# Negotiating Sacred Roles: A Sociological Exploration of Priests Who Are Mothers


## Abstract

In 1992 in a historic move, the Church of England voted to allow women's ordination to priesthood and in 1994 the first women priests started to be ordained. Despite much research interest, the experiences of priests who are mothers to dependent children have been minimally investigated. Based on in-depth interviews with seventeen mothers ordained in the Church, this paper will focus on how the sacred-profane boundary is managed. Priests who are mothers have a particular insight into the Church hierarchy as they symbolically straddle the competing discourses of sacred and profane. However, instead of reifying these binaries, the experiences of these women show how such dualisms are challenged and managed in everyday life. Indeed, in terms of experience, ritual, ministry and preaching, priests who are mothers are resisting, recasting and renegotiating sacred terrain in subtle and nuanced ways. Mothers thus not only negotiate the practical and sacramental demands placed on priests, but also illuminate how the sacred domain is regulated and constructed.



## Key Words

Motherhood, Priesthood, Church of England, Sacred Roles


## Introduction: The Construction of Priesthood and Motherhood

The aim of this paper is to highlight how being a priest and a mother is lived out and negotiated in the sacred terrain of the Church of England, where women's ordination has been allowed only since 1992 (women's ordination in non-conformist traditions has a much longer history, with many traditions having ordained women since the early 20th century). This article will start by highlighting the theoretical lens which informs this study, highlighting how the sacred and profane can be theorized in relation to priests who are mothers. The methodology will be discussed, followed by a consideration of some of the findings on how women negotiate priesthood and motherhood in sacred space. The article will foreground how women are experiencing their role as priests and mothers, highlighting how the experiential can change how priesthood is understood. Different spheres of priesthood (ritual engagement, pastoral activities and preaching) will then be considered, to emphasize the everyday negotiations made by priests who are mothers and how the perspective of motherhood can change the performance of these tasks, compared with the traditional masculinist enactment of priesthood. Indeed, I will argue that whilst priests who are mothers are able to make significant changes to the way these spheres are constituted, these are tempered changes. Priests who are mothers are still a numerical minority in the Church and women are still curtailed by traditional Church approaches, thus limiting the extent to which change can be effectively enacted. The article highlights how women negotiate their position in the context of a traditional organization, and is therefore relevant to those interested in gendered organizations and gendered performances in masculinist work environments more generally.

Knott has defined the sacred as 'marking off or setting apart things, places, and events' (Knott, 2005:122), following a Durkheimian distinction where the profane is separate from the sacred. Delving further, however, Knott (2005) articulates how the sacred and profane are

embedded in each other. Bowie has said that the sacred and profane 'occur together, and in opposition to one another…. Both the sacred and the profane are part of the same ordering system' (Bowie, 2000:52). Indeed, recent scholarship (Howe, 2009; Knott, 2005; Kong, 2001) emphasizes the fluidity between the sacred and profane, but at the same time highlighting the process of marking and boundary maintenance that is undertaken. This often has gendered repercussions. As Kay Turner argues, sacred space 'is created as sacred by men and in most societies women have little or no access to it. Women live in the profane world, the world that is incapable of being transformed or of transforming those who live in it' (Northup, 1997:55, quoting Turner, 1982:222). Since the inception of Christianity, the sacralization of women was bound up with notions of paganism, impacting upon women's subsequent inclusion in the Church of England (Raphael, 1996). Priesthood itself is imbued with a sense of sacredness which is endorsed through tasks, ritual and clothing that are set aside and reserved exclusively for the priest. For example, only priests can consecrate the elements during Eucharistic worship and only priests wear the chasuble connected with this ritual. As men alone traditionally occupied this role, sacredness became bound up with the male body and centred upon masculinist norms (Aldridge, 1989; Bock, 1967), with masculinist meanings that operates on the basis of desired masculine characteristics, often linked with hierarchy, male fraternity and the normalization of the male body in such contexts and spaces. Thus the organization is not a neutral and natural order, but a space where certain socially constructed masculinities are privileged and where rules are forged on the basis of the inclusion of only male bodies (see Monaghan, 2002).

Chidester and Linenthal (1995) argue that power and ownership are crucial in understanding how the sacred is formulated, with women historically being denied a role in this process within the Church. Instead the sacred has been conceptualized through traditional male

hierarchies and norms (Aldridge, 1989; Bock, 1967). Sacred space is central to this classification as sites upon which this power play is constituted, intimately tied to the politics of domination and exclusion (Kong, 2001), with traditional sites of worship such as churches still operating as a powerful currency in representing the sacred sphere (Chidester and Linenthal, 1995; Davie, 2007; Knott, 2005). The body plays a crucial role in mapping out these spatial boundaries and negotiations (Knott, 2005). Indeed, women's position in the Church has been inextricably linked with the conceptualisation of the body, where women's bodies, being read through the lens of the profane and carnal, have been used as a tool to deny them the status-bearing sacred roles of the Church (Furlong, 1988). When women have sought an equitable place, they have been defined in dangerous terms, as 'an ineradicable virus in the bloodstream' (Furlong, 1988:8).

This has been disrupted with women's admission to priesthood, where new processes of marking and boundary-maintenance between the sacred and profane are undertaken (Howe, 2009; Kong, 2001) and where intense argument and disagreement emerge over the understanding of sacred space. For example, some saw the bishops that ordained the first group of women as being tainted through this action (dubbed the 'theology of taint' - Dyer, 1999; Furlong, 1998); thus women entering holy orders were profaning what had been sacred (Shaw, 1998). The body became the site of contestation, and whilst men's existence as a sexual being was downplayed, women's bodies were constructed as carrying the burden of the profaning, with anxiety invoked when sacred roles became open to them. Indeed, at the inception of this Church change, legislation was put into place restricting women's priesthood, meaning that even today, parishes do not have to accept the ministry of a woman priest (Furlong, 1998). Thus when women undertake sacred rites in historically and sacredly sanctioned churches, in spaces behind the altar which have traditionally been closed off to

them, new understandings of the sacred can emerge. However, when the enactment of this ritual occurs on sacred sites which have traditionally denied their input, the legacy of this exclusion cannot be downplayed and will continue to have repercussions when this space is reconfigured (Tweed, 2006).

When priests are also mothers, greater symbolism comes into play, for motherhood itself has straddled its own sacred-profane dualism. The enormous influence of the Virgin Mary and the resulting promotion of silent yet sacred motherhood contrasts sharply with the way birth and the care of bodies has been deemed profaning (Walker, 2003). Indeed, this is brought into focus with the juxtaposition created between Eve and Mary, where Eve represents the bodily and the carnal. In this discourse, women are left with few safe spaces to occupy, for if sacrality is obtained through motherhood, this is negated by the "profaning" sexual process in order to achieve this, a process which, of course, did not apply to Mary. Thus all women are perceived as Eves (Furlong, 1991) whilst mothers themselves are often invoked through both sacred and profane discourses (Dinnerstein, 1978). Church Fathers historically saw women's bodies as dangerous (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998) and the furthest removed from holiness, whilst at the same time, mothers have been revered for their suffering and silence, epitomized in the construction of the Virgin Mary.

Feminists have shown how women's flesh has been profanized through its connections with the embodied elements of motherhood, namely pregnancy and childbirth. Raphael (1996) argues for a ritual reappraising of women's bodies, and is extremely critical of the way Christianity has profanized the flesh. Raphael (1996) purports that patriarchal religion has dominated the process of birth and care, and she links this to the way men are fearful of the part women play in creating new life. Whereas the act of birthing could be venerated (indeed,

earlier imaginings of the Great Mother Goddess indicate this was once the case) male-dominated systems have sought to control and profanize the process.

Secular accounts of motherhood find it hard to ignore the power of religious discourse in shaping popular understandings of motherhood, thus interpreting motherhood as the terrain where traditional religious discourses have been inscribed (Gill, 1994). Rich (1976) argues that religion has had a large part to play in the institutionalisation of motherhood. Judeo-Christian theology has linked motherhood to suffering, and through the story of Eve childbirth has been constructed as a punishment from God (Warner, 1978) which some have used as justification for refusing birthing women pain relief (Rich, 1976).

Forna's account of the 'motherhood myth' looks at how traditional imagery in the iconography surrounding Madonna and child have moulded and created ideals of motherhood:

> Although Christianity did not, on its own, invent the motherhood myth, the Church has been highly efficient at marketing the maternal ideal. Mary is held up to Catholic women everywhere as an inspirational figure… Baby Jesus is never painted with his head thrown back and bawling. His mother never looks testy or tired... No one has ever painted Mary going about the mundane tasks of motherhood (Forna, 1998:9).

Whilst other narratives have imbued birth and motherhood with an alternative symbolism, where the Goddess is prioritized and women's bodies are reinstated with sacrality (see Isherwood and Stuart, 1998; Raphael, 1996), such accounts can be deemed anti-Christian Knott, 2005). This was salient especially in early Christianity when Christianity was set up in

opposition to the fertility cults of the time (Beattie, 2002). Thus priests who are mothers, operating in a traditional organisation like the Church of England, may find it difficult to radically reinterpret motherhood within sacred space. These conflicts are pinpointed in Duckett's (2002) autobiographical account of being a priest and a mother, when she experienced a feeling of apprehension on telling her parish that she was pregnant. However, on being overwhelmed by the positive goodwill of the congregation, where her pregnancy status made her 'seem more "human", more "accessible"' compared with the perception of previous male incumbents as 'distanced' (Duckett, 2002:119) she questioned why women, by virtue of giving birth, would be seen as being more accessible. Indeed, Duckett goes on to wonder, 'Have people responded so well to my pregnancy because I am upholding for them the patriarchal ideal that a woman's role and true fulfilment in life can ultimately only be found not in her work, but in motherhood?' (Duckett, 2002:119). At the same time, Duckett praises the way her embodied image offers up new symbolic engagements for the congregation:

> [T]he presence of a heavily pregnant body behind the altar... was for my congregations a very real image for them of what they hoped and desired the Church to be… where the presence of God is acknowledged and named in *all* aspects of life – even in the physical, passionate and emotional experiences of sex and labour and in all the messiness that comes with it (Duckett, 2002:120, emphasis in original).

Therefore, whilst traditional maternity may be supported and endorsed in the Church, there is also evidence of potential reimaginings of the sacred, and a celebration of the sacred at the level of the everyday. This is precisely the context in which this study emerges, investigating specifically how priests who are mothers experience this terrain.

## The Study

This study is based on in-depth interviews undertaken between 2006 and 2007 with seventeen women priests and deacons (clergy are ordained as deacons first, and are then ordained as priests after a probationary period of one year). There was a vast range of experience captured in the data cohort, from curates to parish priests to women at the diocesan level, with some women having just entered the Church, and others being part of the first cohort of women priests to enter the Church. Ages ranged between 31 and 54. Women were interviewed if they currently had a child or children still at secondary school or younger, or if they had experience of being ordained and a mother in the recent past, even if their children had since become adults. They represented a very under-represented group in the research literature. The women interviewed identified with a range of theological affiliations (with priests self-identifying with traditions including evangelical, liberal, liberal catholic, and 'middle of the road'), Church roles, family circumstances and part-time/full-time status. Most of the priests were stipendiary (thus paid) and a significant number were also married to priests.

All the women were white and the majority were middle class. The Church of England is recognized as an organisation where religious professionals are mainly white and middle class (Thorne, 2000; Walsh, 2001) and the small-scale nature of the study, the dependency on the goodwill of gatekeepers, and a focus on attaining a sample of mothers (who are already a numerical minority in the Church), meant that greater diversity could not be achieved in the time available. All respondents were given pseudonyms and, specifically for those in identifiable roles, exact job titles were not divulged.

The sample was geographically diverse, with respondents being included from nine different dioceses in England. Respondents were contacted through the Women's Ministry Adviser within each diocese. Interview questions were thematically grouped into two key areas: experiences within the Church (including an account of their faith journey, subsequent decision-making around becoming a priest, and the experiences that followed) and experiences of motherhood and family life, linking this back to their role within the Church and how each impacted upon the other. Data were then thematically analysed, with codes emerging directly from the data and utilising Hesse-Biber and Leavy's (2006) concept of the iterative process where there is continual interaction between the data, research literature and the process of analysis. The research was informed by a feminist methodology which sought to give space to priests to document their experiences in detail, in order to obtain in-depth accounts. This feminist approach is underscored by a concern with the empowerment of women, and the vocalisation of their perspectives and experiences (Griffiths, 1995) in order to help understand the complex ways in which 'gender' is multiply located and lived out (Baxter, 2003). Here there is an explicit concern with taking an institution (the Church of England) and considering how personal narratives relate to wider systems and processes, exploring whether narratives can be linked together in order to generate general themes and experiences. At the same time, in line with postmodern feminist understandings, a claim to "truth" is not being made.

## Lived Priesthood: Motherhood as Experience

In this analysis, it is the *experiences* that priests who are mothers undergo which are pivotal to the way in which priesthood can be reimagined, and as such, this does not offer an

essentialist account. Rather it will indicate how women's experiences as mothers can often lead to new ways of working in the Church. Indeed, traditionally, priests have been seen as distanced and disconnected from everyday experience (Duckett, 2002) but when priests are seen as publicly enacting their motherhood role, it can disrupt the separation between priesthood and laity:

> *There is nothing like having children as a real leveller… whatever images people have of priests as 'holier than thou', when people are in the playground [and] see you getting annoyed with your kids like everybody else does, they know that you're simply human too and that's a good thing… I can see it makes people think you understand what life is like for them because you actually have to deal with all those same issues about children doing you head in, what a juggle life can be and I think that's a positive thing* (Laura, mother of two, chaplain)

> *Children… just don't allow you to do the sort of 'holier than thou' bit which I think is very healthy. You know, the congregation frequently see me... less than sort of gentle and polite. They just bring you down to earth all the time* (Natalie, mother of three, team vicar).

Therefore, priests who are mothers, by showing that they have to cope with the same struggles experienced by every other parent, are bringing a new ordinariness into their role. They become role models in non-perfection.

But other priests were ambivalent about this. Esther articulated that she felt held back when the cerebral and the everyday came into conflict:

> *I find I carry the whole family's agenda in my head. So… I'm thinking about my Sunday and all the jobs that I've got to do - has so and so done their piano practice, or violin practice or their homework. Arabella has very, very long hair and she's not terribly good at brushing it herself, so she'll come along to church with her hairbrush because she doesn't like [Dad] brushing her hair. She'll come with her hairbrush and comes into the vestry and we do her hair before the service and all that kind of thing. So I find I get frustrated a lot of the time, that my mind is occupied with domestic stuff* (Esther, mother of three, priest in charge).

In this account the management of public and private space is immensely difficult, with a focus on upholding traditional dualistic oppositions. The domestic sits uneasily with the cerebral, and as, historically, the brain has been associated with the sacred (and ultimately with God – especially in the Protestant tradition), priests may feel lacking when their thoughts are not purely focused on the theoretical (and thus "Godly"). Therefore, because of the way priesthood has been constructed, mothers may feel inadequate because they are more connected with the material, physical realities of everyday life (Miller-McLemore, 1994). Laura and Lois also discussed the way in which motherhood can remove the stillness and quietness that is often seen as necessary for spirituality to manifest itself but it is perhaps less than helpful to divide these two realms of experience (Hebblethwaite, 1984) as this has often been used to justify women's exclusion from sacred spaces. Indeed, when the sacred, prayerful stillness and the monastic ideal are endorsed and intertwined, it leaves little room for the placement of mothers in sacred space, meaning that priests like Esther feel excluded from the emblems of sacredness - contemplation and theorising - despite their ordained credentials.

## Enacting Ritual

The Eucharistic celebration acts as one of the two sacraments that since the Victorian era has been a key Church ritual (Russell, 1980). The idea of a priest who is a mother celebrating communion can give a powerful message about the new status of womanhood and motherhood (Irigaray, 1993). Potentially the trappings of profanity can be removed, so that the dualistic distinction between the sacred and profane becomes untenable. This image becomes more real when mothers in the study describe this experience:

> *I even celebrated with her on my hip, with old ladies in their 70s... they said 'Oh my gosh seeing you celebrate with your child, in the lady chapel, has done something different to the Eucharist for us'. So it was just such a lovely, positive experience* (Dawn, mother of one, incumbent).

> *I've been able to celebrate communion holding my son in my arms because he doesn't want to go anywhere else… And actually, when they saw that, a lot of people said 'Oh that was really nice, actually'. I'm sure there were some people saying 'Oh she shouldn't have done that' [laugh]* (Isobel, mother of two, team vicar).

Interestingly, the circumstances around the priests including their children in a Eucharistic celebration were tied up with wider issues surrounding obtaining childcare - this breakdown in negotiating domestic issues facilitated a change in ritual. Bell's (1992) understanding of ritual is that it is a mediated activity subject to change (despite an adherence to tradition) and that it is malleable to power relationships. The priests here, who in extreme circumstances

have directly involved their children in a ritual, have collapsed the boundary between sacred and profane space and have offered a new symbol to the participants of the ritual. This acts as a disturbance of traditional ways of enacting the Eucharistic celebration, which some would argue has a traditional lineage that should not be altered. Yet, as Bell (1992) shows in her study of the Catholic Eucharist, this ritual has historically undergone many changes, but because of the slow pace of change, it appears superficially as if tradition has always been followed. This indicates that even ancient ritual is subject to alteration and the new symbolism added in this rite should not be seen as nullifying that rite. Therefore, optimistically, these women can be seen as charting a new phase - evidence of the reimagining of the sacred and offering a more inclusive space for mothers. The messiness of the household is embraced in the sacred Eucharistic rite and acts, in Bell's (1992) terms, as a renegotiation of ritual.

It is pertinent that there was a lack of censure by those involved in the ritual – no participant had overtly complained and the feedback received was affirmative. As parishioners were not interviewed, however, it is hard to gauge their reaction and such instances of ritual adaptation tended to occur at quiet services like the mid-week Eucharist, so the possibility for censure was lessened. The way in which the women framed their experiences, however, with consideration given to the reactions of those present, indicates that anxiety and nervousness underpin their accounts. There is specific concern regarding how their sacral performance will be perceived by those participating in ritual, pointing to the strength for potential negativity over their officiating practices. As Bell (1992) shows, ritual enactment is not simply a top-down power exercise by the person conducting the rite; rather, it is something that can be resisted and interpreted diversely. Jones's (2004) research has indicated that parishioners are overwhelmingly supportive of women priests and this appears not to be

changed when parishioners see their priests holding their children during this Christian rite. However, this research does not uncover the way ritual participants interpreted this scene – for some congregants, it may have symbolically embodied the Mother and Child, perhaps endorsing traditional (silent) maternity. However, the priest does not remain silent – unlike the Virgin, the priest is empowered to speak and enact the ritual. The Eucharistic celebration remains at the heart and although the Virgin is consumed entirely by the care of her son, a celebrant as mother, holding her child in her arms, is enacting both her motherhood and priesthood in undivided harmony. At this point, motherhood and priesthood are reconfigured and represented in a sacred act. Yet the wider implications of this should not be overstated. As mothers with dependent children are a numerical minority in the Church, although such experiences may benefit those actually present, it is hard to gauge the wider impact of this.

The Eucharist was also reimagined not only through the mediation of private sphere roles with public rites, but also through the embodied presence of the priest. Rebecca discusses the iconographic significance of her pregnant body clothed in vestments, saying it was 'an obvious sign that you are a woman and that you are somebody that has had sex. It was a striking image…. [and it was] something iconic for a lot of women'. Rebecca had rejected the traditional rhetoric surrounding the pregnant body and felt that she was literally changing the imagery of the Church and giving a new perspective for women in the congregation. No longer was pregnancy to be associated with the profane and the dirty, but it could be sacredly endorsed. Similarly, Dawn discusses celebrating communion whilst pregnant and the words of the service having a much deeper meaning and resonance within the context of a traditional congregation where the churching of women had only ceased a decade earlier (the Churching of Women is a church-reintegration ceremony traditionally held for a mother after she has given birth, which has often been negatively understood as a patriarchal rite

facilitating the cleansing of women following the 'profaning' act of childbirth – see Furlong, 1991):

> *Celebrating the Eucharist when I was pregnant and I was saying 'This is my body and this is my blood'… it was just so vivid and so strong and you know, given that it was a [traditional] congregation I wasn't... too graphic with them… In fact, they were still churching women until about 10 years before I was curate… so it had been the opposite. That it was something dirty and you don't talk, unless you're with other women, you don't talk about the experience of childbirth or the process of pregnancy* (Dawn, mother of one, incumbent).

Interestingly, some priests discussed how the ritual is changed by a woman celebrant even without the embodied presence of either a pregnant body or a child in sanctuary space. As Emily articulates:

> *Women and mothers get involved in the real mess... you are a person who has dealt in all that real bodily mess for people and yet you can still come to this incredibly sacred and special time and consecrate these elements… I'm ordained to be in the middle of the muddle all the time and bring all that muddle and mess into the sanctuary and that's where the priest is the bridge... The bridge between God and the people… showing that God is involved in all of that by our being allowed in even though we may have just come from changing nappies and doing all of that* (Emily, mother of two, curate).

Therefore Emily was reappropriating sacred space by arguing that bringing in the messiness of the everyday actually enhances priesthood, creating a more encompassing priesthood. It also implies that sacredness is not just associated with the theoretical and cerebral but can be linked to the practical and the bodily too.

By having women priests enact sacred roles, there is the potential for old binaries to be dislodged and troubled. The women in the sample reappraised their links with the sacred, thus rejecting the taboos placed on them by others. But it was consistently stressed that such experiences were to re-sacralize *all* women, mothers or not, rather than just those women who were priests. Indeed, this supports Milford's (1994) assertion that what happens in the Church will have repercussions for society as a whole, implying that women priests are not only unlocking sacred doors for themselves, but are doing so for all women by reintegrating the sacred and the everyday. Irigaray (1993) argues that the Eucharist, with only men as celebrants, removes women (particularly the mother) from sacrality and secures it as a masculinist rite. Irigaray (1993) contends that when mothers are invested with the responsibility of this role, there will be a reimagining of priesthood, evoked through her imagery of mothers and daughters celebrating communion together.

Indeed, although any woman undertaking these sacred tasks traditionally reserved for men can be seen as disrupting the normative Church order, this is heightened with the inclusion of minority bodies such as the pregnant woman or the mother, because of their embodied representation. As Isherwood asserts, 'Christianity is about the flesh and blood reality of people's lives in which co-creation and co-redemption are lived out, so it follows that all manner of embodiment and embodied experience is a further unfolding of the divine/human reality that we live' (Isherwood, 2007:2). However, as she goes on to explain, women's

bodies have been denied and devalued, and with it, 'the mother is diminished, as the female aspect of deity has been all but obliterated except for faint glimpses through the construction of Mary' (Isherwood, 2007:108). Thus pregnant women and mothers are so salient because they are at the cutting edge of sacred-profane boundary negotiation, and they are disrupting and challenging this binary. It brings into sharp focus the objections to women's priesthood and what happens when women's bodies do not mirror men's. It challenges the idea of the silent mother who is inscribed with meaning by masculinist culture (Isherwood, 2007; Walker, 2003) and rather brings her into the public sphere, representing the sacred and emphasising instead the untenable binary of public and private spheres; sacred and profane roles. Isherwood (2007) argues that the mother is made safe when she is confined to the private sphere, unable to undermine men's infant dependency on her. This is disrupted when women's bodies that do not represent the normative male (particularly the pregnant body) enter sacred space and are endorsed with tasks in that space.

This can similarly be the case with other minority bodies such as disabled, ethnic minority, LGBT or overweight bodies (Farmer, 1992; Isherwood, 2007). Indeed, Butticci's (2010) research indicates that other bodies are actively challenging sacredly masculinist priesthood. Her consideration of West African Pentecostal women clergy living in Italy highlights much of the border-crossing, boundary negotiation and fluidity that is similarly lived out by the mothers in my sample, but where their minority ethnic status also has to be negotiated. The normativity of traditional male, white priesthood is dramatically challenged when their embodiment as robed clergy comes into visual conflict in a Catholic society where priesthood for women is denied. Butticci (2010) details that women preachers may even be confronted by police for their attire, thus emphasising the anxiety and censorship that comes to the fore when traditional sacred embodiments are disrupted.

In assessing the means through which ritual was being utilized, it was clear that women were not introducing entirely new ritual but were altering the way in which existing ritual was performed. Priests in the Anglican Church are constrained in how far they can endorse new modes of ritual performance, so that rather than creating new rites, or radically altering old rites, old rites are amended within an acceptable limit. And sometimes this happened almost incidentally, such as the priests who, in extreme circumstances celebrated communion with their children and only reflected later on the significance of this. Blohm (2006) *has* uncovered evidence of women priests and rabbis in the British context enacting new ways of undertaking ritual, but it is unclear in the data she presents whether those from the Anglican tradition were as proactive as other traditions in undertaking this, for it seemed that Methodist and Congregationalist ministers were more likely to advocate new ritual (these traditions also have a longer history of women's ordination). Blohm (2006) did argue that new ritual was less likely to be enacted in the public space of the church, as church space was less likely to produce the necessary comfort zone needed. What is evident is that sites utilized for ritual enactment are undergoing processes of change and negotiation, with women priests empowered to make subtle changes. Sacred space is reconfigured (Chidester and Linenthal, 1995) but priests can remain apprehensive and uncomfortable about radically challenging traditional ways of doing things, impacted upon by their location in a historically masculinized space in which such reconfiguring occurs. The church and the altar space are imbued with both the legacy of exclusion and the hope for change (Tweed, 2006).

## Pastoral Ministry

Although the explicit creation of new ritual was not a feature of accounts, it was evident that the personal experiences of priests guided how they developed new ministry areas. Whereas traditionally, (male) priests have sought out people in pubs, golf courses and cricket clubs, Dawn has engaged with people at the nursery and school gates. However, this was not always positively appraised. She reflects:

> *You see it on things like "Seaside Parish"… it's about the guy that's going to the Isles of Scilly and they put forward that he sings in the pub choir… And people said 'Well, you know, we don't see you in the pub… And I said, 'Well you know what – you do see me at toddler group', so why is going to the pub legitimate but taking my child to toddler group and getting to know the young parents, the young families not legitimate?* (Dawn, mother of one, incumbent).

This indicates that mothers as priests have to carve new territories and roles that are not always welcomed by parishioners intent on retaining the traditional (male) understandings of priesthood. Despite this, priests in the sample prioritized areas of ministry which in some way related to their own life experiences. A vast number of priests had been involved in work that supported other mothers with children. Here it is stressed that it is not "motherhood" as some intrinsic and fixed identity which influenced pastoral care, but the past and present *experiences* of priests which informed their practice. Some of this was incidental, like the case of Rachel, who felt her presence as a priest in the community made her a magnet for mums to approach her at the school gates. Others were involved in explicit worship provision for families, with Emily describing how her own experiences of motherhood informed her practice in running the toddler group:

> *So even though mine aren't toddlers anymore… I can still quickly enough transport myself back… I go overboard to explain to new mums how relaxed we are and that we don't mind if they have to change nappies and we don't mind if you know, toddlers make noises and all of that* (Emily, mother of two, curate).

Emily's past motherhood experience enabled her to create a welcoming space for young families to explore their faith in an environment where new mothers are able to tap into their faith when life around them becomes so chaotic and noisy.

This can offer a space for mothers to connect with their spirituality when their children are present. Faith becomes something to be engaged with as a family, bringing with it chaos and domesticity rather than cerebral solitude. This opens up new spaces for faith to be envisioned, so that thought-based, silent and monastic-like practice is not seen as the best and the only way to connect at a spiritual level. Endeavours such as toddler services can thus undermine the traditional association of the cerebral with the sacred and holy, and the practical messiness of everyday life with the profane.

Thus priests had to negotiate their legitimacy in their parishes, with potential rejection by parishioners. As traditional ministry patterns are in conflict with the way many priests who are mothers are engaging with their role, where playschools and nursery spaces are sought out over golf clubs and public houses, hostility can ensue and parishioners can feel that they are being short-changed. Hearn has articulated how the public house signifies 'patriarchy on the street corner' (Hearn, 1992:205) and male priests' traditional engagement with this space perhaps bolsters their own sense of "masculinity" in a profession that has been deemed to have become feminized (Nesbitt, 1997). Despite the fact that families and children have been

traditional sites for faith engagement (Russell 1980), when women support these spheres rather than prioritising spaces where masculinity is supported and maintained, their engagement is undermined. As Russell (1980) has highlighted, historically, clergy focusing on the faith development of women and children have held less prestige and value and when priests alter what is privileged and prioritized, parishioner backlash can ensue.

## Experiences of Preaching

The third area which priests discussed was preaching and how this offered a space where the experience of motherhood could be validated, in a way that had not been typically witnessed in the preaching by male priests.

> *I preached that it impacted on me so strongly becoming a mother and being a priest… given that it was a traditional congregation I wasn't too graphic with them, but able to share with them in my preaching some of these experience and having women come to me afterwards saying we've never had the experience of pregnancy and motherhood spoken about in church before* (Dawn, mother of one, incumbent).

Kate said that she used 'images that they as men wouldn't use. So I do use body images quite a lot', which included the bodily maternal. Kate articulated that it was important not to over-stress the link between motherhood and imagery so as to imply that it is only mothers who can talk about these issues, but equally a mother's *experience* increased the likelihood of this type of content being included. Male priests have had the means to talk about this imagery too, but as Kate argues, they have chosen not to.

Interestingly, it was overwhelmingly Mary, mother of Jesus who was used as a means of representing motherhood in the pulpit. Over any other biblical character, Mary was referenced by the priests. For example, Julie argued that her experience of motherhood allowed her to relate to the Nativity more readily, as she could empathize with Mary's pain. But other priests who used Mary as a resource were more explicit in the way they reformed the traditional imagery surrounding Mary. For example, Laura argued that in her preaching she

> *gave the example of Mary our sister rather than Mary the mother of Jesus. And the sisterhood of Mary as being very important. And I also think Mary, mother Mary has been impossible for women... Because she's been perfect virgin and perfect mother. And you can't be that, it's not possible. And actually you can't be a perfect mother either... all those statues of perfect Mary – it's not real. So I've probably subconsciously gone away from those images because of that* (Laura, chaplain).

And Emily was also pleasantly surprised when her reinterpretation of Mary was much-praised by her congregation:

> *I was saying things about Mary just being an ordinary girl, being probably about 12 or 13, the thought of her becoming pregnant, the thought of what she went through, the fact that I can't think of her as this sort of perfect iconic sort of figure... for me, where she's helpful theologically is thinking of her actually as bewildered and frightened… But obviously it struck a chord and I'm sure some of that came from knowing what it was like to be a frightened new mum* (Emily, curate).

Here traditional interpretations of Mary were undermined to show Mary in a more ordinary and accessible light.

By downplaying traditional interpretations of the Virgin Mary, her story is redefined in order to show different elements of motherhood, such as strength as well as vulnerability. As Joseph (1990) argues, this can give women new creative interpretations that they can use positively. Vincett (2008) also found that the Virgin Mary was more often utilized by Protestant participants, arguing that this is because of her centrality to the story of Jesus. It may also be the case that the Virgin Mary is more easily invoked in traditional congregations over other characters such as Mary Magdalene, for Mary Magdalene can perhaps still be considered a controversial figure (the seductress rather than the mother – see Furlong, 1991). Thus it is easier to alter the symbolism surrounding a traditional and more familiar figure, even though one may wish to 'radicalize' her into 'a figure of earthly womanhood, Mother of God, autonomous and powerful, who accepts the challenge of bearing a child without any relation to any man' (Joseph, 1990:5). This may indicate the constraints placed upon women priests, who are modifying traditional discourse rather than radically altering the plane of understanding. Beattie argues that

> [T]here is a gulf between what most women experience of childbirth and the Christmas card image of the Madonna serenely reclining with her newborn baby amidst the animals and shepherds with not a drop of blood or sweat to be seen. The challenge is to find a way of refiguring the Marian narrative in order to accommodate a symbolics of childbirth that represents the reality of birth, without completely reinventing the story of Mary (Beattie, 2002:101).

The reinterpretations of the Virgin could be one way of making Mary more real and accessible, as Beattie poses. Priests who are mothers have the power to re-symbolize Mary in a way that creates new, more positive imagery.

## Conclusions

The role of priest has been categorized as a sacredly masculine endeavour (Bock, 1967) and women priests have experienced negativity about what they can offer a sacred organisation (especially when women's bodies – particularly pregnant bodies - have been seen as defiling in the Church context – see Douglas, 1992; Furlong, 1984). Priests have an important sacramental role to play, and as Thorne (2000) notes, the sacerdotal role of the priest sits uneasily with childcare responsibilities, for children are not immediately compatible with notions of spiritual engagement, especially when as a result of the monastic tradition spirituality is associated with silence and stillness (Hebblethwaite, 1984; Williams, 1988). The Church has been slow to fully incorporate children, with Williams (1988) arguing that children are often not sufficiently welcomed into Church services. But priests who are mothers bring with them a certain experience of being at the threshold of this juxtaposition and can be seen as bringing fresh insights into the role. They are challenging traditional understandings of the sacred and profane in order to emphasize how their experiences of the everyday struggles of parenting can enhance their perceptions by the wider community – especially other mothers. Further research, however, is needed to investigate the complex processes and experiences of women clergy in other types of church, from different backgrounds, and with different embodied experiences.

It is clear that priests who are mothers have used their experience to change aspects of their role. Different ways of engaging with ritual have been envisaged and new pastoral spaces have been opened up and endorsed. New ways of understanding traditional figures have been expressed and there has been a specific intention to reappraise the sacrality of women's lives. At the same time, priests who are mothers are unwilling to go too far. Any readjustments have been made within established tradition and there was no evidence of new ritual forms emerging. This links with Vincett's argument that Christian women 'bend' (Vincett, 2008:95) rather than radically change spiritual space.

Priests who are mothers are not only constrained by their small numbers and the limiting impact their actions thus have on the Church as a whole, but they are also hindered by the way in which the ministry styles they adopt are not necessarily valued by the wider community and the Church hierarchy. Being part of an authoritative organisation which has the weight of tradition behind it limits the extent to which women in positions of authority can radically change and reinterpret their role, indicating that women positioned in such sacredly masculinist spaces, although able to make small-scale changes, are not able to completely reinvent what is meant by sacred priesthood. This is not a static issue, however. The recent Synod decision to proceed with legislation to allow women's ordination to the episcopate indicates the fluid and changing nature of women's placement in the Church, suggesting that gender is actively being renegotiated and acts as a site of contestation. The extent to which such legislative changes impact upon priests who are mothers remains to be seen, and may indeed be minimal considering the current marginalisation of mothers vis-à-vis other priests.

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