, but instead she chooses to be at the church where God has called her because she has “hope for tomorrow.”

The pastor closed her sermon by asking us all to have hope, like the Children of Israel, reading from Jeremiah 29:1-14. She reminded us that God told the Children of Israel that they would be in exile for 70 years, during which time they should increase their families and prepare for the prosperity that God ordained for them. “70 years!” she said, looking around in amazement, shaking her head. She laughed, exclaiming that she hoped that it wouldn’t be that long until she was able to go home again. Although it took 70 years for God to fulfill God’s promise to the children of Israel, Pastor Meah reiterated to us that they maintained their hope. As she closed her sermon, she reminded us that “we all have hope because God will make a way. God will lead us out of the wilderness.”

After her message, Pastor Meah invited the children forward for their weekly blessing. As we sang a hymn together “I Surrender All,” more than 20 children stood, waiting for her to rub their foreheads with oil and offer a blessing upon them. Their parents gathered them back in their arms after the song was over, and we closed the service with a prayer.

²⁸⁹ As I noted in the previous chapter, this is something that Laura also expressed. Rather than getting a government job, she wanted to serve her people, even though that would not guarantee any money.

Living into Narratives of “Making a Way”

In the sermon above, Pastor Meah compared the members of Friendship Community Church to the children of Israel. Both are communities in exile. Both desire to return home.²⁹⁰ As Pastor Meah elaborated in the sermon, however, God has and continues to “make a way” for those who are lost. Womanist theologians have explored this concept of God “making a way.” Womanist conceptions of “making a way” help me to argue that this particular narrative “fragment” is a particularly compelling way to reframe life out of difficulty. Making a way is a process in which life can be reclaimed, but not always in a liberative way. In other words, “making a way” speaks to the ways women at FCC realize that God does not always deliver us from difficult circumstances, instead providing resources of survival and sustenance for hard times.

In her preface to *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk*, Delores Williams describes the experience of growing up as a young girl in church, where she would hear women testify about “their belief that God was involved in their history, that God helped them make a way out of no way.”²⁹¹ Williams turns to the Biblical story of Hagar to understand God’s salvific work for African-American women through survival, not only liberation. Hagar’s story is recounted in two places in Genesis: Genesis 16:1-16 and Genesis 21:9-21. Williams reads these stories together with “the slave women Hagar as the center of attention” to illustrate the fact that “the slave woman’s story is and unavoidably has been shaped by the problems and desires of her

²⁹⁰ It is important to note that this desire to return home is, it seems, stronger among the older women with whom I talked. For many in the younger generation, the opportunities in the United States are alluring. They want to stay to raise their families, start or finish school, start a business, etc.

²⁹¹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenges of Womanist God-Talk*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), ix.

owners.”²⁹² Williams points out that although there is a great deal of courage in Hagar’s actions, we must not forget that Hagar’s position is extremely precarious. As a young pregnant woman alone, she is “without family support or protection. Courageous though her liberation action may be, Hagar is without the support and physical sustenance a pregnant woman needs.”²⁹³ It is at this point in the story where Williams identifies God’s involvement in Hagar’s life. As Hagar travels alone, she is met by the angel of God, who is present with her “in the midst of her personal suffering and destitution.”²⁹⁴ In this passage, God is not a liberator. Instead, God offers Hagar “survival and quality of life” by telling her to go back to live with Abram and Sarai. God offers a blessing over Ishmael, which promises “survival” and “forecasts the strategy that will be necessary for survival and for obtaining a quality of life.”²⁹⁵ Although leaving the wilderness and returning to Sarai and Abram means that Hagar will once again be controlled by her slave owners, God promises through the blessing that in the future Hagar’s family will be free and protected. To ensure her survival in the present, however, Hagar must return to Sarai and Abram.

The story of Hagar continues in Genesis after Ishmael has become a young man and Sarah has given birth in her old age to Isaac. Sarah worries that Ishmael will receive Abraham’s inheritance instead of her son Isaac because he was the first born son. God enters the story at this point, promising that Isaac will receive the blessings of being Abraham’s son while Ishmael will be the leader of his own “great nation.” Hagar and Ishmael are sent out of Abraham and Sarah’s house with only bread and water; Hagar is, once again, homeless.

²⁹² Ibid, 15.

²⁹³ Ibid, 20.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 22.

At this point in the narrative, again homeless and without resources to support herself, Hagar finds herself “not only without economic resources,” but “they were without protection in a nomadic culture where men ruled the families, tribes and clans.”²⁹⁶ In this dire and precarious situation, Williams points out that once again, God does not provide liberation for Hagar and her son Ishmael, but rather offers a “vision to see survival resources where she had seen none before.” Survival is offered by God; Liberation, by contrast, “finds its source in human initiative.”²⁹⁷ This wilderness desert is, as Williams points out, “hardly a place where a lone woman and child ought to be wandering” without food or shelter. However, God gives Hagar “new vision” so that Hagar and Ishmael are able to gain autonomy over their own situation and live on their own. As Williams notes, Hagar finds a wife for Ishmael, establishes her own house, and possibly, founds her own tribe. This story of motherhood, slavery and autonomy is re-told by Williams from the perspective of Hagar because these “narratives reveal the faith, hope and struggle with which an African slave woman worked through issues of survival, surrogacy, motherhood, rape, homelessness and economic and sexual oppression.”²⁹⁸ As Williams writes:

Hagar has “spoken” to generation after generation of black women because her story has been validated as true by suffering black people. She and Ishmael together, as family, model many black American families in which a lone woman/mother struggles to hold the family together in spite of the poverty to which ruling class economies consigns it. Hagar, like many black women, goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child, with only God at her side.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 30.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 33.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

I bring Williams's understanding of "making a way out of no way" to the forefront here, drawing on the story of Hagar and Ishmael to note the parallels with Pastor Meah's sermon on the Liberian community living in Durham. Like Hagar, most members of the community came to the United States because they were fleeing violence and fearing for their lives. Also like Hagar, they have not been liberated by God. Instead, they face an American life where gang violence, systemic poverty, and immigration barriers can at times seem insurmountable.

This narrative stream of "making a way out of no way" that I heard so often in the church reflects Williams's contention that God's work guides and sustains, even when it doesn't save us. Pastor Meah's work to create a church home in Durham is indicative of this. As she told the women's empowerment group, she remembers being a young girl, meeting missionaries who traveled from the United States to Liberia to plant churches and preach the gospel. She remembered that along with the other children in her village, she would "run to go see the white people because they were different." As a young woman, she felt the calling to serve God, and that knowledge sustains her. "To have a gospel ministry," she recounted, "that is very empowering." She went on to tell us that now is the time for Liberians to minister to Americans because "this place needs the gospel too. America needs God!" She sees herself as a missionary here, like the missionaries she experienced in Liberia as a young girl. Despite the fact that she feels God has ordained this work, finding money to pay for it has been immensely difficult. In the fall of 2011, the church's loan on the land was coming due, and despite massive fundraising efforts (letter-writing, pledge drives in the church, fundraising dinners and events), the pastors were unsure of whether they would pay off their loans. Despite these

hardships and the fact that God does not miraculously step in and solve these budget problems, the work continues, with a faith in God's ability to help them "make a way" where once there was none.

A "making a way out of no way" womanist theology of salvation "is not always liberation or freedom from all pain and suffering...Salvation is also survival and quality of life, and it requires the cooperation of the world in which we live. While God offers salvific resources, humanity must take advantage of these resources to effect salvation."³⁰⁰ Coleman explores womanist and process theologies of salvation in critical correlation to determine a "postmodern womanist theology" that is able to speak to both the "problem of evil" and "declarations about survival, healing and salvation."³⁰¹ Salvation, here "literally means health and wholeness."³⁰² This postmodern womanist theology begins with the concerns of everyday, focusing on the "attainment of health and wholeness...as an activity that happens in particular contexts throughout the entire world."³⁰³ She begins her text with an exploration of womanist conceptions of salvation, naming these as "making a way out of no way." Through examinations of the work of Joanne Terrell, Karen Baker Fletcher, Kelly Jones Douglas and Delores Williams, Coleman is able to discern certain commonalities among these theologians in the ways that they discuss salvation. She writes that perhaps the most important contribution of these theologies is that they bring a "metaphorical language to a constructive womanist theology." This helps us to:

Discuss salvation in concrete images: survival, quality of life and discipleship.
Womanist theologians use the ministry of Jesus to provide action verbs to the

³⁰⁰ Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way*, 32.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, 8.

³⁰² *Ibid*, 11.

³⁰³ *Ibid*, 86.

process of salvation: teaching, healing, praying, welcoming, suffering-with. In this way, they give pictures of what salvation looks like and how it is achieved. They expand understandings of salvation such that we can see salvation in black women, poor people, those marginalized because of their sexual orientations, and even blood and other natural elements.³⁰⁴

By grounding salvation in the lives of black women, these womanist theologians allow us to see and conceptually grasp the ways that salvation is lived and experienced in everyday life. Coleman's postmodern womanist theology likewise seeks to speak to women's experiences, recognizing that "we are all theologians – people who think about God."³⁰⁵ Where Coleman differs from the womanist scholars she begins her text with is primarily in her process theological framework, which helps her to address religious practices outside the Christian tradition and provides a metaphysical framework for understanding change, evil, and the presence of God in the world³⁰⁶. As Coleman outlines it, a postmodern framework is built on five assumptions:

- (1) the ongoing processes of life,
- (2) individual ability to exercise power
- (3) the inevitability of relationship at all levels of reality
- (4) the eternal vision of God, and
- (5) opportunities for immortality in the midst of pervasive loss.³⁰⁷

Building on a Whiteheadian process metaphysic, Coleman demonstrates that God works in the midst of suffering, and we can transcend that evil by heeding the call of God. She writes that, "moving forward into newness – into what God desires for us and calls us to – can rid the world of some evils. It's a bit of a conundrum. The same freedom that destroys can be used to create. The same loss that causes us suffering can also leave evil

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 32.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, 2.

³⁰⁶ Karen Baker-Fletcher also draws upon a process theological framework in her work, but unlike Coleman, she works specifically out of Christian theologies and communities. Coleman is here using process theology to build a framework that will allow her to speak about women's experiences beyond the Christian tradition (African traditional religions, etc.). For a description of Baker-Fletcher's uses and perceived limitations of process theology, see Karen Baker-Fletcher. *Dancing With God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (St. Louis, Chalis Press, 2006).

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 73.

behind and alleviate some of our suffering.”³⁰⁸ Coleman’s understanding of God and the world in process takes the reality of evil in the world seriously.³⁰⁹

As she works within a process framework to mold and create a postmodern womanist theology, she finds that Whitehead’s process thought can address injustice and oppression in the world, but in a different way than has been done by black liberation theologians. For Whitehead, God is not only on the side of the oppressed, as liberation theologians espouse. Rather, for Whitehead, “God is, rather, the God of all. God is the God of all people, and the nonhuman communities of the world as well.”³¹⁰ This does not mean that God does not desire justice and wholeness for all people. Instead, this postmodern womanist God resists oppression by calling “each party to justice in their future actions. God calls the world around these people to enact justice in their lives.”³¹¹ In this way, the presence of God in our lives allows us to feel the suffering of our past, while also being called beyond evil and oppression in the future. This understanding of process allows Coleman to name her postmodern womanist theology as “an activity. It is a verb, a gerund. Health and wholeness come through *teaching*, *healing*, *remembering*, *honoring*, *possessing*, *adopting*, *conforming*, and *creatively transforming*. *Saving*. It is *making a way*.”³¹² Coleman expands upon womanist conceptions of making a way by emphasizing the “doing-ness” of this theological stance. It is not something that is ever finished. Rather, making a way reflects the ways that the world and God live into justice and wholeness in the “gritty, localized and contextual” places we inhabit.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 77.

³⁰⁹ Although she provides an apt critique of Whitehead’s developmental-evolutionist leanings and imperialist language (his reliance on “kingdom of God” language), Coleman finds that speaking of God and the world as in process is the most helpful way to account for the presence of both evil and good in the world. Coleman, *Making a Way*, 45-7.

³¹⁰ Ibid, 82.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid, 169.

Coleman's exploration of "making a way out of no way" as a process is particularly compelling when placed in conversation with the narratives and practices of the women with whom I have worked. As these women talk about their lives, they do not see the past as all that they are. Rather, they see themselves as works "in progress," seeking wholeness and growth. By placing Delores Williams and Monica Coleman's conceptions of "making a way out of no way" in conversation with the experiences and narratives of Liberian women in Durham, I illumine the fact that these women see themselves as survivors *and* visionaries. While the past does have a hold on who they are (as was explored in the last chapter and in more detail below), their ability to vision a new future arises out of their belief that God will "make a way," something that we discussed in the women's empowerment group on strengths and visioning. Pastor Meah talked once again about her "hopes for the enlargement of [our] ministry" and her desire to "have a large building that can serve as a community center" and church home. Laura acknowledged that she "[hopes] to get funds to work in other areas" and with other communities facing trauma and poverty. Joanna told us that like some of the other older women in the church, she hopes to return to Liberia. "When I go home," she told us, she hopes "to be able to work with children, to have a place where they can come in and learn to read the Bible." These visions for the future rest in a faith that goodness and beauty are possible out of trauma and hardship. Like Coleman and Williams's work, these visions also point to the importance of human agency in the work of healing in the world. The women of FCC do not, as the building fund example demonstrates, live in a world where God swoops in to liberate us. Instead, these women work in partnership with God

to create a new world where peace and healing can emerge. Additionally, this work, as Coleman illustrates, is a process. The project of healing is never finished.

The concept of “making a way out of no way” is an important lens for understanding the aims of worship at Friendship Community Church. The pastor and other members of the ministerial staff aim to provide a narrative that speaks to the suffering experienced by the community while also helping them to live into a new narrative of continued hope. It is important to note that being able to envision a new future is always tempered with the knowledge that there is no easy path; salvation is not about immediate change. As I explore in the next section, this co-mingling of the joy and pain of new futures is illumined as well in the ways women talk about motherhood.

Community Practices: Taking Care of the Next Generation

Parenting is an important practice of faith in the church, something that is talked about often and emphasized each week as children are blessed at the close of the service. Being a mother is in particular both a way to bring new life and hope into the world, while it also is an opportunity to experience some of life’s harshest pains. A baby dedication and an informal conversation that I had with a woman from Friendship Community Church are indicative of the ways that women in the church discuss parenting and motherhood. I argue that these parenting practices are important places to look for the ways religion matters in women’s lives. They exist beyond formal institutions (parenting is not an official ministry of the church, rather it is something that is always present at the center or periphery of conversation) and instead point to a more everyday understanding of the role of faith in women’s healing processes.

Parenting Practices: A Thick Description

The ability to “make a way out of no way” is reflected in the continued references to the importance of motherhood and children at Friendship Community Church, as was illustrated during a baby dedication that I attended one spring Sunday. Two children were being dedicated, both beautiful baby girls. One is the daughter of two prominent young members of the congregation (the husband, Othello, is the president of the local Liberian young people’s association). The other baby girl is the daughter of a young couple who were recently engaged. The sermon reflected the theme of the service, and was titled “Good Training Shall Guarantee Children not to Rebel.”³¹³ Although this was the title of the sermon, Pastor Meah focused in her remarks on women’s empowerment, in large part because both of the children being dedicated were girls.

The sermon began with a story about the “old days” in Liberia, when, as Pastor Meah told the congregation, many people regarded male children more favorably than female children. Mothers hoped for sons, and young men were given opportunities to go to school and work that young women did not often have. She forcefully reiterated to all of us that now, “things are changing. African culture is changing. Women are doing things that men can’t do.” She drew our attention to Liberia’s president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a woman, noting that, “It’s a different world.” Recalling her own path to ministry, the pastor talked with us about how the missionary Baptist denomination that she belonged to as a young girl (brought by Southern Baptist missionaries from the United States) refused to acknowledge women as leaders. As a child, she knew that God had ordained her for more; she was meant to be a minister, teacher and preacher. So as a young woman, she joined a Liberian Baptist denomination that allowed and encouraged women in the ordination process. “That’s why I love God. God loves us all the same,”

³¹³ Spelling in the original program.

the pastor reminded us. God sees beyond gender to call people based on their gifts and talents. Because of this radical love, “Christians need to love one another.” As God loves us, we should love each other.

The pastor’s talk about women’s roles led into a discussion of motherhood and the assumptions people make about women’s biological functions. She told us a story about a young woman from her village who was assumed to be barren. This woman’s husband left her to find a new wife because of her supposed inability to produce children. The community assumed, like the woman’s husband, that she was to blame for the couple’s infertility. At this point in the story, the pastor let out a huge guffaw, moving in front of the pulpit to come closer to the congregation. Shaking her head and laughing at the man’s misfortune, the pastor let us know that when this man remarried, his new wife was also unable to have children. However, the woman from the beginning of the story, who was assumed to be “barren” and infertile, went on to birth several children with a new husband. “They used to blame it on the women,” she told us, reminding the congregation of the burden placed on women to bear children. However, sometimes, she laughingly said, the man is to blame.³¹⁴

Her message signaled what she mentioned at the opening of her sermon, that a new day had arrived. Women are no longer held to blame for whatever goes wrong in the family, and they are now being encouraged to be ministers, educators, leaders, and even presidents. In the context of a sermon for a baby dedication, the pastor’s message was meant to open the congregation’s eyes to the ways girls and young women are a valued part of society, and as such, their parents should bring them up in a way that honors the

³¹⁴ The concept of barrenness and infertility came up numerous times at the church, in sermons, testimonies, prayers, and informal conversations. On Mother’s Day, for example, Pastor Jackson Jones preached about how all women are mothers, even those who are unable to have children.

gifts they bring to our world. As such, their parents should be involved in the lives of their children, which means being in contact with their teachers, knowing what they are studying in school, and ensuring that someone is home with them after school is done. The United States is not like Liberia, she reminded us, where there are aunts and relatives around to care for children while parents are at work. Here in the United States, parents must make sure that their children are supervised. If you leave them and “do not raise them,” the pastor chided, you are heading for a disaster. This includes not only helping them with school work, but being sure that they are brought up in the ways of the church – that they come to Sunday school and worship. “If you do not show them the right way,” she admonished, “they will rebel.”

What went unsaid in the pastor’s sermon was the arrest that happened just months before of a young man, a member of the church, who was involved in selling drugs in Durham. The new life members of the church found in the United States is not always a welcome one, as I have noted before. As both Pastor Meah and Reverend Farley have told me, much of their work at the church consists of helping young people to reject the life of crime and violence that Durham offers in favor of a new life where they can, as he told me, take advantage of the “second chance” they have been given at life. In addition to the young man mentioned above, the pastor’s own son died in a gun shooting in Durham, and another young male member of the church was shot this year. As Reverend Farley related, the gang lifestyle is easy lifestyle to step into “when you are coming from violence.” The leaders in the church are concerned about this issue as it affects their community in Durham and in Liberia. When these young men and women “get into trouble” here in the United States, they are often deported back home (because they are

here with temporary status or with no documentation). The gang life of Durham then is transported back to Liberia, contributing to instability there. This surrounding context marks events like a baby dedication, where opportunities to talk about raising children “so they will not rebel” take on a new meaning.³¹⁵

The message of the sermon, reminding the congregation to raise young women with an eye toward their full development and offering some pointed advice on caring for children given the new (harsh) surroundings in Durham was followed by the actual dedication. The couples came forward with their baby girls, flocked with the children’s god parents. One baby, Adeline, had one male and one female godparent, while the other girl, Hannah, had seventeen godparents, meaning that much of the church congregation made their way to the front of the pulpit, crowding around the two little girls. The small space in front of the pulpit was densely populated with parents, godparents and relatives, many with cameras pointed over their heads in an effort to photograph the action at the front of the mass of people. Pastor Meah offered a blessing over each child, and asked the godparents to commit to helping the parents to bring the children up in the community and to do their part in helping to raise them. As the service closed, we all went forward to congratulate the parents, cooing over the adorable baby girls who were dressed to the nines in frilly dresses and bows. We broke to join together in a lunch after church, with talk of the joys of children permeating most conversations.

³¹⁵ Jonny Steinberg cites Rufus Arkoi, a community leader in Staten Island’s Liberian community on this issue, “The African-American kids in this neighborhood were in for a shock...They see these African refugees arrive, washed up from a civil war, and the American kids think exploitation...But the Liberian kids, they are *soldiers*. They have been shooting automatic weapons. They are fresh from the battlefield. They are too hardened for the local kids. They start getting a *reputation*. Many, many get incarcerated. Many others are deported. And so the cops on the street, they learn who is Liberian and who isn’t, and they start picking on the Liberians...and I think, no man, this is going to end badly.” Steinberg, *Little Liberia*, 28.

This brief vignette illustrates some of the key messages regarding children and mothering that I heard at Friendship Community Church. On the one hand, children play a key role in helping women to restore life; children are another type of “second chance,” an opportunity to make this world a better place by creating a new generation. I heard time and again, from women like Evelyn, Joyce and Ruth that the work they do to become better women (by getting an education, in the case of Joyce and Evelyn or helping the community, like Ruth) is premised on their role as mothers. They work so that their children can enjoy a life that is better than the one they lived. In this way, children are the “blessing” that I heard them described as in countless sermons and talks from the pulpit at church. Children can provide a sense that life is worth living; indeed it is a “blessing” from God.

Additionally, the concept of being a mother is incredibly wide, in large part due to the effects of the war on this community. As Reverend Farley told me when I first came to Friendship Community Church, many families in the church were created during the immigration process, when one family member would make it to the United States, then bring relatives (sometimes very distant or of no biological relation at all) to live with them. Or, for one woman, the death of her sister during the war meant that her sister’s children became her own. Very few members of the community know that her son and one of her daughters are not in fact her biological children. Families are created and blended, forming bonds that enrich both the parents and children, creating something beautiful out of the horror of war, but also drawing on older patterns of fictive kinship in Liberia.³¹⁶

³¹⁶ As Mary Moran has noted, the idea of fictive genealogies is not foreign to Liberians. She writes of how native Liberians used their Western education to rewrite their genealogical history, refuting their native origins. Moran,

Despite the ways that motherhood is able to provide a sense that life continues and love goes on, the women I worked with are painfully aware of the fact that motherhood itself contains elements of the tragic. To be a mother (or, for some, the inability to become a mother) is a process that is always fraught with both pain and promise, as I heard in a conversation with Marlene at Pastor Meah's graduation.³¹⁷ I was invited to Pastor Meah's graduation from a local seminary, along with the other members of Friendship Community Church. The Pastor was celebrating the completion of her Bachelors in Divinity, and she had been mentioning for several Sundays that she hoped the church members would be able to make the service. On the Saturday of the graduation, a hot day in early June, I walked alone into the sanctuary of a local church in Durham. I sat on the left side of the sanctuary, thinking that I would catch up with the members of FCC after the service was over. It was then that I saw a couple of hands waving at me, motioning for me to come and join the group situated in the center of the sanctuary, in the middle pews. As I apologized to my seat mates and made my way across the room, I wondered how I could miss the two rows of bright African dresses and head wraps. The two and a half rows that made up the FCC congregation was a colorful picture in the midst of a sea of more drab colors.

A little more than a dozen members of FCC showed up for the Pastor's graduation, and some of the women who were there pulled me into the middle of the aisle to sit with them. I sat down with Marlene, a woman I knew from church. I said hello to

Liberia, 81. Additionally, in her dissertation, Maura Busch Nsonwu writes of how the Liberian women she interviewed did not distinguish between the children they birthed and the children they cared for. See Maura Busch Nsonwu, "God-Talk and Kin-Talk in the Survival Epistemology of Liberian Refugee Women," PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2008, 114.

³¹⁷ In addition to the mothering pains that I describe here, I would also point out that the inability to bear children marks their participation in society, straining marriages and community ties. The loss of a child, whether through miscarriage or death (recall the young men who have died in the last year due to gun violence) reveals starkly the intense pains of being a mother.

everyone, including Pastor Jones, Pastor Meah's sister and her nephew, and a few other people from the pastor's family. After a few minutes of small chitchat, Marlene turned to me and asked where Laura was. When I told Marlene that Laura was in Liberia, she replied that she always asks people who are going to Liberia to look for her daughter Joanna when they go. Marlene then began to tell me about her estranged relationship with Joanna, caused by their separation in the 1990's, during the early stages of the Civil War.

When the war started, Marlene remembers Joanna going to school like any normal day. However, that afternoon, rebels entered her town, destroying properties, homes and lives in their wake. Marlene's family told her that the rebels had already taken over the school, so she needed to leave immediately to ensure her safety. Afraid for her daughter, but also afraid for her own life, Marlene left with her family. She and Joanna were separated for over ten years, each never knowing if the other one was alive. Marlene went across the border with her family to Ivory Coast, where she eventually landed in a refugee camp. Mother and daughter might have been reunited in 2005, when Marlene's family went back to Liberia to find Joanna. Marlene was leaving to come to America and wanted to see if her daughter was alive, and if so, if she would come with her. She had won the elusive "American lottery,"³¹⁸ and could bring family along with her. Marlene's uncles were able to find Joanna, who now had four children and was living "in the bush" with a "bad man." Joanna, who has children with this boyfriend, did not want to leave him to come to America with her mother. In anguish, Marlene left for the US with her three other children.

³¹⁸ As I heard from Joe, Evelyn's husband, and Reverend Farley, being accepted for admittance to the United States under the protective status afforded to Liberians during and after the Civil War was like winning the lottery, a rare and amazing feat.

After she told me this story, Marlene explained in her stilted English that she always, always asks for people who are going to Liberia to look for Joanna, to see how she is doing. Joanna sells produce at a market in Monrovia, and then returns “to the bush with that bad man.” She held my hand for a second, remembering, I would guess, the daughter she has not seen for over 20 years. I promised to let Marlene know if I went to Liberia again, so that I could look for Joanna and make sure she is doing alright.³¹⁹

It was at this point the graduation ceremony started, and Marlene and I turned our attention to the front. A few hours into the service, the graduation speaker asked us if there were people in our past who we left behind, only to find ourselves uncomfortably reminded of their existence by social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Hearing knowing laughs from the congregation, the speaker went on to read Mark 16:24, when Jesus tells his disciples to “take up their cross” and follow him. Unlike Facebook, to follow Jesus means to leave what has been in the past – to move forward to new beginnings, new possibilities, and new prosperity. I sat next to Marlene wondering how this speech resonated with her. For Marlene, and other mothers I talked with, the pain they endured during the Civil War was compounded by the experiences of their children. To forget the past, this past where one’s children were harmed, killed, or taken in by “bad men,” is impossible. As Felicia told me, “When my children came [to live with me in the United States], they tell me how they treated people, killing all these pregnant women, then taking their babies from their stomach. Then, let me see, they would go to the stream where they went to take a bath, [and] they got to put the body aside before they

³¹⁹ Agnes M. Fallah Kamara-Umunna tells a similar story in her memoir, of a woman whose daughter married the man who killed her family members. Kamara-Umunna interviewed her on her radio program, *Straight from the Heart*, where she recounted, “What am I to do? Tell my only child her husband whom she loves killed her father and three sisters? Tell her the truth even if it destroys her marriage? I can’t...She was too young to know, too young to realize. But also, not telling her will cause me to carry the guilt all my life. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how things like this happen in the world.” Kamara-Umunna, *And Still Peace Did Not Come*, 102.

can even drink the water.” Knowing what their children endured, and in Marlene’s case, continuing to feel the effects of what happens in the dissolution of relationships, is a stark reminder that in the process of “making a way,” hardship and suffering cannot always be avoided.

Religious Practice Beyond the Formal Institution

These two stories about motherhood – the joys of a baby dedication and the pain of losing a child to war – reflect the ways that hope and hardship exist side by side in a practice that attempts to knit a life and a community back together. Pastor Meah and the leaders of Friendship Community Church often focus on children as the center of the family. Children are a “blessing,” and bring joy into the home. And yet, as their sermons name (if implicitly) and as women recount, the joy that comes with bringing new life into the world is always fraught with pain and loss. Children provide a reason to go on and to persevere despite the fact that it seems that everything in life is going the wrong direction. As Evelyn recounted to me several times, the difficulties of life are worth it, if they might offer some hope that her children can live in a different world. The practices of faith that mark the paradoxical pain and delight of mothering include the joys experienced at a baby dedication, the worried concerns women share about the children they have lost, and the hopeful – yet tempered – admonitions to raise empowered children. These gestures, actions and practices speak to the ways that children are one way that women “make a way” in an effort to transform life out of hardship.

These practices of creating and sustaining families – of caring for children in the community and in the family – are, for the women I worked with, part of a spiritual, faith-filled life. However, much of the history of the Christian tradition has presented a

marked preference for celibacy as a higher form of religious life, something that has unfortunately crept into Christian ideas about an “authentic life of faith.” To illustrate this, Miller-McLemore recounts her experiences of a systematic theology conference, where one participant remarked that she was forced to give up her “discipline of prayer” when she became a mother.³²⁰ Miller-McLemore, like the women I worked with, claims caring for children as a vital, nourishing religious practice. She refutes assumptions that busy parents are “Christians on idle,” taking some years off from their faith journey while others “seek God on their behalf.”³²¹ Miller-McLemore and feminist theologian Janet Soskice look to parenting itself as a practice of faith, one in which women can connect to God through the daily practices of life, like breastfeeding.³²² The women I worked with are doing the same reclaiming work for the Christian tradition that these theologians are demonstrating. Their everyday religious practices of parenting – painfully aware of both the joys and hardships it implies – help us to see the ways that religion matters through the course of life.

In the first chapter, I noted the ways that in women’s human rights discourse, religion is often talked about in terms of its institutional or organizational functions. What these parenting practices point to is that religion matters for women in more everyday, ordinary ways. As Courtney Bender writes:

Sociologists have abandoned the idea that people subjectively carry religion or other culture internally in ways that do not change much from setting to setting. They have also laid aside the simplistic notion that action in a single institution is shaped purely by the contingencies and rules of that setting. These unsettled currents in cultural sociology surrounding the relation between individuals’ discursive styles and practices, and the contexts where they live and work, talk

³²⁰ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice* (Jossey-Bass, 2006), 3

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 4

³²² See Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

and play point toward the need to better understand the creative forces set in motion through unrelenting encounters with multiple others, multiple ways of responding, and a lack of stock certainty about how to respond.³²³

Rather than assuming that individuals are formed and created by their religious traditions, taking these dogmatic truths with them into each situation, these women's everyday parenting practices are a reminder that religion matters throughout the course of life – in the ways women parent, in the ways they tell their stories, in the ordinary course of their days. We must be willing to examine the ways that religion matters in women's lives, as they describe and practice it. For the women of Friendship Community Church, mothering practices are a central way that women experience healing, in their desire to create and nurture a new generation. As they are also aware, mothering carries with it great pains as well. Again, this is the place where practical theologians can contribute to these larger human rights conversations, by providing a language to describe the ways women's religious practices emerge in the various contexts and communities in which they participate. A complicated view of religious practices as they exist beyond formal institutions or doctrines is necessary for work on women, violence and peace. As the women I worked with demonstrate, looking to mothering and parenting as religious practices that reveal the ways women heal would be one apt place to start.

Prayer Warriors: Bodily Transformations Through Prayer

Prayer is absolutely crucial in the life of the women with whom I have worked. As Chapter Three described, prayer is the central way both Marie and Pastor Meah

³²³ Courtney Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003), 140.

discern what they are to be doing with their programs and projects.³²⁴ It is also a pivotal part of the women's ministry of the church. In what follows, I provide a description of one meeting of the Women's Prayer service. Although this is only one meeting of the group, it is indicative of the weekly meetings that happened over the course of my nine months with this community. I follow by developing a theological language to speak to the "chaotic" theology that I witnessed at these events.

Women's Prayer Services: A Thick Description

Each Monday night, a group of five to fifteen women gather in the sanctuary of the church for the Women's Prayer Meeting. Starting at 7:30pm, the women come together to bring their praises and concerns to a God they believe listens to and answers these prayers. When I attended my first prayer meeting, in very early spring of 2011, I walked in with some hesitancy. At this point in my work, I had been going to worship each Sunday as well as Bible study most Wednesday nights. I had also been working for a month and a half with the leaders of the church and Laura's foundation on some upcoming youth empowerment and trauma healing events. Pastor Meah invited me to the women's prayer services to "get to know the women," and to recruit women who might participate in the interviews I planned to conduct. When I got there, Pastor Jones asked me to come and sit with her, Pastor Meah and Missionary Dean in the cushioned seats to the side of the pulpit, those usually reserved for ministers (even for events outside of worship, like Bible study and prayer meetings). As she does every time we talk, her first question to me is, "How is your husband?" I tell her what is going on with Will, whether he's busy at work, what his family is up to, what we plan to do for the weekend. We talk

³²⁴ As Marie told me, "And you know we just pray, and to say what programs should I do? What is good? And sometimes the doors will close. Since I've started this a lot of doors have closed, but I still put my faith in God because I didn't have anything. Nothing."

about her family too, who is out of town, whether she has had a busy week. I sat with Pastor Jones for this first service, feeling a bit conspicuous in the front of the church at the minister's side.

The service began with some welcome and announcements from leaders of the Women's Ministry and Pastor Meah, letting everyone know when the next baby shower was, what they can bring for the next church event, and reminding everyone of upcoming events at the church. Then Joyce stepped forward to lead us in praise music. Her beautiful, full alto voice carried through the sanctuary space. When Joyce sings (as she often does during the praise and worship time on Sundays), she brings her whole self into the performance. The words of the songs often move her to tears, her eyes closed and her arms stretched up to heaven. After several verses of a song, she leads us all in the singing of several hymns, a capella. At the women's prayer meetings, we sing hymns that everyone seems to know by heart, songs like "What a Mighty God We Serve," "Count Your Blessings," and "Amazing Grace."³²⁵ As the final notes of the hymn die down, Joyce, one of the prayer warriors lead us in about thirty minutes of communal prayer.

The Prayer Warriors are a group of five women who commit to pray together each night at 11:00pm, joined by Pastors Jones and Meah and Reverend Farley. Each night, they share the concerns of the church and pray for healing, sustenance, deliverance and blessings. As Joyce told me later, this ministry makes all the difference in the life of the church. They have "seen women get pregnant" when they have been deemed infertile

³²⁵ "Count Your Blessings" was sung at many events. The words to the song reflect what was discussed in the last chapter, with Joyce's remarks about God's blessings being "more than the hair on your head." The chorus of the song is:

*Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

and their prayers have brought jobs and prosperity to people who desperately needed it. It is a “big commitment” to promise to meet every night, Sunday through Thursday, but the difference it makes in the church makes it worth her while. One of these prayer warriors leads the weekly prayer meeting.

As the designated prayer warrior for this meeting, Joyce stood up and began the prayer, starting with prayers for self and for family. She started by telling us about Penny’s uncle, who was struggling with an illness, leading us to begin the Pentecostal Prayer process. The “Pentecostal Prayer,” as it is named at the church, is one in which everyone present joins in, speaking their own prayer, guided by a leader who offers topics to address and themes on which to focus. I grew up going regularly to my grandmother’s Pentecostal Free Will Baptist Church in rural North Carolina, so I am very familiar with this type of prayer, although it is not always comfortable for me to pray out loud. It is ironic that fieldwork helped me to appreciate this style of prayer that I was perplexed by as a child in my grandmother’s church, wondering why the women were crying and the men were shouting and pointing their fingers toward the sky. At Friendship Community Church, the women’s Pentecostal prayers helped me to see the profoundly participatory stance of this type of worship. As Joyce began to pray, we all joined in, praying together for our families and for healing in our own lives. The voices spilled over one another, some loud and boisterous (like Pastor Meah’s), and others quiet and reserved, like Pastor Jones knelt in front of a chair, bowing her head into its seat. Observing prayer as an ethnographer is difficult, particularly as a theologian and ethnographer – I found myself immersed in these prayers, not only because of my work, but also for the sense of personal healing that I began to find here. My eyes closed, and my thoughts and prayers

drifted to my own issues – the places I needed support, the family members who were hurting – and I prayed with the group for many of the same things for which they hoped: healing, forgiveness, support, grace. At regular intervals, my focus shifted like the other women present, listening to the prayer warrior who guides our focus. We asked for forgiveness for the things we had done wrong, then asked for God’s healing in relationships that needed mending. We prayed for our community and the world, and I heard prayers for Liberia (for peace, prosperity, and hope) resound. Joyce concluded the prayer, which at this point had been going on for more than twenty minutes, with prayers for our visions and hopes for the future. Petitions for God’s blessings – for ourselves, our families, our communities – reverberated through the sanctuary as we closed the communal prayer. As we said our final Amens, I looked around the room. Bodies had shifted in the course of this time together, some stood from kneeling, some moved back to the front of the room from the back where they had been walking, others stood up, stretching their arms and legs a bit. It was only later that night that I realized how sparse my notes would be from this event; I didn’t really know what anyone else talked about, hearing only snippets of the prayers that were loud enough to carry over to me. What I was left with, instead, was a sense of the participatory nature of this practice. We did not come to the prayer meeting to listen and absorb a teaching (as the Pastor hoped we would during Bible study and her sermons). Instead, we came to participate, to share our own stories, to petition for our own healing and to ask for hope to imagine a new future.

Prayer for This Life, for This World

As Joyce led us, the prayers were remarkably directed toward this world, to our families, communities, hopes and dreams. We were asking God to move in our lives.

Although this practice is rooted deeply in evangelical traditions like, perhaps, prosperity gospel, they also speak to the ways prayer is understood in African Religion. Although life extends after death through the participation of ancestors in the life of the community, “traditional African religions do not appear to be concerned about the kind of life that will be led by the immortal soul.”³²⁶ Instead, African religion is concerned with the promotion of life in *this* world. This is reflected, among other ways, in the practical role of prayer in African religion. “There is much evidence to indicate that should a deity fail to deliver on a request sought in prayer, that deity will be censured, treated with contempt, and ultimately abandoned by the people. This means that, as far as the followers of the religions are concerned, the deities exist, and are to be called upon, to supervise and enhance the well-being of human beings.”³²⁷ Theologian Laurenti Magesa echoes the significance of practical concerns in African religion, noting that a common element of African prayer is petition, or asking for help with “practical needs” like healing, shelter, sustenance, and fertility.³²⁸

People perform prayer and rituals so that health and well-being are experienced in the created order as it exists in the present place and time; “religious faith is, thus, perceived as utilitarian and practical, rather than as a means for spiritual upliftment or the union of the human soul with God.”³²⁹ This practicality extends itself into the relationship of the divine and the human through rulers here on earth. As Gabriel Setiloane argues in his article “Civil Authority – From the Perspective of African Theology,” “African people acknowledge a Civil Authority only in as far and as long as it

³²⁶ Kwame Gyekye. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra, Ghana: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 14.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

³²⁸ Magesa, *African Religions*, 197.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

is prepared to be the channel of the blessings of the Divinity into the community.”³³⁰

African religion focuses on the practical concerns of the people as they are expressed in their daily lives; relationships to the divinities and to their representatives on earth are predicated on the belief that intervention on the part of the divinity can bring about well-being in the created order. In the prayer meetings, we petitioned a God who is active in this world, not a God whose promises are limited to the afterlife. God’s movement in this world, in our lives, reflects an African Religious cosmology in which God and the divinities have concrete effects on life here and now.³³¹

Weaving the Chaos: Catherine Keller and Mercy Amba Oduyoye

In addition to being rooted in this world, these Pentecostal prayer practices also reflect the ways women are constantly reinventing and recreating the religious traditions of which they are a part. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye writes in *Daughters of Anowa*, women constantly take in elements from culture and the outside world, discard what is unhelpful or unjust, take in what is good and just, and recreate the world again.

Comparing this to beadwork, she writes that “All is flexible, all is renewable.”³³²

Transformation can, and does, occur out of pain because “where pain is felt, life is still present.”³³³ Both beadwork and weaving recall the fact that women are continuously

working with and through traditions to create something of beauty and meaning. By taking what is meaningful, discarding that which is not, and weaving together disparate elements of experience and the various traditions and communities in which they live,

³³⁰ Gabriel Setiloane. “Civil Authority – From the Perspective of African Theology,” *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honor of John S. Mbiti*. Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang, eds. (New York : Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 154.

³³¹ Recall here what Joyce said about the prayer warrior’s ability to petition God for women’s fertility and for job success. God works in and through lives in this world.

³³² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 209.

³³³ *Ibid*, 211.

African women can and do cultivate understandings of healing and justice that are grounded in right relationship. She concludes this text with a reflection on the ways that this continued re-working and re-weaving of meaning that African women do resonates with the African symbol of the whorl. The whorl describes the spiraling motion of change, the movement of past into present, and the continual flow into the future that Oduyoye wants to position at the center of an African women's theology. This is a theology that both learns from the past and tradition, while also taking it and creating something new. Her analysis of culture and tradition, in this way, is an effort at beginning this whorl-ing theology. It begins with African women's analysis of their own material realities, traditions and spiritual practices, taking what is most meaningful and life-giving from these, and moving toward something new and liberating, a new vision of interconnected humanity and justice.³³⁴

Connected to this idea of theology out of the whorl, in *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, Catherine Keller examines the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Keller argues that this doctrine has upheld the domination of the other in its emphasis of order and domination over chaos. As she writes, "What if we begin instead to read the Word from the vantage point of its own fecund multiplicity, its flux into flesh, its overflow?"³³⁵ Keller recovers an alternative tradition of a chaotic theology in both the first creation narrative and in the book of Job, both of which speak to creation out of chaos. For Keller, the Christian tradition's failure to adequately integrate the "chaosmic" other into its understanding of the creation of the world has meant that a singular narrative of Christian domination and suppression of difference has been allowed to

³³⁴ Ibid, 217.

³³⁵ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 19.

reign. Again using a process framework, Keller argues that there can be no creation out of nothing, but that the process of becoming always emerges out of the primal matrix of all that came before (in Genesis, this described as the deep, the chaos). When we widen our vision of creation to include this chaos (rather than damning it or moving straight to attempts to “order” or “tame” it), difference can emerge and be reclaimed rather than be stifled and denigrated. As she writes, when our theological lens is opened to see the width of the chaotic creation, “the others in their singularity and their multiplicities will recurrently confront me with the face of the deep: the grin or grimace of chaos. Yet they demand my sensitivity and my justice.”³³⁶ The chaotic theology that Keller develops is in perpetual becoming; it deconstructs “the paradigm and presumption of linear time: the bottom line of origin, the straight line of salvation history, the violent end of the line of time itself.” Rather, Keller looks to the beginning as “beginning-in-process, an unoriginated and endless process of becoming: *genesis*.”³³⁷ Like the whorl Oduyoye describes, for Keller, this theology is emergent; there is no beginning or end to mark.

The prayer practices at FCC are, in many ways, emblematic of this type of chaotic, whirling theology. Voices blend on top of one another, creating layer upon layer of petition and hope. They are, like the narratives described in the previous chapter, creating a communal story that is aware of the difficulties of life – the illnesses that aren’t being cured, the wounds that refuse to heal, the children who turn to a life of violence – and yet, they also move toward and envision something new, something beautiful. We closed each prayer with our “visions and hopes” for the future, in a move that speaks to Oduyoye’s theological method of the whorl. The prayers move up and through these

³³⁶ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 7.

³³⁷ *Ibid*, xvii.

moments of hardship; tears are shed, wounds are opened. And yet as the prayers continue to build, layer upon layer, something else emerges, some new story in which God works in and through this world to provide hope, survival and reimagined possibilities. This is not an easy redemption story; it is, woven through with the tragic.³³⁸ It reflects, I would argue, the ways that women are continuously remaking their lives with the scraps and fragments that they gather from their religious communities. Out of these fragments, they craft a collage that reveals the “messiness” of our religious lives.

Robert Orsi writes about this in his text *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, where he notes that fieldwork allows religious studies scholars to see the work of religious history as it happens in real time. His observations of the shrine to Saint Jude at the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Chicago:

suggest there are aspects of people’s lives and experiences within religious worlds that must be included in our vision and attended to beyond what is officially sanctioned. This is a call, then, for attention to religious messiness, to multiplicities, to seeing religious spaces as always, inevitably, and profoundly intersected by things brought in to them from outside, things that bear their own histories, complexities, meanings different from those offered within the religious space.³³⁹

Religious spaces and practices, Orsi argues, are created from the inside-out and the outside-in. By bringing their lives, their cares, their worries into the worship space, the women of Friendship Community Church fundamentally change the space and its theologies. These religious practices can shape and transform the ways we understand

³³⁸ As Marcia Mount Shoop writes, “Tragedy is an important aspect of human experience that allows us to attend to loss and harm in a way that is not focused on blame or even on justice. Feeling helps to tune us into the body’s capacity for telling a story, for witnessing to harm, and for holding grief.” Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance*, 9.

³³⁹ Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 167.

and practice healing, by providing a vision of healing as an emergent process, one that is layered with women's lives, stories, traditions and practices.

Practices that Shift Theology

The practices of the church allow women to imagine their lives in new ways. They allow us to see the ways that religion emerges not only through the stories women tell, but also through the practices they engage as they rebuild their lives after violence. Practices of parenting, worship and prayer reveal the ways that women “make a way out of no way,” generating a chaotic, whirling everyday theology that speaks to the ways healing emerges as a process in and through daily life. In this section, I draw on the work of feminist and practical theologians to continue to develop a language that speaks to the ways that women transform life, and the ways that their words and practices can, if we let them, transform our theologies as well.

For theologian Serene Jones, theological doctrines serve as the performative scripts within which Christians live their lives. Resisting feminist rejections of the term doctrine altogether, Jones attempts to “breathe new life into it by redefining its conceptual contours and its social function.”³⁴⁰ For Jones, doctrines are the “topics” around which Christian theology is situated, and include things like redemption, ecclesiology, incarnation, etc. Doctrines are the normative constructs around which Christians live their lives. As she writes, “they regulate beliefs by setting out the broadest parameters of what Christians do and do not believe.”³⁴¹ She likens doctrine to a theatrical drama, providing the “basic outline of the theological drama within which the

³⁴⁰ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 16.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Christian life unfolds.”³⁴² Doctrines are more than “propositional statements and static rules.” Instead, they “serve as imaginative lenses through which to view the world. Through them, one learns how to relate to other persons, how to act in community, how to make sense of truth and falsehood, and how to understand and move through the varied terrain of life’s everyday challenges.”³⁴³ This idea of doctrine as dramatic script resonates particularly well with what Pastor Meah told me about her goals for her community. As she told me during one of our two more formal interviews, “God has a way for us, and his way is the right way. Where God wants you to be, you will go there. He will make a way.” For her, educating her people through sermons and Bible studies is one of the central ways that she helps members of the congregation to live into the idea that God has a plan and purpose for their lives. It is through education, she believes, that people “get healed. Without knowledge, people perish.” From the perspective of Pastor Meah, worship provides a way to instruct believers in the ways of faith and to help them to see that no matter what they have been through, “God will make a way.” This resonates with Jones’s understanding of theology as roadmap or landscape. As she writes, “this image of landscape suggests that doctrines construct an imagistic and conceptual terrain within which people of faith locate and interpret their lives and the world around them.”³⁴⁴ The continued reference to God’s plan and God’s ability to “make a way out of no way,” represents a sort of landscape out of which members of Friendship Community Church can begin to imagine a life in which God helps them to survive and persevere despite what they have been through.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 17.

Although the Pastor and other members of the ministerial board try, through worship and Bible study, to provide an imaginative landscape into which the congregation can live, this process is far from seamless for many members. As I heard continuously from Pastor Meah and Pastor Jones, working with their congregation, many of whom were so wounded during the war, is incredibly difficult. Evelyn told me that the Pastor hopes to remind people of all of the things God has done for them, including helping them to survive the war. As she told me, the Pastor reminds people that they “made a promise to God to keep them alive.” In some ways, this statement is a harsh reminder of what might have happened, and could be construed as aimed at promoting guilt-induced participation in the life of the community. And Evelyn admits, many people “forget” this promise when they come to the United States. They have a new life here, brimming full with the already difficult tasks of immigrant life in a new country (finding a job, sending children to school, navigating new customs, negotiating for affordable and safe housing). They forget the promise they made to follow God, which as Evelyn describes it, means that they don’t come to church as often. Additionally, this promise is difficult to keep, she tells me, because for many people, remembering all they have been through is “too hard.” Where Jones writes about the performative scripts available for Christians in and through theological doctrines, as Evelyn rightly points out, these scripts lose their luster when one is faced with the significant traumas of life as an immigrant coming from a post-war country.

In her book *Spirit and Trauma*, Shelly Rambo addresses the ways that the psychological rubber meets the theological road as she discusses Jones’s cartography metaphor in relation to trauma theory. As she writes, “by probing the relationship

between cross and resurrection in connection to the experience of death and life in trauma, I am attempting to find, in Jones's words, a place to inhabit for those persons and communities who have experienced trauma."³⁴⁵ However, Rambo notices that trauma affects everyone, not only those who are intimately affected by experiences of violence or harm. Generating a "healing discourse, a discourse that seeks to transform lived realities" in light of experiences of trauma then necessitates a radical reworking of the cartological metaphor. Because our lives are "inextricably bound together," the reality of trauma "becomes not simply a detour on the map of faith but, rather, a significant reworking of the entire map."³⁴⁶ The experiences of trauma necessitate that we look first to the ways that trauma is navigated rather than searching theological doctrine in an effort to make space for experiences of trauma survivors. As Rambo writes, it is an attempt to "honor the ways in which people move on and envision life where no signs of life can be found. These experiences point to a different way of envisioning life in the Spirit."³⁴⁷ For my work, this serves as a reminder that despite the imaginative scripts theology or doctrine might offer, they are constantly interrupted by the exigencies of life, particularly if that life is affected by trauma.

This, I argue, is the practical theological task – to turn to life and experience and ask the question of how our theology shifts as a result of what we witness. It is not only the words we speak about our faith that are transformative, but our practices (of both worship and daily life) are themselves transformative of our faith. As Monica Coleman writes, "experiences of the world" should be the "final test" of a theory according to

³⁴⁵ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 9.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead.³⁴⁸ Indeed a theory itself should be open to change pending description and lived experience. As Coleman writes, “experience has the last word. We are encouraged to revise the theoretical system as necessary to reflect our knowledge of the world.”³⁴⁹ The above reflections, when brought together, reveal that the religious lives of the people we work with are, unlike clear roadmaps or landscapes, instead pieced together from the fragments and scraps we receive from worship, ritual, stories, traditions, and our everyday life. They offer significant resources for re-thinking healing as a process that occurs in and through women’s everyday lives. They also demonstrate the ways that religion matters – both through the transformations of self and in the cultivation of new theologies – for women who have survived violence.

Conclusions

For the women I have worked with, the practices of faith they engage have helped to weave a narrative of life and hope out of harm and difficulty. Sermons about children and “making a way out of no way” provide performative scripts into which women can begin to imagine and create life anew. Prayers that layer multiple voices of concern and praise help to create a communal imagination out of which hope for the future can emerge. These embodied practices and gestures help us to see that it is not only the words that we speak, but the ways our bodies move that form and transform us as human beings. These practices are as much a part of our story as the words that we speak to one another about who we are. In this chapter, I have looked at three specific practices – sermons, prayers, and practices of mothering – to argue that narrative and self-creation happen in and through our embodied gestures and practices. This builds on the insights

³⁴⁸ Coleman, *Making a Way*, 79.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

of Chapter Three, in which I argued that women's ability to see the presence of God in the stories they tell after violence helps to make life bearable and worth living. In the next chapter, I build on both of these chapters to examine the ways that faith communities and community organizations can work together to support women as they continue to seek out healing in their lives, families and in their worlds.

CHAPTER FIVE: HEALING AS A COLLAGE: A RETURN TO PRACTICE

While at the 2011 United Nations Commission on the Status of Women meeting, I met with a Liberian woman doing work on reconciliation and peace. Her first question to me about my research was, “What are you doing to help my community?” Although at the time I was already working with Laura and Pastor Meah on the women’s groups (as well as on youth empowerment projects, something that is hinted at but not elaborated in this dissertation), this question is one that every researcher should have to address: What are you doing here? While for some, this answer might come through their academic work,³⁵⁰ as a practical theologian I felt a pull toward a concrete response to the community, and I must admit that this type of response was requested of me. When I first met with Pastor Meah and Laura together to talk about my dissertation project, their assumption was that I would not only learn about their community, but that I would help them to deal with these same issues of trauma and healing that we identified. I say this here to pull back the curtain a bit on my own research practices, to illumine the more intuitive ways that practical theological work happens in the field, and to point to crucial issues for those of us who bridge ethnography and practical theology.³⁵¹ In what follows, I describe the work of the women’s empowerment group I developed in partnership with Laura and members of Faith Community Church. By partnering with community leaders, drawing on the strengths of their wisdom and traditions, and embracing practice-based

³⁵⁰See, for example, Lila Abu Lughod, *Writing Women’s Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (University of California Press, 1993).

³⁵¹ See for example, Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (New York: Continuum Press, 2011); Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*; and Practical Matters: A Transdisciplinary Multimedia Journal of Religious Practices and Practical Theology, Issue 3 (2009) http://www.practicalmattersjournal.org/issue_toc/3 [Accessed 25 September 2011]; Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008).

methods of healing, I contend that this group provides an apt lens to discern how work with faith communities around issues of women, violence and peace might begin.

The work of this group reveals a theological vision of peace that emerges out of what women say and how they practice. This peace is relational. It emerges out of the intrapersonal and interpersonal healing practices people engage after experiencing violence. Faith and trust in God plays a large role in both of these healing processes – individual and communal – and assists in building a vision of the world in which evil does not have the last word. I begin by describing the women’s empowerment group, offering a thick description of the six sessions. I then turn to an exploration of peace, looking first at how women name it. I then build on their reflections, drawing on the process-oriented language I have described earlier in this dissertation to argue for a theological understanding of peace as a relational process that emerges in and through women’s everyday lives.

Women’s Empowerment Group: An Overview

Group Structure and Rationale

Together with Friendship Community Church, Laura’s foundation, and a trauma counselor who works with refugee communities, I helped to create a six-week women’s empowerment group, which drew on alternative practices of storytelling and narrative. The group met every Wednesday from August 10th – September 14th, 2011. Laura, Pastor Meah, Reverend Farley and I thought that drawing on a strength-based name, rather than calling the group a “counseling” or “trauma” group would bring more women to the table – and it did. Working with the trauma counselor, Angie, we designed a program that incorporated art as a healing practice, and explored the following six

themes: 1) Inspiration/Who am I; 2) Where I come from; 3) Remembering those I've lost; 4) Empowerment; 5) Gifts and visions for the future; 6) Peace. Through storytelling, art-making, prayer, and reflection, this group of men³⁵² and women (which varied anywhere from 5 to 15) came together to provide comfort, care and support to one another. We held the group in the sanctuary of the church, gathering before Bible Study each week. The conversation was often very informal, and focused where participants led – which was often to talk of the Civil War. These practices of story-sharing led to the creation of a shared group narrative of strength and empowerment, despite experiences of violence and loss, which reflects the ways that women talked with me about their healing process. Although we talked about the war from time to time, much of our time together was spent talking about the strengths and abilities that help each of us to get through the hard times and look forward to the future. We also joked about our lives, relationships and families. As one woman told me, “just being together” was healing for her. Additionally, the artistic practices the group engaged reflected a non-verbal method of healing from trauma that allows for growth through embodied practices (when speaking of violence is “too much.”).

Often practical theological methods dictate that we turn to practice at the conclusion of our work, after working with a community, turning to theoretical and theological resources to mine the depths of this community's wisdom in order to move

³⁵² It is important to note that although this program was advertised as “Women's Empowerment,” men showed up regularly. While this changed the group dynamic, I'm sure, it reflected I believe a real need for trauma healing in this community – the men also wanted to tell their stories, remember those they lost, and draw on their strengths to envision a positive future. While not the focus of this dissertation, I will explore this further in future work. This reflects what many womanist theologians argue, that liberation cannot happen without the participation of the entire community, men and women alike. See, for example, Delores Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” in Emilie Townes (ed.) *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993).

back toward a practice-based response to the issue at hand.³⁵³ While this method of theological work often breeds illuminating theological insights and generates new practice-based responses to critical issues for communities of faith, my dissertation research emerged in a much messier, more intuitive way. As Chapter two illustrated, I went into the field with certain methodological approaches, based on methods in both feminist pastoral care and feminist ethnography. I drew on these two fields of research to help me to work with a community that is affected by violence they experienced both during a brutal Civil War and during a “war here” in urban Durham. While these approaches to research guided how I went about doing my interviews and participant observation research, they also led me to think about a response to what I was hearing and learning from the community. This approach, then, led to my involvement in the women’s empowerment group I describe here.

Attendees

Over the course of the six week group, we had anywhere from eight to seventeen participants. The participants represented men and women who attended Friendship Community Church, as well as individuals who heard about the group from Laura and her foundation’s work. Several of the women introduced in earlier chapters participated in the groups, namely Joyce, Ruth, Laura, Evelyn and Pastor Meah. In addition, the core group of women who participated included Joanna (in her mid-50’s, a member of FCC), Tylah (Pastor Jones’s daughter, in her early 30’s), Reverend Farley (late 40’s; he is a member of the ministry staff at the church and a long time community leader), Pastor

³⁵³ As Emmanuel Lartey writes, pastoral theology as liberating praxis, “privileges situated, contextual experience and the analysis of that experience in its multi-layered and multi-factored reality. The cycle begins with concrete, mediated and constructed experience.” The cycle then moves to contextual and theological analysis, finally moving to “demonstrate the dialectical nature of faith and theology. Here situational questions are examined at the bar of contemporary theology...this phase is decidedly public...The last phase is reflective practice.” Lartey, *Pastoral Theology*, 90.

Jones (in her mid-60's; Pastor Jones is the Assistant Pastor at FCC), and Adelaide (in her 60's, one of the elders and missionaries of the church). Several of the young men attended the groups, including Laura's son, Jacob (early 20's), Evelyn's husband Joe (early 30's; the youth leader and praise leader at FCC), and Matthew, a friend of Jacob's (early 20's). The presence of men in the group (in most of the sessions there were anywhere from 2-4 men) no doubt affected the group dynamics. This reflects these young' men's expressed need for trauma healing work; in fact, their reflections in our groups (not recorded here in this dissertation) were incredibly profound and moving. I'm sure that their presence, however, affected women's ability to talk about any experience of gender-based violence during the war, something that Laura would like to explore in the future through additional trauma healing work.

Telling the Stories, Creating a Vision

This chapter illustrates the practice-based response that I developed, along with key leaders in the Liberian community in Durham, as an attempt at answering some of the questions I asked at the opening of Chapter two. What is to be our response when working with communities affected by such horrific violence? As I elaborate below, my method developed in the field, almost intuitively, as a result of the particular approach that I took to understanding healing. The approach builds on the concept of health and healing developed by pastoral theologian and physician Michael Wilson: it is that we approach research subjects not as objects to be studied, but as *persons*.³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ Wilson draws on the work of Paul Tournier, a Christian physician who wrote at the intersections of religion and health. Tournier writes that the practice of medicine is the art of understanding the person. He elaborates, "It is not patience at all, but interest. Everything is of absorbing interest to the person who is always looking for the meaning of things. There is so much to learn from the least important case if one is animated by this spirit of curiosity. There are no ordinary cases. All the greatest problems of human destiny are fundamentally present in the life of every person and in every situation we meet." See Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 40.

British pastoral theologian Michael Wilson examined the relationship between religion and health through his unique perspective as a physician. In his books *Health is for People* and *The Hospital: a Place of Truth* Wilson contends that health is a practice. It is a process. He argues that we cannot create a unified vision of health, but rather should look to actual practices to see how health is engendered through our relationships and through “healthy responses” to life.³⁵⁵ Wilson’s vision of health is not something that can be abstractly defined, or sought out in turns to scripture or tradition. Rather, he turned to sociological studies and his own practices as a physician in Britain and in developing countries to argue for a communal, structural approach to health care that is rooted in solidarity and justice. For Wilson, the distribution of basic needs does not satisfy the requirements of health. Instead, health is also about being in relationship with others who value us as people. He writes that, “health is not for the rich to give to the poor. Health is a quality of life they make together.”³⁵⁶

Given this orientation to persons, I adopted a participatory stance as a researcher, where the community plays a central role in framing the research project. This type of person-centered, participatory approach, can necessitate innovative, creative research methodologies that draw on indigenous traditions like storytelling, performance, celebrating, and remembering.³⁵⁷ Projects like this value different forms of knowledge, offer something back to the community, and recognize that research changes both the researcher and the community. In what follows, I provide a brief overview of the six meeting of the women’s empowerment group as I recorded it in my fieldnotes.

Session One: Who Am I? What is Empowerment?

³⁵⁵ Wilson, Michael. *Health is for People*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975),

³⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 63.

³⁵⁷ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 42-53.

It was the first meeting of the Women's Empowerment Group at Friendship Community Church. Angie and I arrived early to set up the room, placing the art supplies and snacks on the two large tables that Reverend Farley and James helped us to set up. Pastor Meah and Laura were both already there and Assistant Pastor Felicia Jones arrived just after us. Although we advertised that we would start at 4:00pm, most of the participants made their way into the church around 4:30, something that we laughed about while waiting for everyone to arrive. "Liberian time," as everyone told me, was often later than U.S. time, so Laura and Reverend Farley had wisely advertised that the groups would start 30 minutes before we actually needed to begin. We were on a bit of a strict schedule, as Bible study was due to start just after our group at 6:30. There was a lot of laughter as the group settled down; all in all, seventeen men and women sat around the table. Laura welcomed everyone to the first meeting, followed by Reverend Farley who gave a prayer. I then introduced Angie who asked everyone to go around the room and introduce themselves.

Our first task as a group was to discuss what the groups were meant to be about – empowerment. We asked the group to tell us what they thought empowerment meant. Matthew, a young man about 25 years old, said that empowerment was about "not feeling inferior," even if you don't have an education. Empowerment is knowing that you are "just as good as someone else." This jumpstarted the rest of the group, and voices tumbled over one another, with ideas like: having what you need to succeed in life, education, healthcare, housing, and employment. Empowerment, Laura chimed in, is also "in your mind." Doing her part to connect the group to the issues of trauma that she and the leaders at Friendship wanted to discuss, Laura reflected that when you have

things in your “past that you are not able to get over, like the Liberian Civil War, that is a barrier” to feeling empowered. She went on to say that empowerment cannot live when you “keep returning to” these past events, preventing you from moving forward in life. Angie used this as a jumping point to explain that over the next six weeks our group would talk about the internal parts of empowerment, which include recognizing our strengths and moving forward despite what you have been through.

Angie then asked the group to talk a bit about the ground rules we would enforce during our time together. As she looked around and asked everyone to offer some basic rules for conversation, the once boisterous atmosphere became silent and stilted. People looked around, not answering her, fidgeting in their chairs. I started to worry, looking to Laura to check in about what we should do to move the conversation forward. After a somewhat forced conversation, some ground rules were established, including: keeping what we discuss confidential, promising to respect each other when talking, being quiet when others were talking, and showing positive support.

After this awkward moment, I helped Angie to get the art supplies out, while she explained that for the next few weeks, we would be making “empowerment books.” These books, made out of felt, scraps of fabric, art supplies, paint and other art materials, would contain pages with different themes like inspiration, strength, the past, visions for the future, and peace. In this first meeting, we asked the group to create a collage or piece of art that reflected what inspires them. Angie began by asking about shapes that inspire people. The conversation livened (I looked to Laura, saying “thank goodness for that,” with my eyes) as people began chiming in: the colors grey, and green, shapes like stars and diamonds. We moved on to animals that inspire, and heard lions, eagles, bears.

Then we put the materials out and let everyone create, asking them to think about what inspires them. During this art time, everyone was having fun, especially the younger people who were talking to each other, looking at everyone's books, and laughing about little mistakes we made with the supplies or in our representation ("that doesn't look like a palm tree!"). I noticed that despite this boisterous atmosphere, sitting by Pastor Jones were three older women, Ruth, Adelaide, and Rachel, who were quietly sewing pieces of fabric onto their felt. They had their needles and seemed content sitting together and making their projects. I worried for a bit that they were not enjoying themselves like the younger folks, who continued to laugh with one another.

After about 30 minutes of crafting time, we went around the room to share what we had made. Not everyone ended up sharing, although most did, something that reflected both people's hesitancy to talk and also our lack of time (Bible study was almost upon us!). Justice went first. Although not a member of Friendship, Justice is good friends with Laura, and about her age (in her mid-40's). She held up her piece of felt, which had four dots on it – for north, south, east and west, she told us. In the middle of the dots was a heart. This represents, she said, that "no matter where you are, love is at the center." Pastor Meah held up her piece of red felt, which she had cut and sewn together into a child's dress. This is because children are the most important part of life, she said, reminding us that the Bible says to "go forth and multiply." She laughed as she said this, pointing her finger at the younger people in attendance. Pastor Jones had drawn a chicken on her page, because chickens are one of the major foods for Liberians. This chicken represents what we need in order to survive. She drew the chicken eating, "so that it would grow big and feed people." Baby chicks were scattered around the page,

representing the food that would feed the next generation of people. Samuel made an abstract piece replete with symbols. The square was God, because God is the basis of all things. At the center of the square was a circle, which represented Jesus. The star and the moon on the edge of the page are reminders of the light that we receive when we have God and Jesus as our foundation. “Jesus allows us to shine and be all we can be,” he told the group. Jacob made a palm tree out of felt. He made a palm tree because this is the most “important and vital plant to Liberians.” So many things come from the palm tree – light, liquor, oil. It is a “source of life” for Liberians. Echoing the Liberia theme, Valerie created the Liberian flag, cutting each of her stars out of felt. Matthew made a church because he said the church was the “center of life;” if you “believe in God and are faithful then you will be granted abundance.” The group laughed as he held his up, because the cross at the top of the church kept falling off. As we were about to close, one of the three women who had been quietly sewing at the end of the table, Rachel, raised her hand to talk. Her page was empty, except for a fish she had cut out of felt and glued onto it. The fish, she said, was an inspiration because “it was a luxury during the war.” During those times, everyone was “eating whatever they could find.” Fish, although one of the main staples of the Liberian diet, was in short supply during the war, making it a luxury item. This fish, Rachel said, reminded her of those times, when she “didn’t have anything,” and yet was able to get by.

Laura and her son Jacob closed our time together as a group, thanking everyone for coming and encouraging them to come again next week. Reverend Farley reminded us that just being together, “sharing, talking is healing” and important for the community. As we all hugged one another and cleaned up the art supplies, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Laura and I looked over at each other, smiling tentatively about how things went. I walked out to the parking lot to briefly talk with her (since I was returning inside for Bible study), and we agreed that the first meeting had gone well. “We’ll see,” she said, how things go next week. We hugged one another and I headed back inside, preparing for an hour of Bible study with members of Friendship Community Church.

Session Two: Where I’m From

The second meeting of the women’s empowerment group followed the first by a week. Angie and I walked in together, always arriving at 4:00pm, knowing that we wouldn’t get started until 4:30 or even after. Reverend Farley was there with Tylah. Slowly but surely, more people began to arrive, giving us a final total of ten people (three men and seven women, ranging in ages from 18 – mid 60’s). Angie welcomed everyone back to the group, checking in about how everyone’s week had been. As we talked for a bit about our lingering thoughts from last week, she passed around a piece of paper that held a template for writing a poem titled “I am from.”³⁵⁸ Angie asked everyone to fill in the poem, in which they would create a poem out of their statement that “I am from...” an area, a game/sport/dance, music/song/band, village/town/country, etc. We expected this exercise to last about 15 minutes, after which we would read the poems aloud and talk about them a bit. Instead, the group huddled over their papers, intently working for about ten minutes of the time. Then people started to call out to one another, laughing as they did the week before about each other’s answers and handwriting. They spent almost thirty minutes writing their poems, during which Laura’s son played some gospel music on his phone in the background. We went around the room, reading our poems and talking about where we grew up. This activity provided the group an opportunity to hear

³⁵⁸ See Appendix C for a blank copy of the poem.

about where others were from (“I didn’t know you were from Maryland!”) and to reminisce about childhood memories in Liberia. As we read our poems, the group smiled when certain smells (food cooking, the smell of roses), sights (animals like goats, cows and chickens, the river bank) and tastes (palm butter) were remembered.

Laura told us how as a young girl in Caldwell, she would climb in a canoe and paddle it across the river. When reading about the sounds she is “from,” Justice talked about drumming. “The rhythm of drumming,” she reflected, “soothes the soul.” She also told us about her parents, whom she called “unlicensed social workers.” Her parents both were educated, and so they would take in children from “rural areas” to help them to go to school. They brought these children “civilization,” although she was quick to let us know that her parents were not “high class.”³⁵⁹ Tylah told us how she remembers the smell of roses growing up in Maryland County, and how she misses that smell now. Reverend Farley spoke next, and he talked about how families were so much larger back home in Sinoe County. Ruth chimed in, telling us that her Grandfather had 32 wives, so she remembers growing up in large extended families. That is the “traditional way in Liberia,” she said. Although it is a “Christian nation,” many people are still polygamous. She then told us about a river in the town where she grew up. “The grass was so beautiful” on the side of the river.

When the poems were read, we used these poems to create collages that depicted the theme of “I am from.” Unlike last week, the group was quiet, with requests for art

³⁵⁹ The concept of “civilization” is highly problematic. Indeed in Liberia, “civilization” for many years denoted allegiance to the “settler” or Americo-Liberian lifestyle, which was highly informed by a desire to live like Westerners, particularly US Americans. This developed into a dual-system society of “civilized” and “native” Liberians (indigenous to Liberia) that played a large role in the origins of the Liberian Civil War (through the military dictatorship of Samuel Doe and then overthrow by Prince Johnson and Charles Taylor). For more on the concept of civilization in Liberia, see Mary Moran, *Civilized Women: Gender and Prestige in Southeastern Liberia* (1990) and Helene Cooper’s memoir *The House at Sugar Beach* (2008).

supplies filling up the majority of the conversation. When it was time to share, the pictures reflected the poems, with Tylah's depicting the palm trees and bright sun she remembers in Maryland County. Laura's son Jacob made a plate of food (palm butter) and a cup of water, to represent the tastes and smells he remembered from growing up. Laura had cut out a canoe like the one she used to sail across as a child, and she pasted a bright moon above it against the deep blue background. We continued around the room, sharing the images of palm trees, soccer fields, flags, dresses, and food. As we closed, we reflected on how these memories bring us strength during hard times. They remind us of home, something that is on the minds of many of the women with whom I worked. Like Pastor Meah, they hope to return home and remember a time before the war when life was good, food was plentiful, the flowers bloomed, and families gathered together.

Session Three: Remembering Those We've Lost

The third meeting of the women's empowerment group was on remembering. Angie, Laura and I knew that it would be a difficult session, less boisterous and joyful than the last two meetings had been. Angie came up with the idea to create memory boxes for someone that we lost. We purchased small cardboard boxes that everyone could decorate with pictures, words, or other art supplies that represented the person. We would then write a prayer that could be placed in the box, along with any other tokens or mementos. The group started off with the conversation that I pointed to in Chapter Two, Ruth's memories of the moments during the war when "you think you might die." It closed on a positive note, with her affirmation that, "We will rise again," but it was a difficult conversation to have, particularly given the positive and affirming discussions our group had shared the previous two weeks.

When Angie asked the group how they felt about sharing their stories of the war, several of the women stated that conversations like this help them to feel “less alone.” Indeed as they shared stories about the various parts of the war (“Where were you during Octopus? That was the worst of the war!” “Were you in Liberia during World War II?” “I came to the United States in 1996.”) a common story of survival and resilience began to develop. They joked about the palm nuts that street sellers hawked when food became too scarce. As they laughed about these nuts, which would crack your teeth if you weren’t careful, Ruth shook her head, recalling to the group how difficult it was to survive during those times. And when Ruth told the story about being held by the rebel soldier who thought she was a member of government, Laura jumped in with her own story of capture and eventual release. They nodded to each other as they remembered what it was like to “think you are going to die.” These moments created collective memories of the hardships of war that built a narrative of survival among the group.

To return to the illustration from Chapter two, our conversation that day started with a horrific story, shared by Ruth but echoed by Laura who chimed in with her own experiences of being stopped by soldiers during the war. These stories of fearing for one’s life were followed in the group by a realization that they made it out alive and their sense that God helped them to survive. A sense of clarity emerged as the women reminded each other that this same God is present in their lives today. By noting, “We will rise again,” the group was able to see hope out of this painful memory. It is important to note that I am not saying that through this process the trauma itself was erased. Rather, the group was able to weave a new narrative strand of empowerment and hope onto the “thickened” narrative/story about the war. This was exemplified when

Evelyn told our group about her sense of empowerment that she got from watching her mother raise four children on her own after running for her life from her abusive husband. Despite being raised during the war, by a mother who survived domestic violence, Evelyn looked for the strength-filled parts of her story, building on the sense of empowerment that her mother's story offered.

We then created memory boxes for those we had lost, decorating them with pictures, words and scraps of fabric and flower that helped to commemorate those who were gone. Pastor Meah decorated her box with flowers, creating a "traditional tomb" for her father who was from Grand Gedeh county in Liberia. As we crafted a blessing and said them aloud in presenting the boxes, she prayed, "Daddy I love and miss you. May your soul rest in perfect peace." Ruth created a box for her husband who died several years ago here in the United States. She softly wept as she talked about her "best friend" who she misses dearly. They used to joke about who would cook the meals at dinner time, saying every day "who will cook today?" "When I sit down," she told us, "I shed a tear, but I know you are resting in Jesus." Laura created a box which she covered with the names of those she had lost, as others drew and pasted, she kept writing, names littering the cover and sides of the cardboard. Her brother who died in the war is not buried in an identified grave; she doesn't know where his body is. "I have nowhere to see him," she said, as she echoed Ruth's statement that these are difficult things to talk about. Evelyn was the last to present, and she created a box for her sister, wishing for her "showers of blessings." Remembering her makes her "feel sorry. It makes me sad," she recollected when these difficult "memories come back." However, making this piece of art "felt good, it makes me feel like I can collect things to keep her close to me." Several

of the group members, like Joyce, chose not to present, something that she discussed with us in the last meeting. We closed the group with a prayer offered by Reverend Farley.

Session Four: Empowerment

The fourth session began much like the others, with Angie and I setting up while Reverend Farley and Laura got everyone settled into the room (sometimes driving to pick up the older women so that they could attend). We began the group by asking everyone to talk about a time when they felt empowered. Evelyn's husband Joe started us off, telling us that he read U.S. history while a young man in Liberia and in Ghana, but he "never thought a black man would be President. That encouraged me." Obama's election in the United States helped Joe to see that "there is no limit to what you can do." For Laura, "each day empowers me, from where I've been to where I am." Pastor Meah chimed in next, telling us how as a young woman, she remembers the missionaries from America who "brought Christianity" to her town in Grand Gedeh county in Liberia. She recounted how the children would "run to go see the white people because they were different." Now, to have her own "gospel ministry," that is "very empowering." She sees herself as a missionary in the United States, telling us that, "America needs God!" The United States "can't get enough gospel. There is violence here." Ruth agreed, nodding her head, "Yes, too much." As I noted in Chapter three, Reverend Farley told us that he felt most empowered when he was fighting for indigenous rights as a young man in Sinoe County, Liberia. "So many were disenfranchised," he told us, that he "considered Doe [from an indigenous family] coming to power a miracle of God. When people are determined to change for good, it will come to pass." As I noted earlier, several of the older women present (Ruth, Joanna, Pastor Jones) shook their heads during

this talk, to which Reverend Farley laughed good naturedly. We moved on from talk of politics and moved to working on our collages. There wasn't much time to share the collages this week because our group got off to a later start than usual. Angie, Laura and I talked afterwards, agreeing to leave more time for conversation in the next group as well, noting that people seemed to find the discussion helpful and empowering.

Session Five: Strengths and Visions for the Future

As our group settled in for the fifth meeting, I was able to see a certain rhythm that developed among us. We spent time from 4:00 – 4:30 p.m. making small talk, discussing our days, talking about family members, comparing recipes. This day was no different, but this time, Assistant Pastor Jones told us about how she recently dreamed about her oldest sister, who had passed away. Her sister did not want her to touch her, something that made Pastor Jones very sad and “depressed.” Pastor Jones thought that her participation in the group, and the memories it was resurfacing caused her to have the dream. She had been thinking about her sister and the dream all week, wondering if there was something she should learn from it. However, as she told us, “sometimes you have to put it out of your mind,” or you can become consumed by these memories.

Angie started the group by asking everyone to talk about their strengths. We went around the room, sharing what we think makes us unique. As someone began to hesitate when describing their strengths, someone else would step in. Laura went first, wondering out loud what her strengths were. Pastor Jones jumped in, telling us all about how when Laura first moved to Durham, she “had a hair shop.” When she was done styling someone's hair, Pastor Jones remarked that often people would say to her, “I don't have much, can I pay next time?” Laura would say, “Okay,” and let people pay whenever they

could (sometimes not at all). Her generosity extends into the work she continues to do in the Liberian community, Pastor Jones pointed out to us. Joanna chimed in, telling us about how as a child, “what I saw was that the Lord was calling me to do his work. [I] went to bed and dreamed about preaching. I had a large group following me! I told them to look for the Lord in the sky, but they couldn’t see.” Although she is not a preacher now, Joanna told us that she loves “working with kids.” She participates in the life of the church as often as she can, although she seldom gets weekends off. Reverend Farley picked up on this preaching theme, remarking about how many gifted women preachers there are in this community. He first looked to Pastor Jones, affirming that she is “motherly,” and one who “cares for others, always wanting to be sure you have all you need.” He turned to Pastor Meah, affirming her as his “role model,” the one who brings peace to the Liberian community in Durham. Her strength is bringing unity to the church, and helping them to “get into a group that moves together and maintains their balance.” The group continued in this way, with each woman or man affirming the gifts of another. We spent most of our time together that day talking about each other’s strengths.

Our artistic activity for the day consisted of coloring in a mandala, with each layer of the picture representing a strength or vision for the future. Pastor Meah talked about her desire to strengthen the ministry of Friendship Community Church, to “have a large building that can serve as a community center.” Laura echoed this, saying that her vision was to “get funds to work in other areas” like healthcare and youth empowerment. Joanna told our group that she hoped to be able to return to Liberia one day, working with children there. She hoped to “have a place [where they can] come in and learn to read the

Bible.” We closed the group with a prayer, reminding everyone that next week would be our last meeting.

Session Six: Peace

The last meeting of the women’s empowerment group was about peace. We talked together about what peace means and how it emerges in our lives. Laura started the conversation by reflecting that to have peace you “have something settled in yourself.” “Even if you have been through negative things in the past,” she went on to say, peace is being able to accept what you have been through. She recounted that she used to always think about herself as a “survivor,” but this meant that she was “always in survival mode.” Now, she calls herself a “contender.” A contender is able to “move forward” and make positive steps in their lives, whereas a survivor is not able to “get over” what they have been through. Reverend Farley went next, saying that peace is the “management of conflict” and the ability to “transcend surrounding circumstances.” Pastor Meah followed this, saying that there should be “peace in the community, peace in the family, peace in the home.” “No matter what you have been through,” you can have peace. “It is something that is in you.” She reminisced about her family growing up, telling us that she was one of 25 siblings from three of her father’s wives. It was hard to have peace in this family because there was “trouble when a man likes one woman” more than the other. Peace, she told us, must start within and live in the family in addition to the community and the world. “God has been good to me,” she said. She looked around at the group, saying that many present had, during the Civil War, been “running away to save our lives. It is only by His grace that we are here today.”

For Joyce, her understanding of peace is directly related to her own survival of violence during the Liberian Civil War. As she told our group, she particularly remembers one day during the war when she heard yelling and shouting on the Caldwell Bridge, close to her home. This happened in the final days of the war, and Joyce went out to investigate what happened. While there, she knows she witnessed horrible things – women being killed, bullets flying. And yet, as she told us, “I can’t remember how I got home.” Looking back on that moment now, Joyce knows that it was God who helped her to survive that horrific event: “I remember these things, how I have been delivered, and it brings peace.” For that reason, she is thankful for everything that God has done in her life. “You go through so many hard times,” she reminded us. We should always “take a minute and see what God has delivered you from. Some of us have been through all 14 years [of the war]. God kept us alive. I was thinking about that a few days ago.” She looked around the room and reminded us that by “thinking about what God has done for you, you will have peace.”

Despite going through such a harrowing event, Joyce forcefully reminded our group that we should “take a minute and see what God has delivered you from.” When she remembers all she has been through, what she survived, it “brings peace.” “Who am I,” Laura asked, to survive all they have been through. She recalled yet again her own captivity, reflecting that “God has everybody here for a reason,” you are here on this earth because God “gives you a gift.” Pastor Meah built on this, saying that everyone has a gift. “Who am I?” she asked the group. “You are somebody! You are fearfully and wonderfully made.” When you doubt this, “think on yesterday and what He has done for you.” You can’t “count all of your blessings – they are like the hairs on your head.” Our

group of eight paused to reflect on these powerful words before Angie brought us together again to create a piece of artwork that would reflect what we had discussed. The peace flag that we created was a collage, filled with images of the Liberian flag, drawings of Liberian women praying for peace, pictures of churches, there to “represent God, who represents peace.” Joyce drew Jonah and the whale, reflecting that she was “not leaving here closing my mouth.” The final person to present was Pastor Meah who had kept her drawing covered by a piece of paper once she finalized it, in order to reveal it with great dramatic flair at the close of our meeting. She had written a single Bible verse, “Jesus wept.” She said that Jesus wept because of “trouble in the world. He didn’t make the world to be confused.” Instead, “Jesus gives us peace, but we ourselves, because of envy, brought confusion. Jesus is grieving because this is not what he intended the world to be.” As Reverend Farley closed us with a prayer, we all placed our hands on the flag, praying for peace in our lives, in our families, in our communities and in our world.

Healing as Collage: Weaving Counterstories of Hope

At the final meeting of the group, Joyce’s painful recounting of her time on the Caldwell Bridge was layered with the conversation that followed between Pastor Meah and Laura. “Who am I?” Laura asked us, “to be alive today? Those people died! Who am I?” Pastor Meah shook her head, looking around the group. “Who am I?” she asked. “You are somebody! You are fearfully and wonderfully made.” These moments of narrative reweaving – hearing a story of trauma, then layering it with stories of blessing and promise, cultivated healing among women in the group, bringing forward that which is difficult to bear, while also finding what is worth salvaging in those memories. What is there to be thankful for? For life, for God’s presence, for hope in the future. The

experiences of this group help us to see that narrative is a reworking of memories, woven together in ways that vary depending on who is listening and when the narrative is being relayed. Susan Brison writes,

In contrast to the involuntary experiencing of traumatic memories, narrating memories to others (who are strong enough and empathic enough to be able to listen) enables survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma. Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to make a self.³⁶⁰

Retelling, re-weaving stories of trauma allows the survivor to reclaim her life over and against the continued insertion of traumatic memory in her life. Like pasting together a collage, these practices of re-storying the self are poignantly described by Laura and Pastor Meah's dialogue. "Who am I? I am somebody!" By affirming Joyce and other's survival, the women's comments help to create a new narrative of strength and resilience. It demonstrates the work of healing that emerges like a collage. Working with others, we are continuously building (creating, molding) ourselves – learning from experiences, incorporating our stories into our lives, and, most importantly, visioning beyond what we have been toward who we might become. This creative work generates the "somebodies" that we all are. This narrative collage work happens in and through the recollection of traumatic memories, even in cases when they are not actually able to be verbally recalled.

The work of the women's empowerment group mirrored the actual collages that we created as a group. As the women came together to tell stories and create art, new stories emerged out of the continued overlapping of narratives and practices shared by the group. This process of re-creating a life after trauma does not follow a linear frame, instead resembling the creation of a collage. Women gather in memories, gestures and

³⁶⁰ Brison, *Aftermath*, 71.

practices to create a life that is bearable in the aftermath of violence. Recovery and healing happen through the communal generation of an increasingly woven narrative – In this case, the re-telling of violence in a way that forefronts the connections we all share and recognition that as Marie states, “you are not alone.”

The women’s empowerment group highlights importance of storytelling – through both verbal and non-verbal methods - for healing work for trauma survivors. As feminist theologian Serene Jones writes, “it is crucial that the events of traumatic violence are testified to and then witnessed and believed by others...This healing involves, at least partially, the creation of a jointly authored story exposing the event of violence, which had been previously silenced, and then integrating this event into a broader life story...In an event of speaking, hearing and believing, a new future unfolds.”³⁶¹ By sharing stories of the Liberian civil war together, each story spilling over into one another’s experience, a common group narrative emerged. This new narrative built on the women’s experiences of survival and resilience, focusing on the role of God in bringing them through difficult times. As I have heard numerous times in interviews with women at the church, despite everything you have been through, “God will make a way,” something that this shared group story reflected.

Traumatic memories are often not registered in the brain in a narrative way, but rather “might initially be accessed only through bodily sensations and preverbal, body-based memories; unconsciously driven behaviors that might appear self-destructive; and physical illness.”³⁶² Over time, and with the support of an empathic other, the survivor is eventually able to verbalize these unspoken memories and fears. This can lead to the

³⁶¹ Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 79.

³⁶² Pamela Cooper-White, “Opening the Eyes: Understanding the Impact of Trauma on Development” *In Her Own Time: Women and Developmental Issues in Pastoral Care*, Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, Ed (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2000),95.

experience of trauma being “incorporated as something that happened but that no longer has such a controlling influence over the person’s experience of herself and over her actions and choices.”³⁶³ For some, this process this can happen through practices of story-telling and narrative. For example, in her ethnography of child sexual abuse survivors in Newfoundland, Glynis George found that for women who survived childhood abuse in a culture where women are encouraged to forget and “let it pass” allowed for the remaking and transformation of their lives. As she writes of her work with one woman, “months have passed since my last talk with Rhonda who is now settled in town and in much better spirits. Such news is a pleasant reminder that her personal transformation, suspended in text, is nonetheless an ongoing process.”³⁶⁴ This reflects the findings of the Women’s NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL), from their community dialogue process:

Women benefit a great deal from the collective sharing of their experiences which is different to the one-on-one counseling and statement taking some have experienced. It helps immensely for them to learn what others have experienced and suffered. The women said that they found this healing and cathartic and it created a sense of community amongst them to support each other, and showed them ways to continue that support.³⁶⁵

As the community dialogue process demonstrated, this often happens not in any grand public way, but as women go about their everyday lives. Through the process of “working through” trauma, control *of* the situation or *by* the trauma itself becomes less prevalent in the survivor’s experience. It is not an *event* of recovery, but rather a *process* of integration and survival.

³⁶³ Ibid, 96.

³⁶⁴ Glynis George, “Contested Meanings and Controversial Memories: Narratives of Sexual Abuse in Western Newfoundland.” *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, Eds. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 58.

³⁶⁵ “Women and the Conflict,” 27-8.

While some survivors of violence, like Joyce, experienced this sort of narrative re-weaving in the groups, for others it was too difficult to talk about the traumas they experienced. As one woman recounted, “it’s just too much.” It is here, particularly, that ethnographic methods of research are able to illumine the healing practices that women engage in non-verbal ways. In the trauma healing group, we included ritual practices of memorialization that helped women to remember those they had lost, without having to talk about things that were “too hard” to process or bring up. For example, the week we made memorial boxes helped women to remember and memorialize loved ones who were no longer with us. Although it is often assumed that to heal from violence requires speech, these women’s healing practices remind us that assuming that agency consists in forging the link between experiencing the pain of violence and talking of that pain is problematic. Rather, agency can also be seen in the “descent” into the everyday, where women are able to show, feel, recover and resist violence through concrete, embodied relations and practices.³⁶⁶

It is perhaps because violence reminds us that to be human is to be connected that community support in the face of violence is so crucial. When we know what we can (and will) do to one another, to see the good in others feels incredibly healing. Indeed this was the case for the women who participated in the trauma healing groups. As Catherine said, the groups made her think about the past, but not only the “bad moments because someone died.” We all want to “connect with people.” This helps us to remember where we have been and to envision where we are going. The good and the bad times are a part of this. For Joyce, the groups were a time to voice things that she had a hard time sharing before. As she said, “I will no longer be silent.”

³⁶⁶ Das, *Life and Words*, 15.

Informal women's groups might seem insignificant given the significant international attention on rebuilding the Liberian government and justice mechanisms. However, I argue that the reparative work of this group of Liberian women demands an attention to women's peacemaking work that exists beyond formal mechanisms of justice. As feminist theorist Tina Sideris argues, "Healing requires reconciliation and reconstruction within communities at a grassroots level. It is at this level that women are most often involved, although their efforts and the value of this kind of reconciliation are usually neither recognized or acknowledged."³⁶⁷ Although international frameworks no doubt shape the stories that are told about war and peace, I argue, based on these women's lives and experiences, for a focus on local contexts, realities and narratives in order to hear how women themselves describe and experience peace. In the next section, I turn to their reflections on peace, offering a theological, process-oriented language to narrate this everyday, communal understanding of what peace is and how it is experienced.

Peace Is

Peace: In Women's Words

What is peace? We discussed this question in the final women's group, but I also asked the women I interviewed to talk with me about how they envision peace. As Ruth told me, peace is something that must start from within. It is a change in your own heart that changes the way you interact with others. Peace cannot be forced or come from a disingenuous place. Although, as she said, "some people say well I'm gonna make peace with you...[they] say you're going to forgive the person, but you don't do it, they just do

³⁶⁷ Tina Sideris, "Problems of Identity, Solidarity and Representation," *The Aftermath: Women in post-conflict transformation*. Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen, eds. (New York: Zed Press, 2001), 59.

it with grief.” Instead of peace coming “from your heart,” this kind of peace out of forgiveness comes grudgingly; this willingness to forgive comes out of Jesus’ promise of forgiveness to Christians. As she told me:

If you have learned that Jesus Christ has forgiven your sins, who are you to not forgive the next person? You still have to make peace with the next person, yes I believe that. But you say you have to forgive the next person, do it with all your heart, your willing heart. Don’t doubt...God forgives you, why can’t you forgive the next person? Yes.

When I reflected that this type of forgiveness is very hard, she agreed, but with a caveat, saying, “yea, but when you don’t forgive other people, you don’t know what is coming towards you...God is looking in my heart, whether I am saying the truth or saying the right thing. I’m not doing it to you. I’m doing it to myself. When you do anything, you’ve got to do it with your heart.” Peace, for Ruth, is something that comes from the heart. When you remember what God has done, you become better able to reciprocate for others, making forgiveness possible. This reflects the ways that Ella talked about peace. “You can’t change the world,” she told me, “but you can start with one person at a time. You have to start with our own self, in our own hearts to see how we can work toward peace.” She tied this in to the work Laura is doing in Durham to help Liberians who are “not over the trauma they have been through. If you only get to one person, you did something.” Peace is something that arises from within the self, and that starts small – moving from person to person. It is “like a baby,” she told me, “innocent, it don’t know anything.” This small tiny baby that is peace is surrounded by envy and greed, these are the “only things that disturb the baby.” We must “put ourselves in that baby’s shoes,” asking “why [do] we want to trouble the baby?” And we also “disturb one another, we are the babies.” Peace is, in the context of this metaphor, “being left alone,”

to be able to “be by ourselves, not to be disturbed.” However, painfully, we as “human beings disturb our own peace.” Reflecting on her home country of Liberia, Ella told me that she “would like to go back home, but,” she is “worried that someone will go crazy and disrupt” the fragile peace that exists there. “I pray it doesn’t happen,” she said, reflecting that Liberians should recognize that “you can voice your opinion, but you don’t have to kill one another. We are not all going to agree. We are human beings, we [all] think we know everything.” If we continue along this path as humanity, “we will destroy each other” by searching for “more power, more money.” Returning to her sense of faith, Ella told me that “if you have peace in your heart, you can love anybody.” This is at the root of peace. “Peace comes with love. If you can have love for our neighbors, that is what brings peace.”

The Process of Peace

Peace is almost too large to imagine. It does not make itself known, but rather lives and lurks at the edge of our consciousness.³⁶⁸ Peace is not a narrowing of attention, but rather it is a widening of consciousness that we experience “as a gift,” something “largely beyond the control of purpose.”³⁶⁹ It is a “*trust* in the efficacy of beauty.”³⁷⁰ When we deliberately aim for peace, we are confronted with its archenemy – “Anaesthesia”, the “destruction” of “life and motion.”³⁷¹ Often our own egos get in the way of our pursuit of peace, when we *seek* fame rather than *intuit* peace. We can also become blinded to peace by our attachment to others, through relationships that are all about us, what Whitehead calls a “clinging to selfish happiness.” We are unable to experience the “transcendence of personality” that is required for the intuition of

³⁶⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1933), 284

³⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 285

³⁷⁰ *Ibid*, emphasis mine.

³⁷¹ *Ibid*.

peace.³⁷² However, love itself is not the barrier to peace. Some levels of closeness, such as that between a parent and child or close intimate partnership, can actually help us to open ourselves to the world. They:

can produce the love of self-devotion where the potentialities of the loved object are felt passionately as a claim that it find itself in a friendly Universe. Such love is really an intense feeling as to how the harmony of the worlds should be realised in particular objects. It is the feeling as to what would happen if right could triumph in a beautiful world, with discord routed (ibid).

This is a love that extends us outside of ourselves, while also cherishing our own “self-devotion.” This type of love is the “sense of Eros” which allows us to live between peace as the delights of youth and peace as “the issue of Tragedy.”³⁷³

We must find ourselves opened up by peace, at the “width where the self has been lost, and interest has been transferred to coordinations wider than personality.”³⁷⁴ We are able to dwell in the “deep underlying Harmony of Nature, as [if] it were a fluid, flexible support.”³⁷⁵ Our trust in the underlying fluidity of peace allows us to know that in the midst of the passing of things that were, there is an eternal presence in which we can rest. This “flexible support” is – like God – not above or averse to the tragic elements of life. Rather, peace understands and preserves tragedy.³⁷⁶ Through peace, we know something of the eternal. This was reflected in our last women’s empowerment group meeting, where we discussed peace. As I noted above, the final person to present was Pastor Meah who had kept her drawing covered by a piece of paper once she finalized it, in order to reveal it with great dramatic flair at the close of our meeting. She had written a single Bible verse, “Jesus wept.” She said that Jesus wept because of “trouble in the world. He

³⁷² Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 289

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, 286.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

didn't make the world to be confused." Instead, "Jesus gives us peace, but we ourselves, because of envy, brought confusion. Jesus is grieving because this is not what he intended the world to be."

This vision of Jesus weeping for a world that is not as it should be reflects the tragic elements of peace. Peace both keeps alive the sensitive aspects of the tragedy and persuades the world to live beyond the fact of the tragic. "Each tragedy is the disclosure of an ideal – what might have been and what was not: what can be. The tragedy was not in vain." At the "heart of the nature of things, there are always the dream of youth and the harvest of tragedy."³⁷⁷ The final union of these two is the sense of Peace. "In this way, the world receives its persuasion toward such perfections as are possible for its diverse individual occasions."³⁷⁸ As Monica Coleman describes it, "peace is faith in the ideals to which God is calling us."³⁷⁹ Peace allows us to trust in the vision of God. We become once again able to "believe and hope in the process of the organic world itself. It is not a passive belief, but a belief that sustains the actions and decisions in the world."³⁸⁰ Although we will always have to "deal with evil in the world," God both takes in and works through it to provide the world with new options for transformation and growth. God offers an:

Ideal vision to the world through God's calling. Ideally, what we experience conforms to what occurs within the world. This is truth. God also desires a variety of detail with contrast, and a lot of it within our individual experiences. This is beauty. Art aims at the coincidence of truth and beauty. That is, God desires harmony. Again, perfect harmony is only attained in God, but God urges us toward limited forms of perfect harmony on earth. In the process, God grants us peace. Peace is the gift from God that allows us to trust in the process. Peace allows us to believe that

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 296.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 53.

³⁸⁰ Ibid, 69.

despite all that is lost, something valuable is gained as we continue to progress toward newer and higher forms of beauty.³⁸¹

In this succinct and cohesive description of Whitehead's illumination of God's vision provided in *Adventures of Ideas*, Coleman notes that this vision represents God's unchanging nature and God's "unconditional love for the world."³⁸² Faith in the process and progress of this vision is peace. When Marie left her uncle's home, there were "bullets flying," and it was only her faith that got her through it. As she says of her work now, "Sometimes doors will close. Since I've started this a lot of doors have closed, but I still put my faith in God because [before] I didn't have anything. Nothing." This resilient faith that grows out of violence is a faith that there can be newness and life despite pain and trauma.

Leymah Gbowee's understanding of peacebuilding resonates with this sense of the everyday-ness of peace. She writes that:

Peacebuilding to me isn't ending a fight by standing between two opposing forces. It's healing those victimized by war, making them strong again, and bringing them back to the people they once were. It's helping victimizers rediscover their humanity so they can once again become productive members of their communities. Peace-building is teaching people that resolving conflict can be done without picking up a gun. It's repairing societies in which the guns have been used, and not only making them whole, but better.³⁸³

Peace, for Gbowee and the women cited above, does not live in the international treaty documents that mandate it. Instead, it emerges in the everyday healing practices in which women rebuild and restore life. It happens, as I have elaborated in this chapter, as women repair the wounds in their own lives, reweaving narratives of hope and healing out of tragedy as they recognize the presence of God in their moments of hardship. I

³⁸¹ Ibid, 70.

³⁸² Ibid, 70.

³⁸³ Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 82.

have focused in this chapter on the women's empowerment group in order to see the ways that through storytelling, artwork and ritual practice, women's narratives are woven and re-woven in an effort to restore peace – a peace that exists not only in and for the world, but in and for the self. As Ella told me, this is often where peace begins. You “have to start with your own self, in our hearts to see how we can work towards peace.” Theologian Wendy Farley argues this point as well in her text *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*. For Farley, much of feminist and liberation theology has started with structural change, neglecting the changes of heart and mind that can actually fuel large scale social justice work for the world. As she writes:

Attention to the interior landscape of human beings is not a rejection of the claims of justice. To the contrary, attention to our interiority deepens our capacity for justice. Or rather, it roots justice in the well-spring of compassion...Attention to interiority can resuscitate our capacities for relationship and ignite in us the desire for compassion and delight in life. In this sense it is integral to the desire for justice.³⁸⁴

As Farley and Ella argue, starting with the self is a helpful corrective to the large-scale focus (sometimes overwhelmingly so) on structural, governmental and political changes in international peace-building work. As Gbowee reminds us, peace starts with healing the people who are damaged by war. This chapter has meant to be an exposition of the ways that happens, and the role of God in bringing this healing to bear. This healing takes time, and it emerges outside of assumed linear frameworks, but it happens.

Working With/in Religious Communities: Some Considerations

To conclude this chapter, I would like to offer a few considerations for individuals and organizations who would like to work with faith communities on issues of women, violence, peace and healing. As I have noted throughout this dissertation, religion

³⁸⁴ Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, xviii.

matters to women and it is time for the international community to take this fact seriously. It is also time for a more complicated picture of the ways religion matters to women than the instrumentalized or formal ways that it is often presented. The women's empowerment group is one example of a way to partner with religious organizations in this sort of work.

First, I would note that this work takes time; I spent several months with the community before we even began to plan the women's empowerment workshops. They were held at the end of my fieldwork, in August and September of 2011. Second, I believe that it is important to be attentive to the need for ritual and practice-based responses to violence. As has been noted throughout this chapter and indeed this entire dissertation, healing from violence does not only happen through speech. Instead, for those for whom speaking about violence is "just too much," attention should be paid to ritual and practice-based ways to create new narratives that promote healing and recovery. As Elaine Ramshaw notes in her article "Making (Ritual) Sense of our Own Lives," in the United States, "the challenge of empowering the community" and creating "ritual empowerment" is often our cultural "individualism."³⁸⁵ Ramshaw suggests that ritual be dispersed from a clerical model to a more communal ("midwifery") model in order to facilitate healing and empowerment from oppression and prejudice in society. She suggests we encourage "ritual agency" in our faith communities so that individuals will develop the skills and confidence to make use of ritual in the community and for their own lives.³⁸⁶ In the women's empowerment group, we did this by creating memory boxes, something that resonated with the women's ideas about memorialization (as many

³⁸⁵ Elaine J. Ramshaw. Making (Ritual) Sense of Our Own Lives. *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 299.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 303.

of the boxes were decorated like Liberian tombs), while also providing a way to continue to experience the healing effects, through prayer and remembrance, at home.

Third, when working with religious communities, we need to be aware of cultural contexts and restraints. Often women's rights programs are disseminated in different countries without much of a change in their actual structure and style.³⁸⁷ The ineffectiveness of such approaches was demonstrated to me at one of the many meetings that I attended between Laura's organization and members of Friendship Community Church. The two organizations were working together to bring educational programming to Liberians living in Durham. I shrugged off my winter coat and sat down, offering some small talk with the rest of the people gathered around the front of the sanctuary. We pulled chairs together in a circle and started the meeting. The ten of us assembled— a couple of the leaders from both organizations, five young people ages 18 – 30, and me – were talking about how to encourage young people to feel engaged and empowered in their local communities. As we talked about offering educational programs, one of the leaders from the church, Reverend Farley, took the floor. This community suffered a great deal during the Civil War, he told us, and before they can be educated, people need to heal. Laura followed Reverend Farley, echoing his thoughts. As these leaders spoke, the young men and women assembled began to move about anxiously in their chairs, some gearing up to speak, some seeming nervously to wonder when this conversation would draw to an end. One of the young men agreed, noting that while trauma needs to be addressed, it is not only the trauma of the war that is affecting the community – there are also “things that are happening right now that are causing trauma.” He continued by

³⁸⁷ As Sally Engle Merry writes, “As a legal system, human rights law endeavors to apply universal principles to all situations uniformly. It does not tailor interventions to specific political and social situations, even when these might suggest different approaches to social justice. Local context is ignored in order to establish global principles.” Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence*, 103.

saying that often people don't want to talk about the war because there are perpetrators here, too. How do you talk about experiences of victimization in a room where perpetrators of violence might be present? One of the young women nodded her head, agreeing. How are we going to get people to talk, she wondered? How and why would someone come to a group to talk about trauma? Laura agreed that this would be a difficult task. No one will show up if you advertise a "trauma counseling" program. How then can healing happen if people don't want to talk about it? It was conversations like these that led us to create the women's empowerment groups, a way of addressing trauma and healing without forcing people to talk about what they have been through.

As I have noted, for some, talking through their experiences was helpful. Joyce, Ruth and Evelyn particularly described how important it was for them to be able to tell their stories in such a supportive environment. However, for others, like Joanna, who created the picture of a fish in our first meeting, artistic practices allowed women to memorialize, remember, and mourn what they have lost without always having to talk it through. When working with faith communities – or any community – on issues of violence, it is important to be attentive to the ways the community wants, or doesn't want, to deal with it. This takes time, but it leads to programs that are better attuned to a community's own indigenous ways of healing.

As the women's empowerment group demonstrated, women experience healing through practices of care and community that attempt to knit together what has been broken. This work takes time and might not evolve along a linear fashion. Instead, it mirrors the ways artists create a collage, pulling together and pasting down scraps and fragments of fabric and material, creating a beautiful (if sometimes chaotic) picture out of

whatever remnants are available. The women's work points to a vision of peace that also resembles a collage: women take in the fragments of their life, build on it with beautiful and healing remnants from relationships, communities, and practices, and they create something beautiful. They create a life that is worth living. This is no easy process; it is fraught with hardship. However, it is these cobbled together ways of creating peace and healing that are often most significant in women's lives. This collage work reflects, I argue, the ways that religion matters as women negotiate what it means to heal in light of their experiences of the violence of the Liberian Civil War.

CONCLUSION

As I was finishing up the writing of this dissertation, one of the women leaders of Friendship Community Church passed away, Sister Clemmons. I went to the funeral, held a couple of weeks after her death at a large church on Fayetteville Road in Durham. Pastor Meah and the ministerial board of FCC officiated at the service, which was attended by almost 200 people. The service was particularly poignant for me because when I started attending FCC in January of 2011, this woman's husband had been seriously ill. I remember going to the front of the church during the final blessing, where we all prayed for his recovery. He lived, and every Sunday after he got out of the hospital, the couple would come into church, sitting in the second row. Sister Clemmons was the church secretary, the person who would read the church announcements and welcome visitors to the congregation. As she said every Sunday, "Come to Friendship Community Church and be blessed." When her husband survived his illness, the pastor and other members of the ministerial board sent praises to God during service, marveling at God's ability to bring someone back from the grave. I remembered these moments as I watched Sister Clemmons's funeral and as I talked with Pastor Meah on the phone a couple of days before. She sounded haggard and tired. It was obvious she had been crying. At the funeral, Pastor Meah talked about her grief, telling each of us that it is okay to cry; God acknowledges and hears our cries of mourning. These two snapshots of a life given and a life taken away reflect, for me, the ways that the women I worked with experience, narrate and practice healing. God is present at both moments – in the joys of celebrating new life and hope and in the pains of death and despair. God is there. By tracing the ways that women experience this divine presence through their narratives and

practices, this dissertation has cultivated a language for healing that speaks to the ways religion matters in women's lives.

When examined through women's narratives and practices, a vision of healing emerges that encompasses the following elements: 1) Healing emerges out of the everyday; 2) Healing is a process; 3) Healing is relational and 4) Healing acknowledges the tragic. In what follows, I cultivate a vision of healing that is as cobbled together as the peace flag that we created in the final empowerment group, brought together by each of these themes that emerged in and through women's narratives and practices. Although more elusive to grasp and impossible to quantify or measure, this vision of healing reflects an effort to pay close attention to the ways religion matters in women's lives.

Healing Is

Everyday

The women I worked with are able to cultivate healing in and through the practices of everyday life. They participate in their community of faith, finding new narratives of "making a way out of no way" that offer a performative script out of which they can create new stories of hope and promise. They also care for children in an effort to develop a new future. They support their families, friends and communities by hearing their stories, providing, as Marie says a "shoulder to cry on." Laura echoes this when she says that she often just listens. "I'm somebody they can talk to," when no one else will listen. As these chapters have illustrated peace happens outside of the often cited legal and political arenas, instead emerging in and through the course of everyday life.

I have drawn heavily on the work of Veena Das in outlining an understanding of the everyday processes of healing that I have seen through the work of the women

featured in this dissertation. As Das writes, the retrieval of the self after experiences of violence is remarkable in its ordinary-ness:

There is no pretense here at some grand project of recovery, but simply the question of how everyday tasks of surviving – having a roof over your head, being able to send your children to school, being able to do the work of the everyday without constant fear of being attacked – could be accomplished. I found that the making of the self was located, not in the shadow of some ghostly past, but in the context of making the everyday inhabitable.³⁸⁸

This reflection on her anthropological work in India resonates with the ways that women I have worked with are rebuilding their lives after experiences of the Liberian Civil War. As I noted in Chapter two, they are not always willing or able to talk about what they have endured, instead focusing on the practical aspects of life (much like those Das describes above) and drawing on the resources of their faith to create a life that is livable.³⁸⁹

Peace is also found in the ways women are helping their communities to survive and thrive despite the hardships of conflict and the harsh experiences of immigrant life. Leymah Gbowee reflects on the need for this kind of “ordinary” peace work when she states:

Donor communities invest billions in funding peace talks and disarmament. Then they stop. The most important part of postwar help is missing: providing basic social services to people. Not having those resources might have been a reason men went to war in the first place; they crossed the border and joined an armed group because they didn’t have jobs. In Liberia right now, there are hundreds of thousands of unemployed young people, and they’re ready made mercenaries for war in West Africa. You’d think the international community would be sensible enough to know they should work to change this. But they aren’t.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁸ Das, *Life and Words*, 216.

³⁸⁹ A recent article in the Guardian echoes this desire among women in Liberia for more practically oriented peace work. As the women in the article recount, “We don’t want to explain it to anyone again... We don’t want the memory to come back.” Instead, as the author notes, the women are interested in concrete outcomes like jobs, food and shelter. Tomasin Ford, “Wronged Women of Liberia Reluctant to Revisit Human Rights Abuses,” *The Guardian*. www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2012/feb/28/liberia-women-reluctant-to-relive-abuse [Accessed 8 March 2012].

³⁹⁰ Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 174.

As Pastor Meah told me, much of the work that she does to help her community is in both providing their spiritual guidance *and* providing them with the material resources they need to survive. Laura echoes this when she told me about how her work got started, during her time as a student at North Carolina Central University:

That really broke my heart. I didn't know where my own family were, but just, I didn't know where my family were, but all I knew was, look at these children dying from starvation, from not having food to eat! I started to think what can I do to help these children. So I wanted, my main reason was to collect money, maybe dollar, [one] dollar and send it through the Red Cross...So I started collecting [a] dollar, quarter from everyone I met on campus. I started talking to them [about the Civil War in Liberia]...the first time I collected about \$600. So I started going around, [and then] somebody came up to me, the Director of Community Services...She said you know what, Laura, I see you asking for quarters and dollars, and you know we could help you. I could help you. That's when we started raising money on campus and that's when other people got started.

Laura's work, like Marie's, like Pastor Meah's started small, working through the resources each woman had at her disposal. In this way, women's work for peace and healing is remarkably ordinary. It does not always consist in retelling and revisiting the wounds of the past, but instead is concerned with the practicalities of the present and the possibilities of the future.

A Process

Healing is not something that happens overnight. Instead, it emerges in lives and communities in a non-linear way. This process involves the repair of self, of family, of community. It involves telling new stories out of the scraps and fragments of life and the past that we gather up. As Lederach writes:

Peacebuilding requires respect for the center and the edges of time and space, where the deep past and the horizon of our future are sewn together, creating a circle of time. The circle of time, constantly in motion, moves around our biggest inquiries: Who are we? Where do we belong? Where are we going? How will we journey together?³⁹¹

³⁹¹ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 147.

These questions are not answered overnight or even in the course of a truth and reconciliation commission. They are instead worked out in community, and emerge continuously throughout time. As Marie, Pastor Meah, and Laura affirm, they do not always receive funding or recognition for their work, making it difficult to continue on in their work for justice in the world. However, they persevere. As Marie recalled of her time living with her uncle who sexually abused her, “I slept in the kitchen, you know, nobody wanted to have anything to do with me pretty much. I lived in three African countries, you know, trying to find that light. It’s a step.” Marie’s statement that finding the light is a journey taken step by step is a reminder of the continued work for peace and healing that these women engage. It is never finished.

Relational

As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, healing is realized through relationships. As Ella and Marie shared with me, talking through the horrible things you have endured in the past can be particularly healing. As Marie stated, “Breaking the Silence came about because I had to explain my story in order for me to heal. The more I talked about it, the more I cried, the more I got it out, [and] I became a better person.” This was also reflected in the women’s empowerment group, where women related that talking with others about what you have been through can be healing. Sharing your story can help you know you are “not alone,” while also creating a shared narrative of survival and resilience within which you can live. This healing work also happens through practices of faith, as was described in Chapter four, where women’s everyday theologies, parenting and communal prayer practices help to find healing in a world that is still marked by violence. As Serene Jones writes, “healing lies as much, if not more, in the

stories we tell and the gestures we offer as in the doctrines we preach.”³⁹² The everyday practices and gestures women embody as they seek out healing speak to the ways peace emerges on a local level, in and through the healing of self and other.

“If we are socially constructed, as I believe we are, in large part through our group-based narratives, the self is not a single, unified, coherent entity. Its structure is more chaotic, with harmonious and contradictory aspects, like the particles of an atom, attracting and repelling each other, hanging together in a whirling, ever-changing dance that any attempt at observation – or narration – alters.”³⁹³ Understanding the self as relational helps to see why the practices of healing that have been described in this dissertation are so powerful; we are created in and through our relationships with others. Through violence, others have the power to tear us down and apart. And yet, paradoxically, it is also through others that we find healing and recovery, through the gestures and practices of love and friendship that have been described throughout this dissertation.

Attentive to Tragedy

It must be noted that the processes of healing that I describe here are realized to greater and lesser extent. In other words, although the women I worked with are able to “count their blessings” and see the presence of God in and through their narratives of hardship, they also acknowledge that blessings are not always easy to find. There is not always a happy ending to the story, as Marlene’s remembrances of her daughter, or the stories of the young men who have committed suicide or killed one another because of past wartime experiences highlights.

³⁹² Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 2.

³⁹³ Brison, *Aftermath*, 95.

Life and death are always encompassed in the experience of trauma. As pastoral theologian Michael Wilson writes, “There is an infinite gradation of losses upon which to forge our willingness to die that we may live, as we discover the faithfulness of the life which so constantly wells up to renew us. We become acquainted with the pattern of life-through-death.”³⁹⁴ These experiences of death and tragedy are things that need a creative response. They painfully teach us what it means to be human and need to be understood not overcome, although that might be our theological impulse – to overcome the tragedy through our theological exposition of it.³⁹⁵ As Shelly Rambo notes, this is not possible. She writes that, “While theodicies might provide explanation, the degree to which explanations are helpful to the healing process is unclear.”³⁹⁶ Drawing on process theology, I have cultivated a language of healing that admits that while there can be no meaning made in the senselessness of trauma, there is always the potential for something new to emerge from it. Reflecting Wilson’s statement earlier, peace is the ability to see life as it is and imagine something new and beautiful out of that wounded reality. Recalling Pastor Meah’s words in our final women’s empowerment group, we are living in a world that is not what it was intended to be. Peace is the recognition that although this is the case, something good can be made from it.

Based on my work with the women I have represented in this dissertation, I argue for a way of understanding healing as the repair of everyday life that happens through the rebuilding of the self and community. This vision of healing is not naïve. It does not

³⁹⁴ Wilson, *Health is for People*, 120.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁶ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 5. This echoes Robert Orsi’s contention that the saints of Catholicism might not provide a helpful sense of meaning for survivors of trauma. Instead, he notes that what they might “have offered [is] companionship on a bitter and confusing journey...in between a life and the meanings that may be made in it, for and against that life is the wound. Meaning making begins in wounding, and the process of meaning making is wounding,” Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 145.

seek simple answers or try to find meaning to contain senseless violence. It emerges out of what is, reacting to a world that is not as it was intended to be. Out of this, peace is the faith that this wounded world can be more.

Women cultivate healing from the ground-up, picking up scraps from their life and world that they find helpful and sustaining. These include elements of their faith journey, their own narratives, the feeling of God in the moment of trauma, from the support they find in one another, and from doing work to restore their communities. Healing is a process, much like the collages that we made in the women's empowerment classes. It is the way that women make something good and beautiful out of the scraps and fragments they find in their lives and in their worlds. In this process of collage work, God's presence in and through narrative and practice reflects the ways that religion matters for women who have survived violence. Their faith offers a way to frame what they have been through, to find hope where once there was only suffering and hardship. In this way, practical theology offers a compelling contribution to conversations about women, violence and peace, in that practical theologians are attuned to the ways religion emerges in and through daily life. In what follows, I offer some thoughts on the implications for this research on continued work in both post-conflict transformation and for theology more generally.

Implications for Future Scholarship

This dissertation demonstrates that to understand the ways religion matters for women who have experienced violence, researchers and theologians must first pay attention to what women say and the ways women practice and live. This type of work necessitates increased attention to the complexity of women's lives and to the fluid ways that they build and construct both narratives and practices. In what follows, I offer

two reflections on future research on women's religious lives, particularly as it relates to research on violence and peace: 1) That such research should endeavor to be participatory, working with communities rather than working for communities; 2) That practical theologians, given their significant expertise in respectfully studying the complexity of faithful people's religious lives, should claim their place at the table of women's human rights discourse and practice.

Participatory Research

As I argued in the last chapter, working with religious communities necessitates participatory research methods that allow communities to tell them how they experience healing. As Gbowee writes, there is a particular sort of arrogance that comes from those outside of a country telling those on the inside how to find peace. She writes, "Organizations like the UN do a lot of good, but there are certain basic realities they never seem to grasp...Maybe the most important truth that eludes these organizations is that it's insulting when outsiders come in and tell a traumatized people what it takes for them to heal."³⁹⁷ What would it look like if researchers and practitioners instead took a participatory approach to working with communities that have been through conflict and war?

While I don't have the answer to this question, I posit that community-based participatory methodologies like those utilized by the African Religious Health Assets Program (ARHAP) could significantly impact the shape of programmatic and research-based responses to peace work. Through mapping projects, where researchers spend time with/in communities, allowing these community members to describe and define the ways they live into and seek out healing, ARHAP researchers are able to align "the health

³⁹⁷ Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers*, 171.

assets of religion and religious entities in Africa with those of the public health system, thus contributing to the livelihoods of the people of the continent by widening Universal Access.”³⁹⁸ ARHAP researchers have focused on “making these assets - which are generally known to the religious community — visible to the public health community.”³⁹⁹ Research models like these ask local communities to identify the places and people they seek out for healing. At the conclusion of this dissertation, I argue that research practices like these could transform peace work as it happens at local and global levels. They could encourage the widened spaces for participation in women’s rights work and provide a place for local communities to name the resources, practices and traditions they turn to for peace and healing. Rather than assuming that individuals seek out peace and healing through more traditional arenas of politics or the law, researchers and practitioners might help community members to chart and build upon their own religious, healing and justice assets to develop comprehensive and effective programs and policies.

Theology’s Place at the Table

Second, as I have noted, being attentive to life and practice is central to the practical theological task. In Chapter two, I illustrated that methods gleaned from feminist pastoral care can help to create new methodologies that blend research and practice in ways that are responsive to the concrete needs and assets of people and communities. For pastoral care, understanding how peace and healing emerge in the context of everyday life can help us to continue to expand beyond current models of care

398 Steve De Gruchy, “Re-Learning our Mother Tongue? Theology in Dialogue with Public Health,” *Religion & Theology*, 14 (2007), 47.

399 Ibid.

(individual, communal-contextual) to think about pastoral care on a global scale.⁴⁰⁰ This is an apt place for practical theologians in women's human rights work, and I believe that practical theologians have constructive contributions to make to such conversations that build on expertise in care-based work like storytelling, narrative theories, empowerment strategies, and liberation praxis. Religion matters, as this dissertation demonstrates, in complex ways. It is time for practical theology to enter women's rights conversations in an effort to speak to this fact. There is much work to be done in this area, and it is my hope that this dissertation is one step in encouraging such interdisciplinary conversations about women, violence and healing.

This dissertation has been an effort to learn from the ways women cobble together the fragments and scraps of belief, practice, narrative, and interpersonal relationships to create a life that is worth living in the aftermath of violence. This process of healing collage work that I have described in this dissertation is not unique to Liberian women in Durham, North Carolina. Instead, I would argue that this is the task of being human. We are all collage makers, artists weaving life and hope out of the hardships and traumas we endure. We do this, as Laura reiterated to me, because we must.

Laura's work has grown and flourished over the two years that I have known her, and recently an anonymous donor approached her (through some contacts at Duke University) with a matching pledge of \$15,000 for her work. I cried with Laura over the phone the day she told me about it. So much has changed, and yet so much seemed to stay the same – she is still plugging away, trying to find the matching funds so that she

⁴⁰⁰ See Lartey's description of the four paradigms of pastoral theology, including the "classical-clerical" (focused on ordained clergy), "clinical-pastoral" (informed by psychotherapy), "communal-contextual" (widened lenses to focus on the church and faith community), and "intercultural" models (expanded to the "global nexus"). As Lartey writes, "pastoral theology is currently engaged within a global context in which all four paradigms are operative. Each has strengths and weaknesses. The challenge is to draw appropriately and contextually on them in the midst of a world of tensions, ambiguities and complexities." Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*, 122-125.

can start a healthcare program for women in her native home of Caldwell, Liberia. As our conversation on that day drew to an end, Laura reiterated to me that while she might not always be the “best Christian,” but she “[knows] that God has put me in this position for a reason. It’s right in front of you, but you just can’t see it.” For Laura, healing is “right in front of you.” But we can’t always see it, perhaps because we are looking for it in the wrong places – in the international frameworks, documents, treaties, and meetings. When we look at the ways healing is “right in front” of us, we see vision of healing that is a much messier entity. It isn’t easily measured or explained. It isn’t quantifiable or contained as an objective. However, as the women I have learned from in the Liberian community demonstrate, healing can be felt and described and lived through the layered practices of prayer, through the joy and pain of bringing new life into the world, from the narratives of “making a way” into which women can live, through shared stories and gestures, and in the ways communities are rebuilt after experiences of war and violence. It is my hope that these women’s words and practices encourage all of us to look for peace and healing in these ordinary contexts; let us continue to look the ways religion matters, healing lives and peace breathes “right in front of you.”

APPENDIX A

WRITTEN INFORMED CONSENT FORMS FOR INTERVIEWS

Emory University Consent to be a Research Subject

Title: *When Religion Matters: Towards a comparative theology of healing for gender-based violence survivors and activists*

Principal Investigator: *Annie Hardison-Moody*

Introduction/Purpose:

This project asks you to be a volunteer in a research study that seeks to learn about the ways that women affected by gender-based violence navigate healing.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are involved with an organization that works on issues of gender-based violence or violence against women. If you agree to participate in this study, you are being asked to participate in an individual interview (approximately one hour in length).

This project wants to know more about:

- *Your life story – how did you come to be here?*
- *The ways you think about and define healing.*
- *Your religious beliefs and perspectives.*

Procedures:

You are being asked to participate in an interview that will last approximately one hour in length. The interview will cover different topics ranging from important experiences in your life, how you experience healing, and the role of religion in your own life story. Approximately 75 interviews will be conducted for this project.

These interviews may be audiotaped. After completion of data collection and analysis, we will be happy to share our findings with you if you wish. All data will be anonymous with no reference to any of the participating individuals.

Risks:

We acknowledge that you might share difficult information with us. We understand that you will be sharing some personal experiences and information about your experiences and life story. We intend to keep all data anonymous to make it difficult to identify. Additionally, names of individuals will not be linked to the interview data in any study analysis.

Benefits:

Taking part in this research study may not benefit you personally, but the researcher may learn new things that will help others involved in gender-based violence work.

Confidentiality:

All data will be anonymous with no reference to any of the participating individuals. The interview will be audio recorded and the audio will be transcribed without using your name. Once transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed on both the recording device and computer.

People other than those doing the study may look at study records. Agencies and Emory departments and committees that make rules and policy about how research is done have the right to review these records. The government agencies and units within Emory responsible for making sure that studies are conducted and handled correctly that may look at your study records in order to do this job include the Office for Human Research Protections, the Emory University Institutional Review Board, and the Emory Office of Research Compliance. In addition, records can be opened by court order or produced in response to a subpoena or a request for production of documents. We will keep any records that we produce private to the extent we are required to do so by law. We will use a study number rather than your name on study records where we can. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

Compensation/Cost:

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Contact Persons:

If you have any questions about this study you may email Annie Hardison-Moody at ahardis@emory.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, call the Emory University Institutional Review Board at (404) 712-0720 or toll free at 1-877-503-9797.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

You can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and can decline to answer any questions that might make you uncomfortable.

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you're willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

Subject's name (Please Print)

Subject's Signature

Person Obtaining Consent

Date Time

Date Time

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Questions – Participants

Note: These interviews are semi-structured open-ended interviews.

1. I'd like to find out about your life history. Could you tell me about it? Describe it to me as if you were telling me your life story.

Follow up: And then what happened?

Follow up: How did you feel about that?

Follow up: What did you do after that?

2. Were you or your family religious growing up?

3. How did you come to be here at _____ organization?

4. What have been some of the formative/important events in your life?

Follow up: Why were these events important to you?

5. Given your experiences, what do you think that it means to heal? What does healing mean to you?

6. Does religion play a part in your healing process?

APPENDIX C

I AM FROM POEM

I AM FROM POEM

I AM FROM _____ (describe area i.e water,
grass, mountains, concrete, etc.)

I AM FROM _____ (game/sport/art/dance)

I AM FROM _____ (music/sound/song)

I AM FROM _____ (village, town, country)

I AM FROM _____ (smells)

I AM FROM _____ (food)

I AM FROM _____ (animal, things in nature)

I AM FROM _____ (family or cultural tradition)

I AM _____ (your full name)

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