

**Feminist Liberation Theologians' Network Report**  
**Zoom Meeting, November 12, 2021**  
**Mary E. Hunt**

Thank you to the many participants of this wonderful meeting. The following report is intended to capture the festive spirit of the gathering as well as the challenging presentations offered by three invited colleagues. At the end, there is a list of suggested next steps which emerged from the small group discussions and in the chat. A video of the meeting can be accessed at <https://www.waterwomensalliance.org/feminist-liberation-theologians-network/> .

Future plans include both Zoom and in person meetings. An in-person meeting will be held, Covid-willing, at the next American Academy of Religion-Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Friday, November 18, 2022 in Denver, Colorado. We plan continued collaboration with the AAR/SBL Women's Caucus.

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The twenty-fifth anniversary meeting of the Feminist Liberation Theologians' Network (FLTN) began with a land acknowledgement: "WATER is on indigenous land. Silver Spring, Maryland is on the traditional and contemporary land of the Piscataway and Anacostan peoples, the original stewards of this territory. We are committed to making clear the names of these lands and the community members from these nations who reside alongside us. We acknowledge the trauma that is deeply imbedded in the foundation of this country. We affirm the right of all people to bring their whole selves and their stories into this space." The group paused to reflect in silence on the many people across the world on whose lands we sit for this meeting.

More than 60 people attended the virtual meeting from more than a dozen countries including Germany, Australia, Ireland, Ecuador, the Philippines, Brasil, Canada, and the United States among others. The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Network was something to celebrate for our persistence against myriad odds. The event had a festive feel even though in lieu of champagne we had one another; if we had met in person with bubbles some people could not have attended.

Mary E. Hunt from WATER hosted the meeting with technical assistance from Laura Carr-Pries, former WATER intern and now a graduate student at George Mason University living in Ottawa, Canada. While we love the usual in-person circle and the knee to knee small groups, we are grateful for Zoom in these liminal times. Typically, the meeting has been in person at the AAR/SBL Annual Meeting. But in order to circumvent the need for people to pay to attend AAR/SBL virtually so as to come to this gathering, WATER took on the hosting.

Once again, this meeting was held in collaboration with the AAR/SBL Women's Caucus. Several of their members were in attendance including their co-chair, Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, who was one of our presenters. In turn, Mary E. Hunt from FLTN responded to the three excellent papers presented at the Caucus session, "Re-Engaging Praxis: A Call to Action" at the AAR/SBL Annual Meeting. We are grateful for this longtime and collegial collaboration with the Caucus.

FLTN includes this annual meeting as well as a Google list that colleagues are urged to use throughout the year. It is sponsored by WATER which is supported by donors who want this work done. We at WATER believe in socializing resources. We keep our work simple, welcoming everyone without program fees. Our donors are very generous, so if you can donate please do because we need your support. If you cannot donate, you are just as welcome because we at WATER believe that if we share, among us there is enough.

## **AGENDA**

1. Brief overview of FLTN history
2. Three speakers will offer their reflections
3. Small groups will consider :
  - the impact of FLTN
  - what have you found personally useful
  - what do you think we should do moving forward
4. Closing Plenary to gather the group's wisdom

### **1. FLTN History in a Nutshell**

In 1995, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary E. Hunt convened a gathering of theologians and activists at the Women's Ordination Conference's meeting "Discipleship of Equals: Breaking Bread, Doing Justice." The next year, 1996, we floated a proposal and invitation to (1) bring U.S.-Canadian people together, (2) link across racial-ethnic lines, (3) explore and connect with other such groups around the world, and (4) beginning from a Christian starting point, engage with colleagues from various religious traditions.

Twenty-five years later, we still have much work to do on those four lofty goals. But we rejoice in having produced some very exciting sessions and brought many colleagues together. An estimated 1000+ people (50 people on average at 25 meetings) have been involved though some meetings have been bigger. This number does not include people watching videos subsequent to events.

Participants put their personal history with FLTN in the Chat. People range from first time attenders to some who have been at 20+ meetings. One woman said she was at the first two meetings, while another said she was at all the meetings until 2006 then sporadically after that. One person described FLTN as "rippling and percolating, especially throughout the AAR/SBL annual meeting." She went on to say that "Liberation Theology (the AAR Unit) has hung on by its fingernails...but FLTN has been there, right at the beginning of the meeting and has fed, and I mean that in the deepest sense, the praxis dimensions so often missing in academic meetings."

A special welcome was extended to students from Professor Kirk J. Nolan's undergraduate course at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina. Several years ago, he brought students to one of our in-person meetings and he said it had a deep impact on their lives. Wonderful!

FLTN participants have always been both scholars and activists: professors, students, ministers, rabbis, and other religious professionals. The various intersectional justice issues we have taken on include ecology, sexual and domestic violence, and anti-racism among others. Participants always include and value artists and musicians for their part in the work.

FLTN content has consistently been critical analysis and self-critical reflection. We have looked at economic, political, pedagogical, ecological, and related issues. We have deconstructed ‘feminism,’ ‘liberation,’ and ‘theology’ to a fare-thee well. FLTN has sought to bring diverse speakers and participants to reflect on intersectional concerns with attention to global involvement and implications. We have looked at the concrete ways people are engaged whether through successful educational programs, intersectional political work, or locally based action efforts before and during Covid. This meeting’s three speakers began to assess what this means.

## 2. Speakers’ Input

**Traci West** is an activist-scholar who serves as the James W. Pearsall Professor of Christian Ethics and African American Studies at Drew University Theological School in New Jersey in the U.S. Her teaching, research, and activism have focused on gender, racial, and sexual justice, especially related to gender violence which she spoke about at FLTN in 2014.

Traci has taught in community settings ranging from churches to a New Jersey women’s prison. She is an ordained minister as well as a scholar, pastor, and activist in the United Methodist Church where she works for full LGBTQIA+ inclusion and equality in that denomination.

Among her many publications are *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (1999) and *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter* (2006). Her most recent book, *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion, Racism, and Ending Gender Violence* (2019) was the subject of a WATERtalk <https://www.waterwomensalliance.org/october-2020-watertalk-notes-traci-c-west/>.

Traci offered kind words about the Network and its leadership. FLTN is known for its “innovation, relevance, and capaciousness in a world context that too often shrinks, narrows, limits what we can know and imagine in relation to spiritual, intellectual, embodied, and political bonds of unfreedom.” She cited, as a case in point, that efforts to ban teaching of systemic white racism are “unfreedom”.

She used a poem from *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), “The Welder” by Cherrie Moraga as an image of FLTN work. The welder takes the power into her own hands. FLTN has taken the power into our own hands by mapping meanings of feminist liberation, what is shared in common, providing context and specificity to reveal differences in common vision. Cross generational modes of conversation surface new and seasoned insights. Pioneers in activism and feminist studies in religion meet with newer leaders.

FLTN is intentionally transnational beyond the U.S.-centric character of much academic work in the U.S. She insisted on the need to include scholar activists from Africa. Black feminist work in religion is central to our common work

FLTN, she said, has unabashedly “claimed space for centering the urgency of the political moment.” It is immersed in particularity. It recognizes the need to de-colonize time, to lift up voices and paradigms that need to be remembered and honored. She asked about the repeated patterns among us that need deconstructing and how we create the tools to deconstruct class, race, and nation. Alliances can be fragile, superficial, and need more honest confrontation of differences.

She concluded that we are welders taking power into our own hands to reshape the future.

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**Kathleen McPhillips** is a senior lecturer in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle in Australia. She is a sociologist of religion and gender who employs feminist, psychoanalytic, and sociological frameworks to issues around gender and religion particularly around institutional child sexual abuse in religious organizations.

Kathleen has extensive experience in attending, reporting on, and analyzing the Catholic Church at the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse. She has held numerous research grants. Her most recent publications are in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *Feminist Theology*, *Journal of Australian Studies*, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* and *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*.

She was part of a WATERtalk with WATER colleague Naomi Goldenberg (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCpcNPt23o8>) on their book entitled *The End of Religion: Feminist Reappraisals of the State*, a very provocative and insightful volume. Kath also spoke at FLTN last year. Her blend of social scientific studies with theology and religion and her social location in Australia mean we get solid insights.

Kathleen spoke of the FLTN as a networking community which has been helpful to her over the decades and now grounds her efforts to build similar community in her setting in Australia and Oceania.

In the 1980s, she was involved in Catholic student movements and learned her feminism in Catholic circles. Sydney Women-Church, Anglican women’s groups, goddess groups, and others have developed feminist studies and practice of religion in Australia. She cited the late British/Canadian philosopher Grace Jantzen’s foundational concept of the “feminist religious imaginary” as it is unfolding in that context.

Many feminist theologians from other parts of the world visited Australia and interacted with women there. Kath studied the Australian Women-Church movement for her doctoral research as a Catholic feminist and social justice worker. Her trips to the U.S. in 1993 for the Women-Church gathering in Albuquerque, NM, and her conversations with Elisabeth Schüssler

Fiorenza at Harvard Divinity School gave her a glimpse of a wider network of which she was a part.

Her first FLTN meeting in Boston in 1999 deepened that sense of belonging. Then the 2005 *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* gathering in Boston gave her even more experience of it. She introduced her colleague Lee Miena Skye, the first feminist indigenous scholar of religion in Australia to her wider circle. Dr. Skye went on to become the first indigenous Australian woman to hold a post-doc position at Harvard Divinity School. Now women in Australia have their own network where they share their own work on their own terms.

Kath described FLTN as a warm and inviting if also challenging space. It is a venue in which to be connected with women around the world across many differences. In her evaluation, the model of short talks on urgent issues and small group sharing works well. She observed that the annual meeting is but one moment in the life of FLTN. She sees FLTN as “deep root system travelling across expansive areas...a dynamic, moving, generous, safe space with multiple shoots across a range of projects and ideas” where activism on urgent issues by people in religious studies is the norm.

Kath is passing all of this on to graduate students and colleagues. FLTN, she concluded, nourishes our work, our spirits, our politics, our thinking to foster the “feminist religious imaginary” especially with vulnerable communities.

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**Elaine Nogueira-Godsey** is an assistant professor of theology, ecology, and race at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio in the U.S. She explores intersecting decolonial and ecofeminist perspective; she studies black, brown and indigenous women’s experiences of religion, gender, and sexuality especially as connected to climate change, environmental racism, food justice, and immigration.

Elaine is originally from Brasil and lived for 15 years in South Africa. She wrote her doctoral dissertation in South Africa on “The Ecofeminist Theology of Ivone Gebara”. She worked as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa (ICRSA) where she co-coordinated the research project "Southern Knowledge" jointly hosted by the Network for Religion and Education project and ICRSA in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Cape Town.

She has long collaborated and is now co-chair of the Women’s Caucus team of the AAR/SBL which teams with FLTN.

Among her publications are “Tangible Actions Toward Solidarity: An Ecofeminist Analysis of Women's Participation in Food Justice” in *Valuing Lives, Healing Earth*, edited by Lilian Dube, et al (Teresia Hinga, Sarah E. Robinson-Bertoni and Theresa A. Yugar) and “Towards a Decological Praxis.” She is assistant editor for the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (JSRNC). She is currently working on a book titled, *Rethinking Ecofeminism and Religion: A Decological Perspective*.

Elaine described her FLT N experience. In 2016, she had just arrived from South Africa; Donald Trump was newly elected, and she attended the FLT N session where she heard Nami Kim speak about “Survival at No One’s Expense.” Suddenly everything connected—we are part of systems in which some people survive at the expense of others. This should not be! At the related Caucus session where she mentioned that male liberation theologians resisted gender analysis because they claimed it would take focus from larger struggles, she was greeted with support for her insight.

In 2017, at the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* conference at Drew University she discussed post-colonial praxis with Judith Plaskow, met Rebecca Alpert, Traci West, and others whose work she had read, and they were to become her friends and colleagues.

Later her thinking about “decolonial praxis,” a combination of ecological and postcolonial thinking and acting, was an effort to help people survive but not at the expense of others. Pedagogical methods to create spaces for compassion not guilt exemplify what this looks like in teaching.

Elaine’s suggestions for moving forward include cultivating dialogue practices that are postcolonial ways of creating “beloved community.” Students need to learn across differences, enter conversations with humility and openness. Intersectionality grounds dialogue among people from various cultures. These approaches produce love and kindness as well as analyses and critical reflection.

Elaine made clear that FLT N is important for its feminist, liberationist, and theological dimensions, but it is the Network aspect, like the Caucus, that matters most where friendship and mentoring are valued.

### **3. Small Group Discussion**

Small group discussions ensued with people meeting one another and sharing ideas for the FLT N going forward based on

- the impact of FLT N
- what have you found personally useful
- what do you think we should do moving forward

### **4. Closing Plenary to Gather the Group’s Wisdom**

These are among the many concrete suggestions that emerged:

1. Focus on the work of indigenous women in countries as diverse as Ecuador and Australia, not to mention the U.S. and Canada
2. Use Zoom with translation to include presentations in other languages, for example,

indigenous feminist movements in Guatemala and Bolivia

3. Deconstruct the religions of empire
4. Include more African and Caribbean women in Network
5. Meet more than once a year given the urgency of this work
6. Connect movements such as climate, peace, feminist, and others
7. Appreciate the non-consumerist aspects of FLTN
8. Confront white supremacy that is destroying rather than building the beloved community
9. See Eastern Europe as akin to the Global South in its marginalization
10. Convene a small group to plan programs including people from many parts of the world setting the agenda
11. Connect with groups like the Maternal Gift Economy, Goddess scholars, and the The Association for the Study of Women and Mythology
12. Nourish the nourishers

### **Next Steps**

WATER is deeply grateful to our speakers and to Laura Carr-Pries for technical help.

It is clear that after 25 years FLTN has accomplished a good deal but that the work is not finished. To that end, we propose:

1. FLTN will meet twice in 2022. *The in-person meeting (assuming that this is possible) will be at the AAR/SBL, TENTATIVELY scheduled for Friday, November 18, 2022, 4-6 PM MT in Denver, Colorado, USA.*

*The FLTN Zoom meeting will be in May 2022 with time and Zoom link to be sent later. We recognize that there is no ideal time for everyone, but we will endeavor to find a good compromise.*

In addition, the AAR/SBL Women's Caucus session in which we collaborate will probably be on Saturday morning the 19<sup>th</sup> of November 2022, but this remains to be confirmed. They plan to discuss the book honoring Rosemary Radford Ruether entitled *Valuing Lives, Healing Earth: Religion, Gender, and Life on Earth*, edited by Theresa A. Yugar, Sarah E. Robinson, Lilian Dube, Teresia Mbari Hinga, published in Louvain, Belgium by Peeters Publishers, 2021. This will help to inform our focus for the coming year.

2. Please use the Google list to post relevant information to colleagues.  
[feministliberationtheologiansnetwork+msgappr@googlegroups.com](mailto:feministliberationtheologiansnetwork+msgappr@googlegroups.com) Those who are on the list are welcome and able to post.

3. Please signal your willingness to be part of a small planning group of people from various parts of the world with an email to [mhunt@hers.com](mailto:mhunt@hers.com). Thank you.

Every good wish for health and productive work in the coming year. Please be in touch with us at WATER ([water@hers.com](mailto:water@hers.com)) with suggestions and ideas. The FLTN needs and appreciates your input.

## **Feminist Liberation Theologians' Network Brief Chronology 1995 – 2021**

**1995** Crystal City, VA, First meeting held as part of Women's Ordination Conference meeting "Discipleship of Equals: Breaking Bread/ Doing Justice."

**1996** Proposal of network with 4 dimensions: US-Canadian; link across racial/ethnic lines; gathering and sharing info about existing networks around world; general location Christian with link to other religious traditions.

**1997** AAR/SBL San Francisco, "Conversation on US Theological Scene"

**1998** AAR/SBL Orlando, update on groups like European Society of Women in Theological Research, women theologians in Costa Rica, etc.

**1999** AAR/SBL Reception at Harvard Divinity School with Womanist and Women's Caucuses

**2000** Daytona Beach, "Study, Sun, and Solidarity" conference.  
AAR/SBL Nashville, discussion of feminist liberation

**2001** AAR/SBL Denver, "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally"

**2002** AAR/SBL Toronto, "Economics and Feminist Theology"

**2003** AAR/SBL Atlanta, "Feminist Pedagogy"

**2004** AAR/SBL San Antonio, "Nationalism"



**2005** AAR/SBL Philadelphia, “Mapping the Connections: Feminist Work in Religion and Activism”

**2006** AAR/SBL Washington, DC, “Religion and Politics as it Relates to Our Pedagogical Work,” Catherine Pinkerton, Sandy Sorenson

**2007** AAR/SBL San Diego, “FLTN in Various Social Locations,” Maria Pilar Aquino, Jen Bird, Kate Ott, and Nami Kim

**2008** AAR/SBL Chicago, “Problems Raised by Using ‘Feminism’ as a Name or a Brand,” Susan Abraham, Rosemary Carbine, Keri Day

**2009** AAR/SBL Montreal, “Deconstruction of ‘Liberation,’” Lisa Isherwood, Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, Mayra Rivera, Mary E. Hunt

**2010** AAR/SBL Atlanta, “Critical Theology,” Julia Watts Belser, Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie Townes, Leah Weiss Ekstrom

**2011** AAR/SBL San Francisco, “Feminist Liberation Theology Successes,” Shannon Clarkson, Margaret Miles, Hi Rho Park, Sharon Welch

**2012** AAR/SBL Chicago, “Living Feminist Liberation Theology Commitments in Daily Life,” Rebecca Alpert, Rita Nakashima Brock, Peggy Schmeiser, Zilak Spahic-Siljak

**2013** AAR/SBL Baltimore, “Intergenerational Learning: How Contemporary Practitioners Build on the Work of Those Who Went Before Them,” Nicki Young, Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, Monica Melanchthon

**2014** AAR/SBL San Diego, “Teaching and Activism That Engage Gender-Based Violence as Part of Feminist Liberation Theological Praxis,” Solveig Anna Bóasdóttir, Marie M. Fortune, Elizabeth J. A. Siwo-Okundi, Traci C. West

**2015** AAR/SBL Atlanta, “Be Creative, Make Change: Feminist Liberation Theologies and the Arts,” Katie G. Cannon, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Mónica Maher, Elizabeth Ursic

**2016** AAR/SBL San Antonio, “Intersectionality and Political Action,” Nami Kim, Judith Plaskow, Andrea Smith

**2017** AAR/SBL Boston, “Resistance, Resilience, and Creativity,” Christine Pae, Elaine Wainwright, Sharon Welch

**2018** AAR/SBL Denver, “Economics: Global and Local Intertwined: A Feminist Liberation Theology Priority,” Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda

**2019** AAR/SBL San Diego, “Worldwide Climate Change: Feminist Liberation Theological Perspectives,” Anne Elvey, Wanda Deifelt

**2020** Silver Spring MD on Zoom on “Feminist Liberation Theologies on the Ground: Acting when We are *in extremis*,” Rita Nakashima Brock, Mary Condren, Mónica Maher, Kathleen McPhillips

**2021** Silver Spring, MD on Zoom on “Twenty-fifth Anniversary Meeting of the Feminist Liberation Theologians’ Network” with reflective remarks by Traci West, Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, and Kath McPhillips followed by group discussions for evaluation and planning.