Twenty Years of WATER: What Difference Does It Make?
By Mary E. Hunt

WATER's twentieth anniversary is reason to celebrate. We are jubilant about the many forms of collaboration that have brought us this far. Working with religious feminists around the world who seek faith-based social change together, we have plenty of plans for the future. We are grateful for the Holy One's blessings.

Still, we ponder what difference we make in a world seemingly more rent than ever by injustice, more resistant to efforts to include and diversify, more divided by race, class, nationality, and sexuality. It is not that we expected to change the world in twenty years. But we would be remiss if we did not ask, change. We nurture that commitment with both intellectual resources—books, lectures, workshops—and with spiritual resources—liturgies, counseling, prayer—so that we can create strategic efforts at peace and justice.

Our commitment was tried sorely this year when war broke out over the world's protests and our best efforts to stop it. We noted the proliferation of macho religious language and imagery to bolster the bellicose. We were struck by the predominance of male religious figures even in the peace movement. We wondered whether anything we had done had made any difference, not just in the peace movement but in the past twenty years. In the public forum it was not obvious, but we hoped for the best.

Looking back, and with the humility one develops after two decades of working for a small non-profit, let me offer several reflections on what difference we have made, inviting you to join the conversation.

First, we of WATER are different, profoundly different than if we had done some other kind of work. WATER began (Continued on page 2)

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Thank you for your generous support of WATER. Your financial gift for our 20th Anniversary signals your investment in the future of WATER and feminist religious work. In addition to your regular donation you can partner with us by giving stocks and frequent flier miles, by naming WATER in your will, or by transferring ownership of a life insurance policy to WATER. Call Diann for more details, (301) 589-2509.

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and invite others to ponder with us, what difference WATER makes and use the results for future planning.

When we started in the spring of 1983, we had no game plan, no blueprint for an organization. We made our way as we went, as our Latin American sisters counseled. For twenty years we have analyzed and responded to the needs of our time to create a place and a movement of people who believe that feminist religious commitment can catalyze social

Mary Condren (l), director of the Institute for Feminism and Religion in Dublin, Ireland, spoke at WATER on "Feminist Theology and Spirituality in Ireland." She shares her book, The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland, with Sister Catherine Pinkerton (r) of NETWORK.
Editorial

Many signs indicate that feminist work in religion is becoming increasingly more difficult by the day. Several well-established centers are facing serious decisions about their futures. Re-imagining in Minneapolis is talking about closing their office but continuing their publication. The Center for Women and Religion in Berkeley is scrambling for funding to keep its doors open despite more than twenty years as a women’s organization in a consortium of theological schools. This sobering news causes us at WATER to double our efforts to continue our work.

Feminist religious publishing is equally under fire. Many classic texts in the field are no longer in print. Publishing houses are rumored to be turning down feminist work on the grounds that it may not sell. Several feminist religious journals are barely holding on as electronic publication takes hold and ideological swings to the right threaten their future.

That such necessary resources are seen as expendable luxuries in hard economic times creates a dangerous situation. Imagine a world without what we have come to rely on for intellectual, spiritual, and strategic nourishment. Meanwhile conservative religious groups and publishers flourish and continue to have a disturbing influence on public policy. Feminist work is more important than ever to counter such moves and to provide other models.

Twenty years later, as the accompanying article indicates, WATER continues to provide programs, projects, and publications for feminists in religion. We encourage you, our readers, collaborators, and supporters to broaden your horizons. Increase your financial support for WATER and support our sister centers and related projects as well. It is an investment in our own and our children’s best interests, and there was never a better time.

(Continued from page 1)

as a response to the need for women to do theology, ethics, and ritual unfettered by the constraints of patriarchal religion. Diann Neu and I, who founded the organization, come from the Catholic tradition. In the early 1980s there was simply nowhere for us as Catholic feminists called to priesthood and prophecy to work. There still isn’t any place in that kyriarchical church. Yet, from our starting point in a changing, diverse neighborhood up over the Debe’s Cateria and the Special Effects Hair Salon, we have done all that our colleagues in academic and religious institutions do, and then some.

Countless interns, visiting scholars, volunteers, and other colleagues who come to use WATER’s ever-growing Carol Murdock Scinto Resource Center and to be part of the office community are different too. Future feminist leaders train here. Wonderful feminist dissertations in Portuguese, Swedish, and English have been written here. Dozens of women with disabilities participate in our job-training program with great success. Each person contributes to the network, while together we help to create a new reality.

While we have not necessarily had the impact we would like at the heart of a patriarchal society and kyriarchal institutions, we have at least carved out places at the margins where we can live and work with integrity. The deeper, broader impact is a goal for the next decade.

Second, I submit that things would be much worse without WATER. While this sounds like a low threshold of expectation, given the pernicious power of unbridled corporate greed, unchallenged U.S. hegemony, and unchecked religious fundamentalism of many stripes, it is energizing to realize what a contrast we provide because our values and commitments are different.

Our modest budget, ever in need of increase, is proof that a little goes a long way. Like well-prepared soil, money well spent can produce results without impoverishing some and enriching others. As a U.S.-based organization, WATER seeks to be a partner in international work—not the boss, a place for sharing resources—not imposing an ideology. Our international colleagues remind us of our role as U.S. citizens resisting from within our government’s unjust practices and supporting the marginalized from our place of privilege. They also help us to see just how tenuous our privilege is and how isolated the U.S. is becoming in a world that wants globalized justice.

As an organization made up of people coming mainly from Christianity, then from Judaism and pagan groups, we are now learning to become multi-religious. It is slow going but this is all part of the challenges that await us in the next decade.

Third, in twenty years we have come to know some of what works and what does not work with regard to feminist religiously grounded social change. For example, we know that it is all but fruitless to knock on the doors of patriarchal kyriarchal institutions and beg to be allowed in on their terms. Rather, it is fruitful to live the alternative—whether ordination, socialization of resources, or the like—and let the good life speak for itself. We have seen too many women co-opted, too many people from racial minority groups instrumentalized to recommend a tamer strategy.

We know that it is virtually impossible to diversify groups that begin as white, Christian, and middle class. So we strive for inclusivity among stakeholders in all new projects we undertake. We know that children and young people have quite different fundamental experiences than adults, that time changes everything, and so we must listen to their experiences and include them in decision-making. Such learning is hard wrought but useful and necessary.

Finally, we know that we need more conversation to assess how other grassroots women’s centers and groups

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Twenty Years...
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see the current reality and what we want to do together to assure that this trajectory of feminist work continues.
We invite your collaboration:
1. Join us in Washington, DC, September 26-27 for a weekend of celebration and critical assessment of where we are as grassroots religious feminists. Individuals and groups are welcome. Bring your women’s group, your work colleagues, and your friends. Together we will ask the hard questions, assess the achievements of our movement, celebrate the past twenty years, and map the future of feminist religious work for social change!
2. Take stock of your own progress in these past twenty years. What goals have you achieved? What lives have you affected? What structures have you changed? How has your group done so and what can you share with others about your work? successes?
3. Send us your wisdom. How has WATER had an impact on your life, your work? What do you see as the top three priorities for the next decade of WATER’s work? How would you like to participate?
We celebrate our first twenty years by casting a broad net and asking the kinds of questions that we hope will take us into a different future. Thank you for your part in all of it.

Mary E. Hunt, Ph.D., feminist theologian and ethicist, cofounded and codirects WATER.

In Memory of Her
From Carolyn Farrell, Chicago, IL:
In loving memory of Barbara Kutchera, justice worker, feminist, loyal member of the BVM Network for Women’s Issues, who gained eternal peace 12 May 2003 after a ten year dance with cancer. Her partner did not leave until the last waltz was over.

From the WATER community:
Congratulations to Dr. Diann L. Neu for receiving her Doctor of Ministry from the San Francisco Theological Seminary and publishing her dissertation, Women’s Rites: Feminist Liturgies for Life’s Journey (Pilgrim Press, 2003). (See p. 4-5 for one of the rites.)
Prelude Music: Play music that the loved one enjoyed.

Call to Gather
(Sound a bell, triangle, or tambourine to call people to gather around the casket, urn, or pictures. A family member, close friend, or community representative says)
Welcome to this "Feminist Farewell: In Memory of Our Beloved N." (name of person). We gather to bid her a final farewell and to support her loved ones and one another in our sorrow. It is so hard to believe that N. is not here with us. Let us celebrate her power in life and in death and give thanks that we knew her.

Candle Lighting
(A family member, loved one or colleague offers a biographical sketch of the loved one and then lights a candle, saying)
I light this candle to remember N., especially her ___ (for example, smile). You each have a candle. Light yours from this one and share a memory you have of N. (She passes the candle around the circle and all share a memory.)

Reading: "Song: 'Now let us honor with violin and flute'" by May Sarton

Now let us honor with violin and flute
A woman set so deeply in devotion
That three times blasted to the root
Still she grew green and poured strength out.

Still she stood fair, providing the cool shade,
Compassion, the thousand leaves of mercy,
The cherishing green hope. Still like a tree she stood,
Clear comfort in the town and all the neighborhood.

Pure as the tree is pure, young
As the tree forever young, magnanimous
And natural, sweetly serving: for her the song,
For her the flute sound and the violin be strung.

We are the waters, each small drop of rain,
Life-spawning ponds and stream-filled sea.
We run the blood that flows in living veins
to live and die that all be free.

Chorus: This circle opening moves with deepened faith,
our lives to birth a living dawn.
As love renewed turns in our common way,
creating hope we carry on.

We are the wind-filled song
that sounds of joy and cries
from dungeons cast away.
The deep sung dreams of those who labor on
to shape a just and caring way.
We are the sun-fired passionate love of life,
the burning heart within the soul.
We are the love that grows
resisting chains
to free the bound and make us whole. (Chorus)

We are the hands proud ache to knead the bread
from golden seed we raise as corn.
We harvest thoughts to feed the hungering mind
translating life into a poem.
We are the faith beyond all mystery,
beneath the deep yon skies above.

A Feminist in Memory
by Diane

We are the hope in solidarity
profoundly shaped by human love. (Chorus)
Our healing love, our hands reach out and touch
the cherished body, the quiv’ring mind.
Our lives like grass, like bread, like falling rain,
the ordinary our sublime.
Hold true this tough spun web as hard times
come and much be lost or taken away.
We struggle not for things that best be gone,
integrity rewebs our way. (Chorus)
Readings: Excerpts from Wisdom
(Read alternately by two readers.)

Proverbs 9:1, 5
Wisdom has built herself a house; she has
prepared her meat, mixed her wine, and set her
table... She calls to all in the city and in the towns...
come and eat my food and drink the wine I have
made.

Proverbs 1:20; 2:1, 6
Wisdom calls aloud in the streets... I will pour
out my heart to you... tune your ear to wisdom and
your heart to truth... then you will understand who
Wisdom Sophia is and discover love of life... you
will understand justice and the ways of happiness.

Proverbs 31: 25, 28, 29
Wisdom is clothed with strength and dignity,
and she laughs at the days to come... Her
children rise up and praise her; her husband,
too, extols her. Many are the women of proven
worth, but you have excelled them all.

Funeral:
Death of Her
L. Neu

Proverbs 31:31
Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her
works praise her in the gates.

Storytelling
N.'s works tell her praises. She was a wise and
amazing woman. When you think of her, what
memories do you want to share? Let us tell
stories about her now. After each three we will
sing, "You Can't Kill the Spirit." (Sharing)

Song: "You Can't Kill The Spirit," traditional
You can't kill the Spirit, She's like a mountain
Old and strong she lives on and on and on
(Sing three times)

Litany of Remembrance

Leader: We will remember N., whom death has
taken from our midst. In the rising of the sun
and in its going down,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: In the blowing of the wind and in the
chill of winter,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: In the opening buds and in the rebirth of
spring,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: In the blueness of the sky and in the
warmth of summer,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: In the rustling of leaves and in the
beauty of autumn,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: In the beginning of the year and when it
ends,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: When we are weary and in need of
strength,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: When we are lost and sick at heart,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: When we have joys we yearn to share,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: When we look in the mirror and see her
smile in our eyes,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: When we hear her voice in the sea,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: When we feel her spirit in the
mountains,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: When we gather as a community,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: When we celebrate our gifts as women,
Response: We will remember her.
Leader: So long as we shall live, she too shall
live, for she is now a part of us, as we
remember her.

Song: "Blessing Song," by Marsie Silvestro

Bless you my sister, bless you on your way
You have roads to roam before you're home
And winds to speak your name.

So go gently, my sister,
let courage be your song

You have words to say in your own way
And stars to light your night.
And if ever you grow weary
And your heart song has no refrain
Just remember we'll be waiting
to raise you up again

And we'll bless you, our sister
bless you in our way
And we'll welcome home
all the life you've known
And softly speak your name. (Sing two times)
Bless you my sister, bless you on your way.

Closing Blessing: "She Whom We Love, " by
St. John Chrysostom

She whom we love
And lose
Is no longer
Where she was before.
She is now
Wherever we are.

Sending Forth
Let us go forth remembering N.
as we look up at the stars.
Let us love as she loved.
Let us carry on her legacy of love and justice.
Let us remember
that "she is now wherever we are."
Amen. Blessed be. Let it be so.

2 Carolyn McDade, "This Tough Spun Web," This Tough Spun Web © 1985, Surtey Publishing. Audio recording.

Dianne L. Neu, D.Min., MSW, cofounded and codirects WATER.

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Engaging Impasse: Circles of Contemplation and Dialogue

Nancy Sylvester, IHM, a WATER collaborator from our beginning, has created a new and exciting project designed to incorporate meditation and contemplation into work for social and ecclesial change. After more than a decade of lobbying through NETWORK, the Catholic social justice lobby group that she directed, and recognizing the deep difficulties we face in creating a just and sustainable world, Nancy and her colleagues looked to the contemplative dimension of many religious traditions as an untapped resource. They developed “Engaging Impasse: Circles of Contemplation and Dialogue,” an invitation to join other religious people to reach beyond the usual repertoire of resources.

The project in its initial stage involves six small groups of a dozen or so women (many men were invited but not one responded affirmatively) gathering three times during the year for four days each to learn and develop techniques for contemplative listening. The theory is that such listening, when done individually and collectively, will add energy and insight to the process of social and ecclesial change.

I was an enthusiastic participant in the first round of meetings, a rich and fruitful experience. Each participant shared a story of impasse in her life and was listened to by a small group that received the story with reverence. Silence created space for feelings and insights to emerge, for individuals and the group to go more deeply into the heart of the impasse, whether a personal relationship, a social problem, or an issue of injustice. Then there was time and quiet to discern the commonalities and differences among the impasses in the hope that we might cove more creatively in the future.

The process will deepen in subsequent meetings. Nancy and others will report on the results, hopefully sharing knowledge gleaned that can be used in many other settings where people struggle to move beyond impasse, not with "cheap grace" but with faithful integrity. For more see www.engageimpasse.org.

Women, Religion, and Social Change II

Twenty years ago Harvard Divinity School held a conference on Women, Religion, and Social Change under the able leadership of Diana Eck, now director of the Pluralism Project. The conference brought together scholars and activists from a range of countries, faith traditions and perspectives in an unforgettable week of lectures, panels and personal interactions. The volume that resulted, Speaking of Faith, edited by Diana and Devaki Jain, includes classic articles by Sylvia Marcos, Judith Plaskow, and Fatima Mernissi.

On this 20th anniversary occasion, the Pluralism Project invited a number of the original participants as well as some of the member of its Women’s Multi-Faith Network to a similar gathering to assess what had happened in the interim. I had attended the first event as a young scholar and went to this one as a member of the Network.

It was remarkable event characterized as much by gracious hospitality as stimulating discussion, as much by personal ex-

change as corporate results. More than a dozen of the original speakers, including Elizabeth Amoah, Vena Das, Beverly Wildung Harrison, Brigalia Bam, among others, were able to accept.

Of course we are all older now—Melanie May then a student organizer for the conference came back as dean of Colgate Rochester Divinity School—but hopefully with more wisdom to share. Lots of young students were in attendance; a panel of them told stories of their multi-religious experiences in college and graduate school, so different from what most older women had experienced, but proof that we are having an impact.

Many of the same difficult issues remain on the table twenty years later, for example, dealing with seemingly intractable religious differences such as are articulated in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The war in Iraq clarified the pernicious role of the U.S. in policing the world from its own gain, a reality that led Elsa Tamez from Costa Rica to reject the invitation to come to this country. We learned from her in her absence.

New issues emerged of course: whether and how to globalize justice in the face of international injustice; how to hear and incorporate the wisdom of indigenous people around the world; how women in religious roles previously reserved to men can make a difference.

One discussion on feminism seemed to capture the dynamic of this meeting. A group of about a dozen women of varying ages, religions, nationalities, and ethnicities sat spellbound for more than two hours listening and sharing ideas. The conversation was rich with questions, unencumbered by certainties, and open to the range of experiences gathered in the circle. It was, for me, one of those conversations that confirmed my sense that women engaged in religiously-founded social change are capable of changing the world, both in how we act and in what we think. I can only imagine what we will accomplish in twenty more years. See http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/.

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Resources

whether matriarchal societies existed. It is a good way to see how the arguments line up. What matters most, of course, is women’s power now.


Protestants look at Mary with new eyes and new insights to benefit all.


Nineteenth century Jewish women began the move from the margin to the center of their tradition. The tale is told well in this book with helpful insights for women in other traditions.


Feminists for the Reformed tradition confront the central matter of Eucharist in Christianity. The welcome conclusion is one of greater and greater inclusivity, both in imagery and practice.


This second edition is a reminder to look anew at 19th century Christian feminism for models of equality.


The introducing series includes many themes in the field. This volume focuses on the ambiguous relationship between Christian theology and the body, especially women’s bodies. All in the series are good primers for classroom use.


The narrative approach is helpful for especially for those who want to tread the line between those who consider scripture authoritative and those who feel it must be handled with less rigidity. Regardless, texts doinform and transform lives so they are never trivial.


A well-written personal and theoretical look at how “Catholic” is changing. Papal recalcitrance and expanding horizons make it a very expansive work according to this courageous and consistent author.


A valuable resource for an overview of womanist work in the field. Ideal for classrooms and study groups. It whets the appetite for more of the primary sources.


Male dominance, white supremacy and now economic vulnerability play a role in domestic violence. James Poling makes the case well and points toward creative solutions.


A lovely approach to the spirit through the five senses. Read it and feel the difference spirit makes.


A powerful antidote to the naive Mother Nature claims. Sure to cause welcome debate among ecofeminists that will sharpen analysis and practice.


A unique feminist collaboration. This book includes artwork as well as commentary on the various aspects of the life and impact of Jesus. Written in an accessible style with a good glossary.


A practical guide for returning to center through simple but structured days for oneself. Give yourself a gift, buy this book.

Resources for Young People


A sweet children’s book that teaches “God is watching, God is watching” to the traditional tune. Nice suggestions for activities and wonderful illustrations. Also, TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE STAR by the same author is a similarly styled gem that teaches “Twinkle, twinkle, shining bright in the velvet dark of night. Painted there by God above, watching over me with love.”


If your teen wants to be a witch, this is a good guide for how to do it. Emphasis on rituals shows how most religions work, namely, to provide ways to acknowledge and celebrate life’s important times.

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conferences, classes, discussion groups, family, friends, and colleagues.

WATER is a feminist educational center, a network of justice-seeking people that began in 1983 in
response to the need for theological, ethical, and liturgical development for and by women. We work
locally, nationally, and internationally doing programs and projects, publications and workshops,
counseling, spiritual direction and liturgical planning which help people
actualize feminist religious values and bring about social change. If you would like to subscribe for
weekly updates from the office and occasional news from colleagues in the field,
send a message to major@omni.com with the words "subscribe water."1
(that's water-hyphen-letter "l", NOT number 1) in the body of the message.

Mary E. Hunt, Ph.D. and Diann L. Neu, D.Min., Co-founders and Co-directors

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years, and map the future of feminist religious
work for social change!

WATER's 20th Anniversary
26-27 September 2003
Washington, DC

Details to be announced this summer

Mark Your Calendar Now!