

# 1. Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space

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I am neither a Catholic by confession, nor am I a systematic theologian, so it is with some reluctance that I share these reflections. My hesitancy also arises from the fact that I was not familiar with the *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, and I confess that I was hearing the term “synodality” for the first time when the invitation came. I had to do some quick reading to learn about both the *Ecclesia of Women in Asia* and the topic of “synodality.” I was certainly intrigued. I do not present my reflections as an expert on the subject but rather as someone sharing some initial thoughts so to extend the conversation and to enable further reflection.

“Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space” is a complex theme with so much that can be said about each of the components that comprise this theme—ecclesia, women, synodal/synodality, third space. Each concept requires unpacking for clarity, for there can be multiple definitions or understandings, and I cannot assume that everyone is on the same page with regard to how we understand each of these terms individually or taken together.

*Ecclesia*, a civic assembly in ancient Greece, is a “called out assembly.” The word is derived from the Greek *ekkaleō* meaning “call out” or “summon,” and hence, a “called assembly.” In biblical usage, it meant the assembly called by God, the church. As a “gathering of those summoned,” it is united by both identity and purpose. The “*Ecclesia of Women in Asia*” is a community, a gathering of women called and sustained by its identity as Catholic and in its participation in the life of the church and society in Asia. In what follows, I attempt to reflect on features which might characterize the “*ecclesia of women as a synodal third space.*” As a biblical reader and reflector, but also as someone committed to context, I seek to reflect on this topic using a scriptural lens to understand the theme, and derive from this select scriptural text insights that would perhaps help us

unpack the theme and ways to implement the vision and mission of this forum.

## **Synodality and the Synodal Church**

“Synodality” was the keyword that was applied by the late Pope Francis for his vision of the church. But what is synodality? Etymologically, it comes from the familiar word “synod” which in Greek is a combination of *syn* [together] and *hodos* [way or journey], often used to describe the process of fraternal collaboration for the future direction of the church. “Synod,” or *σύννοδος* (*synodos*) denotes “journeying/walking together.” Pope Francis reminds us that “the path of synodality is the path which God expects of the church of the third millennium.”<sup>1</sup> There are several features that characterize the understanding of the word “synod” or “synodality.” First, “synodality” speaks of the *involvement and participation of the whole church* in its life and mission.<sup>2</sup> It is the “specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the people of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly, and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.”<sup>3</sup> Secondly, a synodal church is *a church which listens*, which realizes that listening “is more than simply hearing.”<sup>4</sup> It is about listening to each other and attending to the Holy Spirit that knows no boundaries in order to discern the Spirit’s message to the church. This is essential because “listening reconfigures the whole process of interaction among all ecclesial subjects in a reciprocal and horizontal dynamics founded on the

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](http://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html).

<sup>2</sup> International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, no. 6, [vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](http://vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html).

<sup>3</sup> International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” no. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Liliane Mugombozi, “Synod of Bishops 2021–2023: Called to Make a Contribution,” *Focolare Movement*, [focolare.org/en/synod-of-bishops-2021-2023-called-to-make-a-contribution/](http://focolare.org/en/synod-of-bishops-2021-2023-called-to-make-a-contribution/).

ecclesiology of the People of God.”<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, following and listening to the Holy Spirit requires that *we listen to everyone who belongs to the one people of God, including those who live on the borders and edges of the community*. These are, according to Pope Francis, “the poor, the beggars, young drug addicts, all those people that society discards, part of the Synod too . . . Synodality is an expression of the Church’s nature, her form, style and mission.”<sup>6</sup> It is “realizing that the Holy Spirit can speak through anyone,” irrespective of who they are, “to help us walk forward together on our journey as the People of God.”<sup>7</sup>

The call for synodality in the life of the church is an encouragement to foster a new pattern of relationships within the church, so that the church becomes an effective witness to the Gospel in the world. The synodal movement is one that would engage with the life experiences of *all* the faithful, evoking and nurturing greater levels of participation and inclusivity, and gaining from the insights and talents of all, through a more egalitarian system of communication. Thus, synodality involves a reorientation of church life and leadership requiring a different emphasis in how the church faces the task of communicating faith and promoting spiritual learning.

Behind such a process of synodality is the conviction that ordinary people are not simply passive recipients of divine truths and biblical reflections handed down by superiors, the clergy, and so called “experts” and “scholars.” It is the conviction that ordinary people, too, have been given the grace and equipped with the capacity and capability to understand, discern, critically reflect, and articulate what God requires of them, based on life experiences and through their responses to God in faith.

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<sup>5</sup> Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (Paulist Press, 2022), cover description.

<sup>6</sup> Mugombozi, “Synod of Bishops 2021–2023.”

<sup>7</sup> “What’s Unique About the Synod on Synodality?” *The Jesuits Communications Office*, September 28, 2023, [jesuits.global/2023/09/28/what-s-unique-about-the-synod-on-synodality/](https://jesuits.global/2023/09/28/what-s-unique-about-the-synod-on-synodality/).

The process of being a synodal church requires more than merely adding a degree of consultation; it is a call to us, ordinary folks and believers, who tend to leave much to the authorities and the powers that be, to be much more actively involved in church life and leadership than is the current norm. This is not easy given the many walls that the ‘superiors’ and so-called experts, have erected to shield the church from change, even the transformational kind—all in the name of safeguarding tradition, but more so to maintain power and control. While synodality appears to be a new way of “being the Church,” in reality, as John Sullivan reminds us, it reflects the practices of the early church. He writes, “In the early years of the church, and at various other times, social networks of Christians preserved and handed on the life of faith without the benefit of formal educational institutions or strong ecclesial structures.”<sup>8</sup> Synodality therefore exhorts the church to become a far more “participative and co-responsible community,” a community characterized by reciprocal listening, exchange, communication, collaboration, and cooperation, to give and to receive, steeped in respect, charity, humility, and poverty for this is the synodal spirit.<sup>9</sup> In a synodal church, “decision-making is decentralized, the voice of all is listened to, and a process of discernment rather than a simple ‘command and obey’ model is used to formulate and then confirm by reception the authenticity of Church teaching.”<sup>10</sup>

Such an emphasis then requires that all baptized people are heard, listened to, and respected for their faith. Unfortunately, clericalism and misogyny, among other socially driven hierarchies and discriminatory systems such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, and even language, have been and continue to remain the biggest impediments to our being a synodal church. As a movement of women, we are cognizant of the ways in which women have been sidelined and marginalized and denied fuller participation in the life of the church. It is encouraging that Pope Francis

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<sup>8</sup> John William Sullivan, “Friendship and Spiritual Learning: Seedbed for Synodality,” *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 592, doi.org/10.3390/rel14050592.

<sup>9</sup> Luciani, *Synodality*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis* (Messenger Publications, 2018), 93.

particularly highlights the need to listen to women, noting that the bishops and cardinals likely learned their faith from their own mothers. He states that “it is women who know how to wait, who know how to discover the resources of the church, of the faithful people, who take risk beyond the limit, perhaps with fear but courageous.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Ecclesia of Women in the Third Space**

The *Ecclesia of Women* understands itself as “an assembly of free citizens gathering for deciding their own spiritual-political affairs.”<sup>12</sup> It also sees itself as being within a “synodal *third space*” by virtue of their marginal status as women, desiring to redefine synodality from the perspective of their marginalized and excluded experience. The “third space” has been posited as a setting for informal public life, offering connection, community, and sociability.<sup>13</sup> But in postcolonial discourse, the third space is the “*in-between* space” where some individuals and communities of individuals have fallen—fallen into the cracks of mainstream or officially recognized spaces. These “in-between spaces” are characterized as spaces of creativity and imagination, for it is where difference and cultures overlap and interact and where people can develop their sense of self and identity in conversation with others. These spaces are sites for collaboration and contestation, and they contribute to our understandings and definitions of society. The “in-between space” is, therefore a “hybrid” site that witnesses the production—rather than just the reflection of cultural meaning, community interest, cultural values, and the negotiation of nationhood.<sup>14</sup> Hence, being in the third space can be advantageous in

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<sup>11</sup> “Pope: I Like to Think of the Church as God’s Faithful People,” *Vatican News*, October 25, 2023, [vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-10/pope-i-like-to-think-of-the-church-as-god-s-faithful-people.html](https://vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-10/pope-i-like-to-think-of-the-church-as-god-s-faithful-people.html).

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Toward a Feminist Biblical Spirituality: The *Ekklesia* of Women,” in *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Crossroads Publishing Company, 2000), 343–351.

<sup>13</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories About the “Great Good Places” at the Heart of Our Communities* (Marlowe, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 2.

that it is a space of reflection and imagination, a place where difference is performed without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. It provides for a spatial politics of inclusion rather than exclusion that “initiates new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.”<sup>15</sup> This is very similar to how Indian Catholic theologian Felix Wilfred also defines “margins.”<sup>16</sup> There are many positives to being in the “margins,” according to Wilfred, for margins are the spaces and sites of God’s visitation; places where the misfits of society roam, where self and identity are affirmed and where difference is supported. Margins are also spaces of theological creativity, imagination, innovation, and where one’s theological horizons are widened.<sup>17</sup> We are, as a community of women, therefore in a space that is bursting with opportunities, for despite our marginality, God is amidst us, stirring us into new ways of being and relating to the world. But it is possible that those ways of the world, the hierarchies in society, and the many factors that contribute to discrimination could also seep into our midst and impact us, our relationships, and ways of functioning.

The conditions in which women find themselves in both the society and the church are not without controversy. While our status has improved over the years, there are still many challenges. Women’s economic and social opportunities have increased, but we still face discrimination and violence. Many women must constantly contend with patriarchal values and harmful gender norms that prioritize men and boys over them. Dominant religions, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or Confucianism alongside Christianity, have played a huge role in conceiving women’s roles in society. Societies in Asia are largely configured on hierarchical relationships, discriminatory structures, and systems such as caste which emphasize family virtues and filial piety. Women’s roles are largely confined

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<sup>15</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (ISPCK, 2008), xii–xx.

<sup>17</sup> Wilfred, *Margins*, xii–xx.

to the household, serving as wives to husbands and mothers to children.<sup>18</sup> The increased and growing incidence of brazen violence against women in both the domestic and public sphere requires the continued effort on the part of the state, the women's movements, and the church. There is much that can be said in this regard and the effort to improve the lives of women.

As the EWA makes clear, in the church,

Women are clamoring for a listening, dialogical, and service-oriented Church that is a non-hierarchical communion of a "discipleship of equals," marked by mutuality, relationality, and inclusivity. There is need for reimagining *Ecclesia* as a "third space" wherein liminal and marginal voices can be heard. Leadership in the Church needs to be redefined in ways that are empowering to all the marginalized sections. Small communities and liminal spaces emerging from local contexts from below demand recognition and mainstreaming. A feminist/womanist transformation of the Church can lead to a more discerning and imaginative way of being Church, that is more vibrant, authentic, just, and totally at the service of the Reign of God.<sup>19</sup>

## What, Then, is Required of Us?

What might feminist/womanist and Asian women's imagination and reflection offer towards the transformation of the church? What do we as the *Ecclesia of Women in Asia* need to do to find a "more discerning and imaginative way of being church, that is more vibrant, authentic, just, and totally at the service of the Reign of God"?<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes:

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<sup>18</sup> Sidney B. Westley, "The Changing Status of Women in Asian Societies," in *The Future of Population in Asia* (East-West Center, 2002), [eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/fileadmin/stored/misc/FuturePop05Women.pdf](http://eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/fileadmin/stored/misc/FuturePop05Women.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> "EWA XI Call for Papers: Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space," *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, [ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/2022/09/01/ewa-xi-call-for-papers/](http://ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/2022/09/01/ewa-xi-call-for-papers/).

<sup>20</sup> "EWA XI Call for Papers."

## *Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space*

If Catholicism is to contribute to the fashioning of a radical democratic catholic-global ethos, then our struggles for the feminist catholicity of the church must remain conscious of their global location and develop spiritual practices and forms of ministry and community that can contribute to justice and well-being for all. We must insist on our intellectual and spiritual freedom to articulate ekklesial, i.e., radical democratic paradigms of how to live in diversity, tolerance, and respect for those who are not like us.<sup>21</sup>

Theologically speaking, feminist and womanist voices the world over have challenged and continue to challenge the notion of canon, orthodoxy, tradition, and universality. Even a cursory survey of feminist/womanist theologies will show that they have questioned classical and traditional understandings of most theological concepts, namely God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, human anthropology, and ecclesiology. These innovative, alternative, and creative configurations and articulations of Christian theology have emerged from contexts of pain and exclusion, by speakers—individuals and communities—who themselves suffer. They speak in their own voices in a context of listening that encourages the telling of truths hitherto suppressed and silenced—voices of women, the earth, those that are disabled, of varied genders and sexual orientation, the traumatized and the colonized, to name a few. Such telling and re-telling, the resulting analyses of power and oppression, and styles of leadership have contributed to the development of subversive discourses. Such discourses come to the fore every time a community, forged by suffering and in solidarity, emerges. Such publics arise as communities that are seeking a shift in power, inspired and driven by democratic ideals of free speech, equality, fairness, justice, and respect for human dignity. Revolutionary and popular movements, education, and ideals of modern

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<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “We are Church—A Kingdom of Priests,” *Women’s Ordination Worldwide (WOW) Second International Conference: “Breaking Silence, Breaking Bread: Christ Calls Women to Lead,”* July 22, 2025, [womensordinationcampaign.org/ottawa-2005/2014/2/2/elizabeth-schussler-fiorenza-we-are-a-church-a-kingdom-of-priests](https://womensordinationcampaign.org/ottawa-2005/2014/2/2/elizabeth-schussler-fiorenza-we-are-a-church-a-kingdom-of-priests).

liberalism have provided means for marginalized groups, including women, to make their voices heard. And they are challenging and forcing the church to take note of its hierarchical structures, theological positions, outdated platitudes and dogmatisms.

If we are to maintain social fabrics and communities of radical discipleship, which help foster justice and the flourishing of life, then we must learn to address not only the many social, political, and economic issues that plague our world but also our theologies and the lacks within them brought to the fore with changes in contexts, and emergence of new movements through the process of synodality. We need to negotiate relationships, across differences and diversity in race, geographical locations, and confessional ideologies in order to work together for the welfare of humankind and the earth.

We need alternative ways to understand power and values that enhance life, community, healing, and justice, that unleash the life-giving energy necessary for transformation and the creation of just and sustainable life in human communities and on the earth. In analyzing power, we often focus on domination and subordination, on oppression and victimization, on power and powerlessness. These analyses are extremely helpful for revealing the exploitation, alienation, and violence of fixed hierarchies. But they do not take us beyond the need for reversals of power, conflicts of power, balance of power, or the condemnation and avoidance of hierarchical power typical of polemics. To shift the conversation to life giving and transforming power, values, and community involvement, I want to direct our attention to sources of renewed personal agency for change and transformation. Perhaps this will enable us to find concrete strategies which we, as individuals and communities of women, can employ in the work of transforming life and the creation of a synodal church.

In what follows, I will consider two texts and derive from them some insight that might inform us of what is required from us, as women, to engender synodality.

## **Jeremiah 31:15–22**

The book of Jeremiah narrates horrifying accounts of death and destruction in the form of siege, military occupation, and forced relocation—very much like the news we wake up to every morning. His testimony to the crisis that was gripping Israel during his time, resulting in the loss of meaning and civility, as well as the collapse of social systems and venerable institutions, sound remarkably familiar to us today. We live in a time of cities and countries in crisis, increasing national debt that threatens future generations, preemptive military doctrines that destabilize large regions and erode international morale and morality, new technologies—all leading to alienation and dehumanization, consumerist values, immigration legislation rooted in xenophobia and garbed in evangelical piety, forced deportations, rapid depletion of natural and cultural resources, ubiquitous violence, torture and systematic killing of civilians, human trafficking and exploitation of children and women, nuclear, biological and chemical terrorism. Religion/faith is also harnessed for the purposes of creating dissent, suspicion, distorted definitions of nationhood, and separation between communities, races, and cultures. These times have also seen unprecedented protests against governments and structures of power, by massive crowds as never seen before, offering hope for change and transformation. These protests for me are uprisings symbolizing divine presence and accompaniment and the Divine speaking through these movements of dissent.

Jeremiah offers words of both hope and chaos. The book displays raw emotion and gives “speech to the disaster” being experienced by Israel, especially between 587–582 BCE. Chaos and

wreckage not only causes physical and emotional havoc, but it also evokes probing questions about meaning: the meaning of atrocity; the meaning of moral chaos; the meaning of divine silence. The prophetic corpus, like many contemporary expressions of art that are informed by

war atrocities, are penetrating responses to multifaceted configurations of evil, hegemony, and cosmic inertia.<sup>22</sup>

The book of Jeremiah provides “a complex theological response, a judgment-salvation schema with multiple voices and counter voices and therefore offers a thick ‘meaning making map’ for those in the midst of suffering.”<sup>23</sup> In one of the most poignant passages of Scripture, the prophet Jeremiah uses Rachel as a personification of the city of Jerusalem and describes her inconsolable grief because her children have been slain or carried into exile. We first meet Rachel, the woman shepherd in Genesis 29. Her life, entwined with that of Jacob and Laban, requires her to wait seven years to marry Jacob and another seven before she becomes a mother. She begs God to give her children (Genesis 30:1), but it is also motherhood that robs her of life (Genesis 35:16–20). Rachel is remembered by her children, grandchildren, and their descendants.

In the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, and when many were taken into exile, Jeremiah recalls her name. Jeremiah, a Benjaminite from the village of Anathoth, was a descendant of Rachel. The people are suffering, and the land is in pain; they lament and pray to God. Rachel, the personification of all Israel’s mothers, weeps over the graves of her children.<sup>24</sup> Jeremiah memorializes her as a mother who weeps and pleads for her children.

Thus says the Lord:  
A voice is heard in Ramah,  
Lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children.  
She refuses to be comforted for her children,

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<sup>22</sup> Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Abingdon Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Stulman and Kim, *You Are My People*, 133ff; see also chapters 4–5.

<sup>24</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Smyth and Helwys Books, 2002), 434.

Because they are no more. (Jeremiah 31:15)<sup>25</sup>

She weeps and refuses to be comforted. Her refusal to be consoled grips our attention. She faces the loss of her children with weeping and loud lamentation, and her crying is bitter. She rejects the comfort extended to her, because she refuses to be reconciled to the injustice and violence of her world. Crying and showing emotion, especially sadness, is understood to be a sign of weakness. Crying is emotional release, but it is also a process of navigation through the complexities of a person's internal world. Despite the resistance to crying, tears can be a positive signal because tears are an indicator not only of emotional vulnerability, but also of strength and courage to face and process difficult experiences. Instead of seeing tears as a weakness, it is important to perceive them as an indication of courage and willingness to address emotional and other wounds. Crying, bitter weeping, is not always a sign of weakness but of resistance which makes way for the new, for transformation and change. Crying indicates significant progress is being made in the process of self-exploration and self-acceptance.

Rachel laments before God, her cry a prayer of lament, and God hears her cry and responds to it with a startling promise. There is hope; your children shall come back to their own country, justice and peace will reign on earth.

Thus says the Lord:  
Keep your voice from weeping  
and your eyes from tears,  
for there is a reward for your work,  
says the Lord:  
they shall come back from the land of the enemy;  
there is hope for your future,  
says the Lord:

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<sup>25</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the passages from Jeremiah in this chapter are from the New Revised Standard Version—Updated Edition (NRSVUE).

your children shall come back to their own country. (Jeremiah 31:16–17)

One can discern other voices in the text, and they all address the intense suffering brought on by the destruction and the exile. Rachel's voice—grief stricken, weeping, and powerless—is accompanied by the obedient, disobedient, and repentant voice of Ephraim, the child who is significantly aware that the suffering and exile is justified and deserved penalty.

Indeed, I heard Ephraim pleading:  
“You disciplined me, and I took the discipline;  
I was like an untrained calf.  
Bring me back; let me come back,  
for you are the LORD my God.  
For after I had turned away, I repented,  
and after I was discovered, I struck my thigh;  
I was ashamed, and I was dismayed  
because I bore the disgrace of my youth.” (Jeremiah 31:18–19)

Women scholars have called attention to the character of God, imaged here as parent. They suggest that the metaphor of parenthood involves God showing “motherly compassion” for the child.

Is Ephraim my dear son?  
Is he the child in whom I delight?  
As often as I speak against him,  
I still remember him.  
Therefore, I am deeply moved for him;  
I will surely have mercy on him,  
says the LORD. (Jeremiah 31:20)

One might ask what is it that necessarily makes God a maternal figure in this text? Surely, a male parent is also capable of showing compassion. Feminist interpretations tend to focus on phrases like “I am deeply

moved,<sup>26</sup> translated alternately as, “my heart yearns for him,”<sup>27</sup> or as “my heart has a desire,”<sup>28</sup> or “my heart longs for him,”<sup>29</sup> which some scholars connect to a “stirring or tumult within” similar to the love a mother has for a child. Rachel’s tears and lament and Ephraim’s plea stir/move the inner parts (the womb)<sup>30</sup> of the Divine which trembles (yearns/longs/moves) for the child Ephraim and result in the third voice, the voice of Mother God who declares compassion and salvation for Israel.

Set up road markers for yourself;  
make yourself signposts;  
consider well the highway,  
the road by which you went.  
Return, O virgin Israel,  
return to these your cities.  
How long will you waver,  
O faithless daughter?  
For the LORD has created a new thing on the earth:  
a woman encompasses a man. (Jeremiah 31:21–22)

These verses display some of what Renita Weems calls “the messiness of intimacy,” indeed covenant intimacy with God.<sup>31</sup> God remains powerful,

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<sup>26</sup> New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized; New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Catholic Edition; New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

<sup>27</sup> New International Version; New International Version—UK; New King James Version; Orthodox Jewish Bible; Revised Standard Version; World English Bible; Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

<sup>28</sup> New Life Version.

<sup>29</sup> New Living Translation; The Voice.

<sup>30</sup> See the *Wycliff Bible*: “For Ephraim *is* a dear son to me, *he is* a delightful child; for though I spoke against him, still I remembered him; and so, my bowels, *or my innards*, be concerned for him, I doing mercy shall have mercy on him, saith the Lord”; or *Young’s Literal Translation*, “A precious son is Ephraim to me? A child of delights? For since my speaking against him, I do thoroughly remember him still, therefore have my bowels been moved for him, I do greatly love him, An affirmation of Jehovah.”

<sup>31</sup> Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Fortress Press, 1995), 82–83.

God punishes, but God is also compassionate and uniquely devoted to Israel.<sup>32</sup> The children of Israel will return, and God assures that this will be the case.

Parallels between Rachel and Yahweh occur in each of its three sections. . . . Yet there is a difference. The human mother refuses consolation; the divine mother changes grief into consolation. As a result, the poem has moved from the desolate lamentation of Rachel to the redemptive compassion of God.<sup>33</sup>

The pain, the grief and the suffering of the people are surrounded by womanly, mothering ways/maternal thinking, which are first initiated by Rachel. The Lord offers a word of hope:

For I, YHWH, promise to bring about something new on the earth,  
something as unique as a woman protecting a man! (Jeremiah 31:22)<sup>34</sup>

This line has created some confusion as is evident from the varied ways in which it has been translated.<sup>35</sup> It has puzzled commentators who either neglect it on the grounds that its meaning is uncertain, unsure, and incomprehensible,<sup>36</sup> or see it as “a simple role reversal of power in which a

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<sup>32</sup> Weems, *Battered Love*, 82–83.

<sup>33</sup> Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress Press, 1978), 45.

<sup>34</sup> New English Translation.

<sup>35</sup> “For the LORD has created a new thing on the earth: a woman encompasses a man,” (NRSV); “For the LORD hath created a new thing in the earth: a woman shall court a man,” (JPS); “For the LORD has created a new thing on the earth: a woman protects a man,” (RSV).

<sup>36</sup> Says Robert P. Carroll: “The wiser course for the exegete is to admit ignorance and acknowledge that ancient texts occasionally do baffle the modern hermeneut. 31:22b is one such baffling text. . . . In the final analysis I must admit that I do not know what v. 22b means. *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Westminster, 1986), 604–605. Cf. also Kathleen O’Connor: “Its meaning for the poem is not clear . . . [it] refers to future sexual relationships in which women will be active agents in the procreation of a restored people. Perhaps . . . women will be capable of protecting warriors . . . it anticipates role reversals of a different sort.” Kathleen O’Connor, “Jeremiah” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (SPCK/Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 176.

woman takes on the power of a man.”<sup>37</sup> Is that what the verse is saying? The vocabulary is strong. Women scholars suggest that the verse is saying that the ways of power and strength, of exclusivity and manipulation, normally associated with the male, have all failed. Instead, Rachel’s faithfulness and patient waiting have become a model for all.

A seminal contribution to the meaning of this verse has been offered by Phyllis Trible. She finds clues to the meaning of this line in Genesis 1:27 in which *zā·kār* (the male) and *n<sup>e</sup>qēbā* (the female) are created in the divine image, both of which are all encompassing terms referring to the entire species of male and female.<sup>38</sup> Jeremiah uses *b<sup>t</sup>ūlā*, a virgin or young woman, in verse 21, who is instructed homeward, but in verse 22 he uses *n<sup>e</sup>qēbā* derived from the verb meaning “pierce, bore, or penetrate,” therefore an experienced woman. It is the *n<sup>e</sup>qēbā* that surrounds not the *zā·kār*<sup>39</sup> or the male of Genesis 1:27 but the *gā·ber*, the young and strong man, the virile, and powerful man, with strong military connotations.<sup>40</sup> There are two contrary images of a woman here<sup>41</sup>—the *b<sup>t</sup>ūlā*—the young, innocent, vulnerable and inexperienced daughter and the experienced, *n<sup>e</sup>qēbā*, and it is the latter who will encompass or surround the strong, powerful, warrior man.

As an inclusive and concluding referent, the *n<sup>e</sup>qēbā* encompasses poetically all the specific female images of the poem. . . . Accordingly,

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. William L. Holladay, “Jeremiah and Women’s Liberation,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1972): 213–233.

<sup>38</sup> Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> Understood as “male offspring.”

<sup>40</sup> The term *gā·ber* is derived from *gabar*, a verb meaning “to prevail, to have strength, to be great.” It is a verb often used with a man/male as subject, that distinguishes him from women, children, and non-combatants, whom he is to defend. The term is used primarily in poetic texts. See Francis Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Hendrickson Academic, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Eerdmans, 1980), 576. Based on Jeremiah 30:5–7, Thompson makes a distinction between daughter Zion and warriors who become women, effeminate: “Israel is then both feminine and effeminate.”

female surrounding man is Rachel, the mother embracing her sons with tears and with speech.<sup>42</sup>

The central paradigm of hope and future transformation in this text is the woman/mother.<sup>43</sup> The female imagery surrounds Ephraim; the female surrounds the warrior; the words of a mother embrace her son.<sup>44</sup> It is a text which maintains that “the surprising new role of women symbolizes a changed order of relationships in a reconstituted and joyous society.”<sup>45</sup> The line therefore goes beyond a simple role reversal and offers a vision, a hope in the transformation and defeat of traditional values of control, power, and conquest that deny life, even extinguish it. Is the prophet saying that the ways of men have failed? Their ways have only brought death, suffering, and tears. Is the prophet therefore suggesting that women should now lead? He seems to be affirming that women’s ways, strategies, and approaches will now surround the man—to bring hope, calm, reconciliation, and transformed living conditions. This word of hope is offered amid conflict, despair, and utter hopelessness.<sup>46</sup>

## Women Talking

Reflection on “synodality” as journeying together, listening, and dialogue reminded me of the 2022 movie *Women Talking* that has left a lasting impression on me. Directed by Sarah Polley, the movie is an adaptation of the 2018 book of the same title written by Miriam Toews, a Canadian novelist, which is “an imagined response to real events.”<sup>47</sup> The events that

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<sup>42</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 48–49.

<sup>43</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, “A New Thing in the Land: The Female Surrounds the Warrior,” in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby (Scholars Press, 1997), 157.

<sup>44</sup> Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” 176.

<sup>46</sup> See also Monica J. Melanchthon, “Mothering Ways and Reconciliation,” *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*, ed. Robert Schreiter and Knud Jørgensen (Regnum, 2013), 146–159.

<sup>47</sup> Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (Faber, 2018).

spurred Toews's imagination took place from 2005 to 2009 at a Mennonite colony in Manitoba, Bolivia, where women and girls, ranging from age 5 to 65, would wake up having no idea what happened, but seeing blood on their sheets and legs, or their underwear missing. These drugged sexual assaults/attacks were apparently attributed (by men of course) to ghosts, demons, Satan, or hysteria ("wild female imagination"),<sup>48</sup> while others accused them of sin, and of covering up adultery, that left many of these women and girls terrorized, pregnant, or dead. When one of the perpetrators is caught, the women find out that eight men—their very own husbands, brothers, relatives, and neighbors—have been sneaking into the bedrooms of women and girls at night, equipped with livestock tranquilizer, and raping their unconscious victims. On average, the attacks took place every three or four days.<sup>49</sup> The colony's elders admitted the problem and tried to shield the accused but had to involve the secular authorities to protect the accused. The question then is how the women should respond. In the real and actual incident, there was a sensational trial, in which the victims showed up to testify. The eight men were sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for the rape and sexual assault of one hundred and fifty women and girls,<sup>50</sup> one as young as three years old.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Toews, "A Note on the Novel," in *Women Talking* (Faber, 2022).

<sup>49</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 15.

<sup>50</sup> The figures vary. In an interview by *The Guardian*, Toews claims that it was more than 130 women. A Mennonite who grew up in a similar colony in Ukraine, Toews expresses an affinity with the women in Bolivia and says she could have been one of them. See Katrina Onstad, "Interview: Miriam Toews: I Needed to Write About These Women. I Could Have Been One of Them," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2018, [theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/18/miriam-toews-interview-women-talking-mennonite](https://theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/18/miriam-toews-interview-women-talking-mennonite); "At least 300 female members of the colony had been attacked, from toddlers to grandmothers," writes Parul Seghal, "In 'Women Talking,' Miriam Toews Ponders Punishment and Justice After Horrifying Crimes," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2019, [nytimes.com/2019/04/02/books/review-women-talking-miriam-toews.html](https://nytimes.com/2019/04/02/books/review-women-talking-miriam-toews.html).

<sup>51</sup> Linda Pressly, "The Rapes Haunting a Community That Shuns the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *BBC News*, May 16, 2019, [bbc.com/news/stories-48265703](https://bbc.com/news/stories-48265703); Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, "The Ghost Rapes of Bolivia," *Vice*, December 22, 2013, [vice.com/en/article/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8/](https://vice.com/en/article/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8/).

The novel and the movie are set in the aftermath of these crimes. The men leave the commune to secure the release of the accused men. The bishop of the colony wants the men to be able to come home and the women to forgive them so that all victims and perpetrators can have a place in heaven. Anyone who does not comply with this is threatened with expulsion from the farm to a life outside for which they have not been equipped, having lived all their lives on the farm. Toews begins the novel by declaring that, the novel is “both a reaction through fiction to these true-life events and an act of female imagination.”<sup>52</sup> The group of women, eight in total, belong to three generations. They are of varied marital status and mostly victims, representing two families, namely the Loewens and the Friesens. In the group are Greta Loewen and Agata Friesen, the oldest women of each family. Their daughters, Mariche and Mejal Loewen and Ona and Salome Friesen, and granddaughters Autje Loewen and Neitje Friesen complete the group. Ona Friesen is pregnant with her rapist’s child, and teenager Neitje Friesen’s mother had committed suicide. Another woman who was present had been raped several times but denied treatment for a sexually transmitted disease by the bishop, because doctors would talk, and the case would be known. Left with “a brief window in which to *imagine* their future,”<sup>53</sup> they meet in a hayloft, a makeshift court of sorts, to hash out a course of action. They appoint August, the one male in the group and the only literate individual in the gathering to write the minutes.<sup>54</sup>

Before they begin their conversation, the women wash each other’s feet, as a “symbolic act representing . . . service to each other,” and in memory

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<sup>52</sup> Toews, “A Note on the Novel.”

<sup>53</sup> Mark Kermode, “*Women Talking* Review—A Stellar Ensemble Energises Sarah Polley’s Timeless Parable,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2023, [theguardian.com/film/2023/feb/12/women-talking-review-sarah-polley-timeless-parable-sexual-abuse-mennonites-rooney-mara-claire-foy-jessie-buckley-frances-mcdormand](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/feb/12/women-talking-review-sarah-polley-timeless-parable-sexual-abuse-mennonites-rooney-mara-claire-foy-jessie-buckley-frances-mcdormand).

<sup>54</sup> In the book, the story is narrated by August Epp, the “minute taker,” “since the women were illiterate and unable to do it themselves.” See Toews, *Women Talking*, 1. A good part of the novel is August’s transcription of the conversation/debate interspersed with occasional observations and background information by August.

of “Jesus’ washing of the feet” of his disciples, while saying “*God bless you to each other.*”<sup>55</sup> The debate which follows arouses danger, doubt, fear, tears, and deep pain as they recall their own experiences as well as giggles and laughter, providing comic relief. Their conversation is interspersed with singing. The women seek to be democratic and have already voted on a referendum offering three choices: 1) Do nothing—forgive, forget, and hope for the best; 2) Stay and fight; or 3) Leave.<sup>56</sup> Through the course of the conversation, which is also a debate, “carried out in Low German, the only language they know,”<sup>57</sup> the women “unpick the ethical conundrums attached to their three possible courses of action.”<sup>58</sup> They had only two days to organize and decide between the options.<sup>59</sup> At one point in the film *Autje*, Mariche’s teenage daughter, addresses herself to Ona’s unborn child and says, “We had 24 hours to imagine what kind of world you would be born into.”

The “Do Nothing,” option was not popular. Some women tended to lean towards it, and “to leave things in the hands of the Lord.”<sup>60</sup> The option to vote for it “would at least be empowering.”<sup>61</sup> But doing nothing would be sinful, because it would denigrate “the central tenet of the Mennonite faith, which is pacifism, because by staying we would knowingly be placing ourselves in a direct collision course with violence, perpetrated by us or against us. . . . By staying we would be inviting harm, we would be in state of war, be bad Mennonites.”<sup>62</sup> The debate was not

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<sup>55</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 19–20.

<sup>56</sup> Because the women were illiterate, they had to draw images to help them distinguish between these options. Option 1 was depicted as an empty horizon, Option 2 was a drawing of two members of the commune engaged in a duel with knives, and Option 3 was depicted as the rear end of a horse. Toews, *Women Talking*, 6. See also, “*Women Talking*,” *The Famous Feminist*, [fmus.org/women-talking](http://fmus.org/women-talking) for the images used.

<sup>57</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Anthony Cummins, “*Women Talking* by Miriam Toews—Review,” *The Guardian*, September 10, 2018, [theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/10/women-talking-miriam-toews-review](http://theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/10/women-talking-miriam-toews-review).

<sup>59</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Cummins, “*Women Talking* by Miriam Toews.”

free of minor conflict between the two families. “Should they stay within the community that has raped and abused them, or leave, thereby casting themselves out of the Garden of Eden, estranged from the God in whom they still place their faith?”<sup>63</sup> But in order to stay, they had to forgive the men. What does forgiveness mean in this instance? “Is forgiveness that is coerced true forgiveness?”<sup>64</sup> asks Ona Freisen. “Perhaps forgiveness can, in some instances, be confused with permission.”<sup>65</sup> Doesn’t God alone have the prerogative to forgive?

Time was short, and the urgency to decide was palpable! They settle in to debate the remaining two options, arguing the relative merits of exit and voice.<sup>66</sup> Salome expresses anger, that she would rather stand her “ground and shoot each man in the heart.” She vows to “burn forever in hell” before she would “allow another man to satisfy his violent urges with the body of my four-year-old child.” Mejal, who has panic attacks, says rather disturbingly that “they made us disbelieve ourselves.” A huge silence follows, screaming to be filled by voices sarcastically described in the novel as “only women talking.”

These women with minimal education were illiterate, but their wisdom, attained through farm and household labor, child-rearing, understanding of the Bible, faith, prayer and intuition, is vast. It is “sufficient to spur the emergence of a powerful and sophisticated collective political consciousness and debate.”<sup>67</sup> They debate over awkward but basic questions such as whether mothers will need to abandon sons if the women decide to leave the men. “Who will take care of our brothers? Who will do the milking and make men their supper?”—revealing the conundrum, they faced as mothers and wives. They realize

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<sup>63</sup> Kermode, “*Women Talking* Review.”

<sup>64</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 26.

<sup>65</sup> Kermode, “*Women Talking* Review.”

<sup>66</sup> A.O. Scott, “‘*Women Talking*’ Review: The Power of Speech,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 2022, [nytimes.com/2022/12/22/movies/women-talking-review.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/22/movies/women-talking-review.html).

<sup>67</sup> Scott, “‘*Women Talking*’ Review.”

that they were treated no better than animals and wondered if women were animals; at least animals fight back and run away!<sup>68</sup>

The questions they raise in the course of the conversation are revealing. “Is it okay to harbor a little bit of hate,” asks Mejal. “A very small amount is a necessary ingredient to life . . . to survival,” says Salome.<sup>69</sup> Is it blasphemy to question and reproach God? What does God really want of women? Who are we after we have liberated ourselves?<sup>70</sup> There is much “moral and theological to-ing and fro-ing, as they spar over how best to remain faithful to a system that has been used to betray them so brutally. The improbable, almost magical result creates something redemptive from a subject that seems anything but.”<sup>71</sup> How they arrive at a clear understanding of their oppression and potential liberation, physically and theologically, is the film’s subject, a source of suspense, emotion and inspiration.

While the book specifies the location to be Molotschna, the film chooses to be vague by not specifying the location. That vagueness as one reviewer writes, “reflects the universality of the story’s themes.” What is also perhaps significant are the three options placed before the women—do nothing, stay and fight, or leave—are options that many women confront at some time in their lives, be it family, marriage, church or workspace. It is reminiscent also of the choice women within the church faced in the early years of feminist consciousness and perhaps in some ways, choices that women wrestle with all the time as they negotiate life, identity, and their humanity.

Through the vibrant and engaging conversation and the theological and political progression, these women embody what Pope Francis alluded to in his opening speech to the Synod, on October 4, 2023, namely, that we must become a church of encounter, of listening and dialogue, “a

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<sup>68</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 24.

<sup>69</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 27.

<sup>70</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 28.

<sup>71</sup> Cummins, “*Women Talking* by Miriam Toews.”

church that makes itself a conversation,” a spirit filled synodal community.<sup>72</sup> The film and the book are mostly about voice—a weaving of voices sometimes in harmony, other times in dissonance, passionate and principled, at times certain and confident, other times searching and vulnerable, caring and angry—in fact raging—sympathetic, and at times mischievous and humorous.

## **Ecclesia of Women in a Synodal Third Space—A Community Forged in Pain**

What might we take away from these two narratives or rather what insights do the texts that we have looked at, albeit briefly, offer us to get us started on making this vision of synodality a reality? First, a pointer to who we are.

The women who gathered in the hayloft were women in pain, and it was their shared pain that created solidarity and the awareness that there were varied ways of responding to the pain. Rachel spearheads the formation of a community forged in pain through her tears and lament and she refuses to be comforted. Her pain and grief and the ensuing resistance to being comforted serve as a catalyst for others to embrace a similar posture. We need to acknowledge that we are a community that has been formed out of pain and some disillusionment with the way things are within the faith community we belong to and in our societies. This pain arises from being excluded, from not being listened to, from being violated, and from recognizing that we are not alone in our pain.

Pain, according to Italian philosopher Antonio Negri, “is a key that opens the door to the community.”<sup>73</sup> Fear creates a hierarchy between the one who fears and the one who causes the fear, since it arises out of an authoritarian and dictatorial foundation. Pain on the other hand enables camaraderie and community and provides the democratic foundation of

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<sup>72</sup> Francis, “Homily at St. Peter’s Square,” October 4, 2023, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2023/documents/20231004-omelia-nuovi-cardinali.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2023/documents/20231004-omelia-nuovi-cardinali.html).

<sup>73</sup> Michael Hardt, “Foreword—Creation beyond Measure,” in Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*, with a foreword by Michael Hardt and commentary by Roland Boer, trans. Matteo Mandarinini (Duke University Press, 2009), xiv.

political society. Collective subjects/communities are formed by shared pain, those that struggle against the diminishing and expropriation of life by power. The power established in pain, is the power of non-being, it is the power of community—an ambiguous essence within an indefinitely creative process. When power includes pain, it leads to the formation of community and the bringing together of life, death, of power and action, giving rise to immense possibilities.<sup>74</sup>

It is our experiences of church, our shared pain, and our identity as women of faith that have brought us together, and enables us to recognize that we occupy the “third space,” a space that is marginal and yet vibrant and alive with shared purpose, creativity, and imagination. We are united in purpose, with power established in this pain and disappointment, the power of being non-beings or diminished beings. We lament our experiences within the church and share our disappointments so as to encourage and empower one another to resist, to rebel, and to imagine a movement that equips us to imagine and strive for a church that is inclusive and allows for a discipleship of equals.

## **What Might We Do to Move Forward, to Be a Synodal Community?**

### ***Mourn***

Mourning is the act of feeling and expressing deep sorrow. We mourn and grieve over the treatment of women, over the hierarchical structures of power in church and society that deny women their personhood, humanity, and dignity. Judith Butler reminds us that the universal experience of loss has contributed to the making of a tenuous “we.”<sup>75</sup> Butler reminds us that we are socially constructed bodies; we depend on each other; and we are at risk of being severed from those attachments. Our shared grief creates community for grief; if it is genuine, cannot be

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<sup>74</sup> Negri, *The Labor of Job*, 90–91.

<sup>75</sup> Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004), 20.

outsourced. It can only be shared. Our mourning is filled with the awareness of social wrongs and is the embodiment of genuine solidarity. The community of *Women Talking*, forged in pain, mourned together their shared experience of abuse and vulnerability and the feeling of being ‘let down’ by the leadership, of being treated as animals by the community and perhaps even by the Mennonite faith. Their gathering in grief and Rachel’s weeping and the community that surrounded her might represent in Butler’s words, a form of “egalitarian mourning.” Mourning and grieving together forge deep human bonds. In the bonds of mourning, we share more. Hence, Butler says that egalitarian mourning can expand the very conception of what it means to be human.<sup>76</sup> It can engender resoluteness and determination to ensure that women will not continue to experience abuse and to work for change and transformation, leading to new life. Our shared pain and love for each other and true mourning have the capacity to produce the conditions for a transformative politics. What do we mourn for? And why?

### ***Lament***

The lament is a passionate expression of grief and sorrow, most often in the form of a formal prayer, song (a dirge), poem, or passionate verbal complaint about something mourned or lost. The “unsettling biblical tradition of prayer that includes expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair and protest to God,”<sup>77</sup> is the lament, characteristic of the Hebrew prayer ubiquitous within the Psalter. Billman and Migliore liken Rachel in Jeremiah 31 to the biblical Job, as “a resister, a protester, who refuses the consolation of unorthodox theology and conventional pastoral care.”<sup>78</sup> They also stress that Rachel’s lament is not for herself. Her prayer will not bring the dead back to life, instead it will assure the continued life of the living. This lamentation is about the affirmation of life.

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<sup>76</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

<sup>77</sup> Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Wipf and Stock, 2006), 6.

<sup>78</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry*, 10.

The prayers and laments are uttered for the sake of the living, for the continuance of their life, for the redemption of the community's soul, its humanity as it were, and its ability to regain the power to feel, to weep, to care and to love.<sup>79</sup>

Lament is not just crying aloud. It begins with naming and questioning the pain. The questions 'Why?', 'How?', and 'When?' are foundational to the lament tradition since the suffering, evil, and chaos is incomprehensible. Although we are not given access to the content of Rachel's lament, we imagine that it was daring, powerful, and disturbing, a lament that is also a prophetic cry, for her crying is a resistance to consolation—"She refuses to be comforted for her children . . ." (Jeremiah 31:5)—and hence is an expression of faithfulness, calling God to account, for God, she believes, is the God of life. God seems to be behaving in ways contrary to what she understood God to be. In refusing to accept easy consolation, Rachel does what is right. Her weeping and lamenting and her resistance to consolation is a protest, a questioning, a censoring of God while at the same time a waiting on God. Her resistance to all easy comfort registers a powerful protest to brazen and outrageous suffering and injustice. It is a protest so deep that it must become a prayer, for only God can provide the needed hope that justice will prevail and that the future will be different.<sup>80</sup>

The women in Molotschna are not said to lament. In other words, there are no words addressed directly to God. But the lament is embedded within their tears, voices, their questions, their anger, their hate, and their bodily presence. Herein lies the initial and required power for the forming of a new just order/community.

Rachel's lament paradoxically makes room for the new. It keeps open the possibility of once again praising God, not falsely or mechanically, but from the heart. Only in the longing for continued life, and redemption from the ravages of sickness, war and suffering, can the seeds of renewed hope for the coming reign of God's justice and peace take root. Rachel's

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<sup>79</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel's Cry*, 16.

lament is not contrary to praise but the precondition of authentic, honest praise.<sup>81</sup>

Courageous people do not flinch from bearing or exposing their pain in public. Lamenting in public, and protesting even at the cost of their bodies, exposing their pain in the most visible of forms—whether through the wearing of black or stripping naked, risking shame and censure—their lament forms are radical and confronting! Women mourn for their children, but they also mourn for their people, their countries, their churches, and those involved in the conflict. They are aware that violence is not the path to take; there is no security in it; in fact, there is no security in the blood shed by innocent victims. They are cognizant of the fact that there are other non-violent ways to address violence. What is our lament? How might we employ lament in our work?

### *Imagine*

The only grace we can have is the grace to imagine. Imagination is born out of hope, and hope emerges among the vulnerable and wounded.<sup>82</sup> Hope is not only about the future, but also, in fact, the fuel that keeps the current struggles going. Hope is not found in triumphal hegemony or the customary military pomp and circumstance—that is, in the garb of winners.<sup>83</sup> Hope is born when one is able to resist and relinquish oppressive modes of power and orientation. When one surrenders “one’s old identity and accept one’s marginal status, then despair loses its grip, and hope is born.”<sup>84</sup>

The women arrive at a final decision—Leave! They are nervous, having never ventured out of the commune, ignorant of what they might encounter. But there is no time to dwell on the unknown. They need to prepare for the journey, a journey to freedom, to peace, to find purpose, to life. They need food, money, leaving 10 percent as tithe, a map, a buggy—

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<sup>81</sup> Billman and Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry*, 17.

<sup>82</sup> Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Fortress Press, 2002).

<sup>83</sup> Stulman and Kim, *You Are My People*, 136–137.

<sup>84</sup> Stulman and Kim, *You Are My People*, 135–136.

material essentials. But they also imagine a future where they have freedom, freedom and time to learn how to write their names. And they carry with them their memories, their faith, and the knowledge that “consciousness is resistance” and that “faith is action.”<sup>85</sup>

We need to imagine a future before we can work for its realization. Imagination is vital. It demands attention and has the capacity to generate compassion. Imagination can enable us to see beyond ourselves (like Hannah and Mary the mother of Jesus, who put their imagination into song) and toward the entire human species and all that is endangered along with us (such as other marginalized groups and the earth). We can then try to envisage how present conflicts may affect beings not yet even born and consider our responsibility toward the past as well—what many have called our stewardship of resources that are not ours to use up or destroy at will.<sup>86</sup> What is the content of our imagination?

### ***Practice Mothering Ways***

At the center of Toews’s book are also mothers who confess and seek forgiveness from their daughters for not raising them differently, for not encouraging agency and independence and voice, and mothers determined to protect the lives of their children, to raise and socialize their boys with respectful attitudes to girls and women. While the book does not tell us the ways these women may act to bring change, justice and peace, what the prophet Jeremiah is calling for is the employment of maternal thinking which dominates the text—both human and divine—to grieve and to console. It involves adopting a mindset focused on nurturing, protecting the vulnerable, fostering growth, and prioritizing care, responsibility, and connection. These often stem from the practices of mothering but are applicable to broader life, politics, and security, involving attentive love

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<sup>85</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, 214.

<sup>86</sup> Sissela Bok, *A Strategy for Peace: Human Values and the Threat of War* (Pantheon Books, 1989), 27–28.

and a focus on vulnerability rather than control.<sup>87</sup> It's about a deep-seated, active care for what is small, weak, or developing, extending beyond biological motherhood to a philosophy of peace and responsibility.

Most women and mothers sit on the pivot of power and powerlessness, of domination and silence, of hope and despair, and of abuse and empowerment. Women employ a power that is channeled and used for the betterment of those in pain and suffering. It is power that is vested in bodies, in solidarity and community; it is a means to action; it is 'power-with' and is related to knowledge, love, difference and embodiment. Per Denise Ackerman, "Power is the reciprocal energy that engages us with one another and with God in such a way that power becomes synonymous with the vitality of living fully and freely."<sup>88</sup> It is a power that "surrounds," not overpowers; it is a power that is life giving; it is power tapped from one's grief. And it is a power that is compassionate; it is the power of repentance, of brokenness, and shame; it is the power that is capable of overcoming pain and suffering, of neutralizing death and violence, of transforming defiance and shame through actions that are risky, frightening, and threatening.<sup>89</sup>

### ***Recognize the Power of "Voice"***

We use our voices all the time—to communicate our needs and wants. But the idea of "voice" or "having a voice" goes much deeper, because having a voice gives an individual agency and power, and a way to express one's values, beliefs, desires and aspirations both for oneself as well as for society at large. In our discussions within the church and communities with a liberational bent, we have often spoken about "giving voice to the

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<sup>87</sup> Sarah Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in *Child Nurturance*, vol. 1: *Philosophy, Children, and the Family*, ed. A.C. Cafagna, R.T. Peterson, C.A. Staudenbaur (Springer, 1982), 101–126, doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-3473-6\_11.

<sup>88</sup> Denise Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Eerdmans, 2003), 74.

<sup>89</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, "A New Thing in the Land: The Female Surrounds the Warrior," 157.

voiceless,” and in some ways, if you will permit me to say, the phrase has an arrogant tone to it. What do we mean when we say we are about “giving voice to the voiceless”? Who are “the voiceless”? The ones who are usually excluded from public discourse—and who, more broadly, lack political and economic power and visibility are described as “the voiceless.”

The notion of “the voiceless” therefore suggests a fixed and clearly defined group. It also implies that the so-called voiceless do not have a voice, that they are incapable of expressing themselves. Such an understanding safeguards the privileged and the powerful, who present themselves as spokespersons of the voiceless. It also deprives the voiceless of their visibility and agency. The “voice of the voiceless” concept masks the fact that voiceless people do in fact have voices. But the voices of the historically underrepresented, marginalized, discriminated, economically disadvantaged, the disabled and vulnerable seen as the voiceless have actually been rendered speechless, whose voices have been suppressed, silenced, ignored or taken or perhaps even been stolen. Voicelessness in our society is not just of expression, but of reception as well.<sup>90</sup>

Proverbs 31:8–9 encourages us to “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.” This idea of speaking for someone else is significant. What does this involve? Giving such communities “a voice” would involve analyzing, recognizing, and challenging the means and methods by which they have been rendered voiceless. In other words, voice must be understood in relation to other forms of exploitation—be it sex, race, caste, ethnicity, ability, and the like. These structural inequalities need to be identified, unmasked, and queried. These voices, often sidelined, need to be listened to, heard, and amplified to feel the weight of their meaning, power, and resonance.

Rachel’s voice and lament is heard, and God responds. In the safe space of the hayloft, the women share their voice, and each hear the other and share their pain through ritual and dialog. But the space also provides for

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<sup>90</sup> Jesse Wilson, “Voices from Solitary: ‘Loneliness Is a Destroyer of Humanity,’” *Solitary Watch*, July 7, 2012, [solitarywatch.org/2012/07/07/voices-from-solitary-loneliness-is-a-destroyer-of-humanity/](http://solitarywatch.org/2012/07/07/voices-from-solitary-loneliness-is-a-destroyer-of-humanity/).

expressions of anger, pain, fear, lament, laughter, for questions. In my mind, the speaking and the listening are synodality in action. In the sharing, each woman had to go where the other led them, sometimes hesitantly and other times willingly, informed by their experience, faith, and the desire to forge a new life, free, where they could exercise their freedom and their identity as women created in the image of a mothering God, where they could infuse the world with women's ways of being and thinking and relating.

## Conclusion

Synodal engagement is both a process and a result, at the center of which is the creation of dialog, listening in trust and tolerance, justice, and peace. The process and the outcomes are embedded in each other, and the steps taken toward a state of life and transformation must themselves reflect the qualities of relating such as caring, mutual respect and honesty.<sup>91</sup> To be an effective presence and influence in the third space, requires a sensitive and feeling-ful understanding of the suffering women and marginal communities face both within and outside the church. It requires that we use our experience of marginalization and knowledge derived from it and our empathetic understanding in service of our caring for others and ourselves. This is the center piece of womanist/feminist and maternal thinking.

A commitment to life and transformation “requires disputants to be sufficiently capable of experiencing, acknowledging, and articulating feelings that their capacity for transformation . . . is not impaired by emotional rigidity.”<sup>92</sup>

Women employ their varied experience—of love, of tenderness, and of compassion. The tender love and resistance Jeremiah perceived came to focus in the lovely figure of the earthly mother, Rachel, and the divine

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<sup>91</sup> Cynthia E. Cohen, *A Poetics of Reconciliation: The Aesthetic Mediation of Conflict* (PhD diss., University of New Hampshire, 1997), 25.

<sup>92</sup> Cohen, *A Poetics of Reconciliation*, 70.

mother, YHWH, whose womb was moved. Miriam Toews's book is an "act of female imagination." The women in her imagination did not want pity or revenge. They only wanted a better world for themselves and a safe future for their children. They decided to leave the community. Their leaving is not a rejection of their faith or belief, but rather a way to re-establish it on a firmer, more coherent moral basis. They imagined "a new colony" of trust and safety, of respect and voice, of justice and fairness, of dignity and relation. The book recalls and rekindles the spirit of protest against all arbitrary and unaccountable authority.

Culturally women have been conditioned to think relationally, to prize caring, and favor egalitarian models geared to sharing. They use experience to guide them into new ways of seeing, of being, of caring, and of envisioning a new world. Their bodies and lives are store-houses of experience, mostly of agony, but out of this pain arises a strong yearning for relationship and community. It is in this yearning lies their power both personal and spiritual. In the consideration of the biblical text and *Women Talking*, and knowledge derived from the functioning of women's groups for peace and reconciliation, mutual caring, respect and relationality, the ability to feel, to mourn, to weep, to lament, and risk oneself, courage, being guided by experience, imagination, hope and a relinquishment of modes of power and orientation that oppress and subjugate, solidarity—these are the ingredients to sustain life as offered by the powerless and the way forward to establish a "new colony" of discipleship, of equality and fairness.

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