

Receiving the Gift

Using receptive ecumenism to explore
women's experiences of working within
diverse churches in England

Revd Dr Gabrielle Thomas, Centre for Catholic Studies
Durham University

This research was funded by the
National Board of Catholic Women
June 2019



Acknowledgments

This research was possible because gifted, intelligent women were willing to explore receptive ecumenism together. A heartfelt thanks to all the participants for sharing so honestly and with such integrity.

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INTRODUCTION

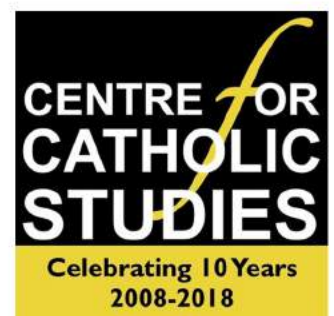
About the researcher

Gabrielle Thomas is a post-doctoral research associate in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University, working within the Centre for Catholic Studies. She publishes and teaches on historical theology, theological anthropology, receptive ecumenism, and women in the Church.

Her recent monograph is entitled *The Image of God in the Theology of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). She is also a priest in the Church of England, serving as a Minor Canon in Durham Cathedral. As someone with a background in full-time ministry, Gabrielle is energised by working across the academy and the Church. She tweets occasionally at <https://twitter.com/womeninchurch>



Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University
Founded in 2008, the Centre for Catholic Studies (CCS) at Durham University represents a creative partnership between academy and church: a centre within the pluralist, public academy for critically constructive Catholic studies of the highest academic standing.
Website: www.durham.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs



The National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW) actively seeks to promote the presence, participation and responsibilities of Catholic women in the Church and society in order to enable them to fulfil their evangelical mission and to work for the Common Good. It is a forum in which Catholic Women in England and Wales (members of Catholic organisations and other women representatives of diocesan structures) exchange experience, express their hopes and concerns and make recommendations on the life and mission of the Church. It forwards to Government and others, submissions dealing with matters of public interest and concern.

Website: www.nbcw.co.uk



— What is receptive ecumenism?

At the heart of receptive ecumenism lies the belief that each faith tradition has an ecumenical responsibility to ask, 'What do we need to learn from the other to help us address difficulties in our own tradition?'

One way of understanding receptive ecumenism is like this: In England, 'High Tea' is a tradition in which the host or hostess brings out all their best china and puts it on the table for the guests, covered with delicious food. On these occasions, the convention is to use only the very best china and crockery, preferably a matching set. If you have any broken or chipped plates, the practice is to keep them hidden at the back of a cupboard, well out of the sight of your guests.

Sometimes, when churches come together ecumenically, it can be a little like an English 'High Tea', in which the churches share only the best of themselves.

We are often quite good at coming to the 'tea party', with our bright and shiny plates, ready to share our gifts with other churches, and to explain to them how we 'do church properly'. If there are any aspects of church life which are not fully functioning we tend to keep these hidden, firmly out of sight; just like those old, chipped plates in the back of the cupboard.

Receptive ecumenism turns this behaviour upside down by encouraging faith traditions not to bring out their best china at an ecumenical gathering. Instead, one tradition is invited to lay out their broken and chipped crockery for the other tradition to see. With their brokenness in sight, one asks the other whether they have any gifts which would help heal the brokenness. In this instance, brokenness refers to those aspects of our traditions where destructive practices, or dysfunctions, are at work. To engage in receptive ecumenism is to encourage traditions to pause, and to be honest with themselves. It creates the space for a faith tradition to admit that not everything within it functions perfectly yet; rather there are wounds and difficulties in each of our traditions that await the Spirit's transformation.

Another way of thinking about receptive ecumenism is to imagine your church holding out her hands to receive a gift from another church. In this case, the hands bear wounds. To engage in receptive ecumenism is to believe that God has given different gifts to different churches. Therefore, we first examine ourselves, as one church, and ask the Holy Spirit to shine a light on those areas of our church life which need healing.

We turn to another church and seek to

listen to them, and discern whether that church has gifts, which we might receive, to heal our wounds. Integrity is crucial, since receptive ecumenism does not advocate the destruction of denominations, rather it advocates that each tradition should be more wholly itself; or said another way, that each church should image Christ more fully.

Receptive ecumenism does not aim to replace other forms of ecumenical engagement. It serves a radically different purpose by calling for ecclesial conversion, not unlike a prophet in the wilderness crying out to the people of God, 'Repent'. Ultimately, it is guided by the belief that the Holy Spirit is calling the churches into full and visible unity. By being willing to be transformed and healed, churches walk more closely together. They move closer to sharing in the unity for which Jesus Christ prayed in John 17:

“

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

”



Paul D. Murray

Developed by lay-Catholic theologian Paul D. Murray, the director of the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University, receptive ecumenism develops a long Christian tradition of recognising the gifts in the other. For instance, in his encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* (That we may be one; on commitment to ecumenism), Pope John Paul II, speaks of ecumenical dialogue as an 'exchange of gifts' (§28). Likewise, Pope Francis recalls the spirit of receptive ecumenism when he says, "If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us" (*Evangelii Gaudium* §246).

Receptive ecumenism has attracted attention globally from academics and practitioners alike. Popular conferences dedicated to exploring and interrogating this way of ecumenical engagement have taken place in Durham, U.K. (2006, 2009), Fairfield, Connecticut, U.S.A. (2014), and Canberra, Australia (2017). The next

conference will take place in Sigtuna, Sweden (June 2020).

Formally, the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) employed receptive ecumenism during its latest phase (see Further Resources). The resulting document, *Walking Together on the Way*, demonstrates a shift in methodology for formal bilateral dialogues. Rather than exploring areas of commonality, the document shows that it can be fruitful to consider how one tradition is different from the other, and how these differences can bring helpful challenges to each tradition, particularly with respect to difficulties being faced.

Back in October 2007, a regional comparative research project was launched in the northeast of England under the title 'Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church'. The project involved six representatives of the major denominational groups of the region working in full partnership with the staff of Durham University's Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University's Business School, and the former North of England Institute for Christian Education. This project explored three areas of church life: Governance and Finance, Leadership and Ministry, and Learning and Formation – for access to the process and results of this project, see Further Resources.



One recent example of the early stages of receptive ecumenism concerns a one-day conference held in Pusey House, Oxford, 29th September 2018. For several years, Orthodox theologians, both academics and practitioners, have been gathering together twice a year in various locations around the U.K. These study days, whilst named 'Women's Ministries Initiative' are, in fact, open to all. Elena Narinskaya, an Orthodox theologian based at Clare College, Oxford is the pioneer of these gatherings. After five years of meeting together, she and the other regular members thought that it was time to talk about women's roles in the Orthodox Church. In light of this, Elena organised a study day entitled 'Ordination of Women: Pros and Cons'. Orthodox theologians, including academics, such as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware and Fr. Andrew Louth, spoke on different aspects of priesthood and explored both some of the questions pertaining to and also the implications of ordaining women priests. Met. Kallistos set the tone for the day by explaining why, after many years of arguing against the ordination of women in the Orthodox Church, he had changed his mind. He suggested that it was time for the Orthodox Church to explore this question with serious consideration.

The event was an inspiring day – and was an example of receptive ecumenism at work. As the organiser of the study day, Elena was aware that some women (though not all) in the Orthodox Church in England felt it should be possible to explore a vocation to the priesthood. Because of this she thought that it would be helpful to include, amongst the speakers, a woman who is ordained. Since the Orthodox Church does not ordain women as priests or deacons, Elena reached out to another church. She generously invited Gabrielle Thomas (an Anglican priest who is a woman) to present



the opening plenary talk in which I reflected theologically upon my own experiences of being an ordained priest in the Church of England.

This conversation will continue since Elena and I are currently preparing an edited volume, to be published in 2020, which includes the talks by Met. Kallistos Ware, Fr. Andrew Louth, and others. We hope that it will serve not only as a useful resource for the conversation on women priests in the Orthodox Church, but also as a further example of receptive ecumenism in practice, since it includes essays from theologians in other traditions.

Building on the success of these different ways of engaging in ecumenical learning, this particular research is the first of its kind to use receptive ecumenism to explore women's experiences of working within their respective traditions. In light of the low number of women represented in formal ecumenical dialogues, it's time to bring women's voices to the fore! Up until now, receptive ecumenism has focused upon gifts such as doctrines, practices and structures in the different traditions. This research shows that the women themselves are gifts to the churches, and have God-given gifts to share with their churches, albeit many of them are still waiting to be received.

— Background to the Research

In 2013, a small group of Catholic women attended the first conference on receptive ecumenism hosted by the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University. The women are members of the Ecumenical and Interfaith Group of the National Board of Catholic Women and were drawn to the possibilities presented by receptive ecumenism.

They were especially interested in 'listening to, learning from and receiving gifts from other Christian traditions'. Seeing 'new possibilities for ecumenism through the fresh approach offered by receptive ecumenism' the women decided to 'put it to the test'. In collaboration with women from other churches, they pioneered small-scale conferences to serve as a space for women from diverse churches to listen to, learn from, and receive from one another and one another's traditions.

The gatherings proved to be popular, bringing together women from Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Anglican, Assemblies of God and United Reformed churches. They explored together a wide range of themes, such as 'prayer', 'ministry', and 'affirming women's gifts'.

Building on the success of these gatherings, the women wanted to facilitate further learning and approached the Centre for Catholic Studies in order to explore the possibilities of collaboration.

These conversations resulted in the appointment of Gabrielle Thomas as a post-doctoral research associate in the Centre for Catholic Studies in October 2017, whom the NBCW commissioned to design and lead research which uses receptive ecumenism to explore women's experiences of working within diverse churches in England.

Ethics and Confidentiality

This report does not name participants, nor the geographical areas in which the focus groups were held, due to a confidentiality agreement with participants.

The focus groups and interviews were recorded and later transcribed; quotations are used with permission. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Durham University approved the research plan prior to focus groups and interviews.



CONTEXT

— Scope of the research

Who took part in the research?

This report provides a snapshot of the experiences of a small sample of women who work in various ordained and lay (non-ordained) roles in churches across England. It does not represent every woman's voice in every faith tradition in England.

122 women have contributed to this research, either through focus groups or interviews.

8 and 18 women in each group

5 focus groups were held during 2018

21–91 years of age



The groups gathered in various locations across England and met during the day for 6-8 hours.

The contexts of the groups ranged from the front room of someone's home, a café, through to comfortable function rooms in church buildings. The researcher quickly found that hospitality was integral to the success of receptive ecumenism. Since this is key to the development of receptive ecumenism, she has since published further articles in which she reflects theologically on the role of hospitality within receptive ecumenism (see Further Resources).

The women were initially invited from preexisting networks, after which invitations were rolled out more widely. Most of the women in the groups did not know one another prior to taking part in the research, but they found that the groups had a 'synergy' about them. The aim was to have as many church traditions represented as possible, in addition to a range of roles, ethnicities and ages, within the project constraints.

The women who took part were asked to think about their experiences

(positive and negative) of working in their churches and to reflect on the gifts, challenges, and wounds of their respective traditions. They did this prior to meeting together. They were invited to bring to the groups whatever they felt comfortable in sharing with one another, before moving on to reflect together on what they had heard. Details of this process can be found in the models towards the end of the report. The women found the principles of listening to, learning from and receiving from the other, which are core to receptive ecumenism, were an excellent method of engaging with one another. The findings demonstrate that the participants shared their experiences personally, boldly and openly in the groups.

Whilst only a sample of what was shared in the groups is documented in this report, it offers a glimpse into the depth and richness of the conversations, and into the value of gathering to engage in receptive ecumenism.

Whose voices are in the report?

The churches represented in the research include Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Orthodox, United Reformed, Assemblies of God, Independent Evangelical and Independent Pentecostal.

Women from other churches were approached to take part in the research but were unable to for a variety of reasons. Some agreed to participate but had to withdraw at the last minute for personal reasons; some women from evangelical and charismatic churches approached their church leaders and elders, and were not permitted to take part; others reported that they could not take part because the research involved Catholics, whom they did not regard as Christian.

This highlights some of the wider issues with respect to the landscape of ecumenism in England.

Why does this research explore only women's experience?



In many churches women are underrepresented in positions of authority and their voices are not always heard. This research gives voice to those who otherwise might not be heard.

Ultimately, receptive ecumenism is concerned with the full, visible, sacramental unity of churches. Churches differ over the ministries that women are permitted to exercise; consequently women, or at least, the roles women take on in churches, are often cited as being the principal reason for churches not moving to full unity. Through engaging in receptive ecumenism together, women themselves change the landscape in which they are often perceived as 'stumbling blocks'. Through learning and receiving from one another at grass roots, rather than being the 'stumbling blocks', instead they become 'stepping stones' to unity.



— Purpose of the research

Some of the questions that have been designed for this research ask: How are women's gifts used to enable churches to flourish? Or, are women's gifts being overlooked, or worse, denied? What are the challenges for women working in churches? What, if any, are the differences between the faith traditions with respect to women's experiences? What can they learn from one another? Since women make up roughly 65% of churches in England, we might expect to see/hear of women sharing in all kinds of roles and using their diverse gifts in a variety of ways, but is this always the case?

We hope that that this report will

A Demonstrate the complexity of women's experiences of working within a range of churches in England.

B Provide a snapshot of how women are using their gifts across diverse churches

C Outline some of the challenges women encounter within their traditions

D Inspire women to engage in receptive ecumenism more widely



FINDINGS

Roles undertaken by women

On meeting together, the women in the groups were invited to explain their roles within the churches. These are listed below. They constitute both paid and unpaid roles and activities undertaken by the participants in the research. Some roles are not noted here due to the participants' request and their concerns for their own privacy.

- Parish Assistant
- Pastoral Worker
- Lead-Pastor
- Ordained Minister
- Deacon
- Presbyter
- Priest
- Lay Minister
- Eucharistic Minister
- Lay Reader
- Social Justice Worker
- Lay Chaplain
- Hospitality Coordinator
- Prison Chaplain
- Ecumenical Officer
- Teacher
- Theological Educator
- Freelance Theologian
- Holy Orders
- Choir Leader
- Academic Theologian
- Academic Theologian
- Children's Worker
- Youth Worker
- Chair of Local Churches Together
- Catechetical Officer
- School Chaplain
- Hospital Lay Chaplain

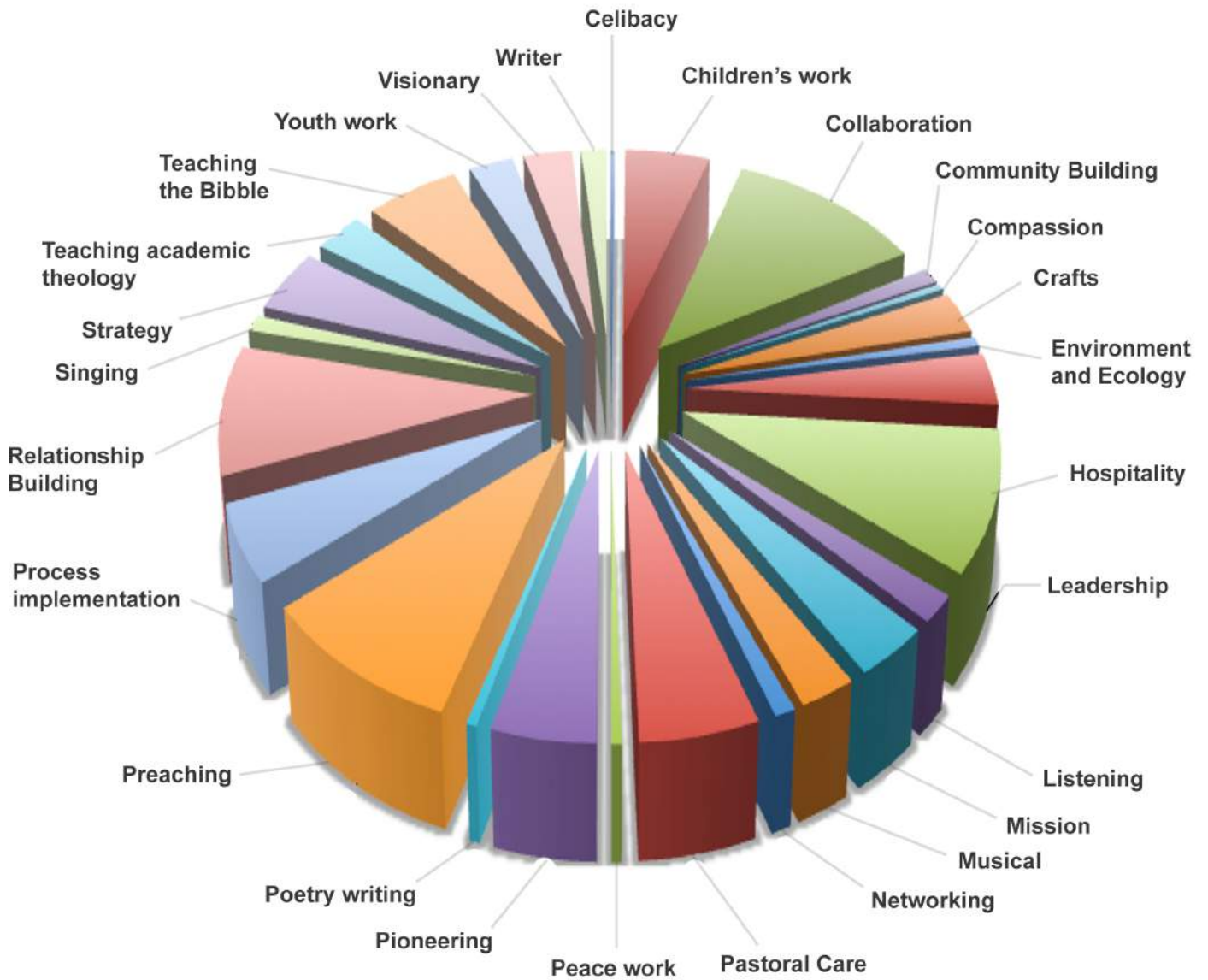
Women's gifts

During the process of sharing with one another, the women began to reflect on their own gifts, as well as the gifts of their traditions. They self identified the following gifts which they believed that God had given them, and which they wanted to use in the service of their churches:

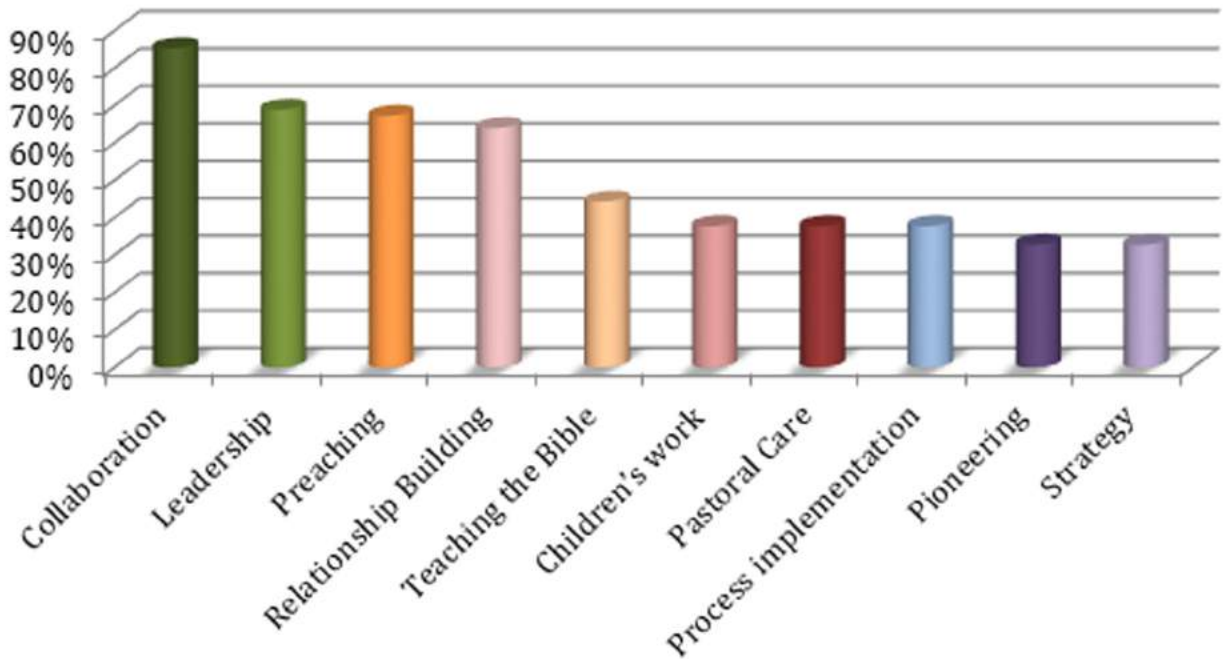
- Caring for the environment
- Celibacy
- Children's work
- Collaboration
- Community building
- Compassion
- Crafts
- Joy
- Hospitality
- Leadership
- Listening
- Mission
- Musical
- Networking
- Pastoral care
- Peace work
- Pioneering
- Poetry writing
- Preaching
- Process implementation
- Relationship building
- Singing

Gifts identified

This chart represents the proportions of women who identified with certain gifts. Are they as you would expect? Or, when you read this are there any surprises?



From the range of gifts identified the chart below demonstrates the 10 most frequently mentioned by participants in the research (% of the sample).



Snapshot

75% of **Catholics** identified with having leadership gifts

91% of **Methodists** identified with having gifts of collaboration

67% of **Anglicans** identified with having gifts of preaching

95% **Baptists** identified with being gifted in Bible teaching

67% of **Orthodox** identified with being gifted in writing

95% of **Pentecostals** (Independent and AOG) identified with gifts of mission

90% of **URC** identified with being gifted in building community

— Are women flourishing and using their gifts?

In many churches across England, women are using the gifts which they identify God has given them. Women reported no difficulty or resistance in deploying the gifts listed below in their churches:

- Caring for the environment
- Music
- Celibacy
- Pastoral care
- Children's work
- Peace and justice work
- Community building
- Poetry writing
- Compassion
- Singing
- Crafts
- Teaching academic theology
- Joy
- Youth work
- Gathering people together
- Writer
- Hospitality
- Listening



KEY QUESTIONS:

Are women flourishing and using all their gifts?
Which, if any, gifts are prohibited?

— The range of women’s experiences

It is important to emphasise the complexity of women’s experiences across the traditions.

In the following pages, this research demonstrates that we cannot say ‘this church always receives women’s gifts’ and ‘that church does not’. The women participating in the research also varied in their approaches to beliefs about biological essentialism.

Some thought that women bring particular gifts which men do not possess; others thought that men and women bring the same gifts and that the difference in gifting lies with the individual person.

The following findings are quotations from the women themselves.

The themes and gifts discussed below are those which were discussed for the greatest amount of time in focus groups and interviews, rather than those which were mentioned most frequently:

A Collaboration

C Preaching and Bible Teaching

B Leadership

D Pioneering



“

*Women's beliefs and
experiences vary*

”





Collaboration

The gift of being able to collaborate was discussed in great depth; overall, the women were delighted to be able to say that they collaborate, and for the most part, they were certain that collaboration is 'something women just do really well'. In fact, in each focus group, they noted that the research itself was 'a form of collaboration', and commented that 'people do not need to think the same or even believe the same thing to collaborate'.

At one point, interjecting, as the researcher, I asked, 'what does collaboration mean?' The replies reveal more than a dictionary would with respect to women's the beliefs and experiences!

'to collaborate means not to do like the men'

'collaboration means not lording it over the vicar in the parish next door, but actually working with him, or her'

'collaboration means being team'

'collaboration means ending up with greater success because you've involved lots of people. So, I suppose what I'm saying is that collaboration, when it's done properly, means people flourish'



‘collaboration means going out not as a single person, but in pairs, like the disciples’

‘collaboration means distributing the power evenly’

Some women gave examples of when collaboration is not possible. These involved areas of church life where they were not welcome or able to participate in. Women who came from church networks in which women are not permitted to take on leadership roles which mean they are in authority over men, said ‘we could not collaborate at a leadership level’.

The Catholic women noted that ‘collaboration in the Catholic Church is sketchy – it really depends on the priest’. One of the Baptists said that she found at a higher leadership level, ‘it is sometimes tricky because not all Baptist ministers want to collaborate, especially with women’.

The Methodist women came out overwhelmingly positive during discussions on collaboration. Both ordained and lay Methodist women testified to being able to collaborate with ease, at least within their own tradition. They did note that it was not always as easy ecumenically, since ‘ecumenical work brings us into contact with leaders from churches which do not support women in leadership’.



B Leadership

Leadership, in different forms, was mentioned frequently in the groups and the interviews. Some of the women stated that they considered themselves as having leadership gifts, but often apologised for making such a claim. When the groups probed the reasons for this, a number of women explained that they had been described as 'bossy' when they were young girls. There was a general agreement that this is an unhelpful way to respond to girls and that a more positive approach is required.

Some women noted that the various structures and distribution of power makes 'being a leader tricky':

'I am empowered by my priest in my leadership gifts, but if another priest came he could shut down what I'm doing immediately. I've seen that happen to other Catholic women.' ~ Catholic, 39

'I think the problem with women leading in the Orthodox church is that we can't easily grow beards. To me the beard says, "Men lead. Women don't."' ~ Orthodox, 64

'I am a leader, but I'm not sure the Anglican church has fully reconciled it self to the fact that women are gifted to lead. And they don't necessarily lead differently from men.' ~ Anglican, 37

Father knows best, does he 'eck. But there's nothing I can do about it. He won't listen to the likes of me. A woman. Despite the fact I've been a CEO.'
~ Catholic, 78

'Pastors have power; an enabling power and a restricting power – what's sad is that I seem to have experienced the restricting power more often than the enabling one. Saying out loud "I am a leader" has attracted a great deal of resistance.' ~ Baptist, 67

As with preaching, experiences of leadership differed radically amongst the women. Despite churches formally permitting women to lead in official capacities, it does not mean that they will flourish:

'I used to have a formal leadership role within my church but I got really tired of the power games amongst the men, and in the end I left and became a teacher instead.'
Independent Evangelical, 47

Another key difference amongst the women was their views on models of leadership and whether women lead differently from men:

'I think we bring something that men don't. We are softer and more caring.'
~ Methodist, 49

'I lead no differently from some of my male colleagues and this always seem to be a problem. I don't prefer the more pastoral roles, or working with young children, and yet they always seem to want me to be in these roles because I am a woman.'
~ Baptist, 54

Some of the testimonies were hopeful and positive:

'All the role models for leadership were men, but I was just convinced that God was calling me, a woman. And yet, women did the cleaning and the cooking in the church and look after the children. When I told my pastor, he was very supportive and he supported me whilst I went and trained. I will never forget how empowering that was.' ~ Independent Pentecostal, 49

'Methodism has an understanding of institutional non-hierarchical core leadership, which does not reinforce male dominance/alpha male models of leadership. My experience as a leader has been a positive one in the main.' ~ Methodist, 42

'Leadership in my church does not equate to autonomy and so possibly that's why I have not encountered too many issues.' ~ URC, 67

'Both in my own role, and working collaboratively with ordained colleagues, I held significant responsibilities in designing and delivering first diocesan and then national level pastoral strategies.' ~ Catholic, 65





Preaching / Teaching the Bible

A surprising proportion of women expressed either a desire to preach, or a love of preaching, or a sense of call to be preachers and teachers of the Bible (preaching and Bible teaching are treated as one category here because the women spoke of both gifts interchangeably).

Some of the women, irrespective of their church tradition, were able to flourish and use their preaching gifts. Women in the Catholic Church are not officially allowed to preach the homily after the Gospel reading, since this privilege is reserved for the priest (the Catholic Church does not permit women to become priests). Yet, as we shall see below, some of them are able to preach despite this ruling:

I preach in the Mass. Our priest is progressive and he often invites me to preach. No one from the parish has ever complained. I think people like hearing a woman interpret the Bible.’ ~ Catholic, 42

*‘Since my own church does not allow me to preach, I have a license to preach in the Anglican Church. Whilst it’s not the same as preaching in my own ‘home’, I still get to use my gifts and my preaching is usually well received.’
~ Catholic, 67*

‘I’m training to become a local preacher and I’ve only ever been encouraged to go for it. I’m loving it and everyone’s very supportive.’ ~ Methodist, 31

‘I’ve always preached and there have never been any challenges from the congregation.’ ~ URC minister, 64

However, not all the testimonies were positive. Note that both positive and negative experience occur within the same faith traditions:

*My church does not want my gifts just because I am a woman. Sometimes, when I read the Gospel for the mass, I really want to preach on it. I feel like I have a gift that I could give here; a way of interpreting the Gospel. And even though I studied theology and I have the background that maybe they’d expect for someone to preach, I’m not allowed to do this because I’m a woman. I’m not a priest.’
~ Catholic, 22*



'Despite the fact that the Baptist Church has ordained women for 100 years, I am not permitted to preach in many Baptist churches. The structure of the Baptist church means that there is nothing I can do about that. There is no way of challenging it.'

~ Baptist, 45

'I would like to preach. Priests don't always have time to prepare good homilies, and they are the only ones allowed to preach in the homily slot. I find this frustrating.'

~ Catholic, 71

'For years I felt that the Lord was calling me to preach, but my Pastor said that women can't do that. It did not occur to me to challenge him; the women did not do that. It's not how it worked. In the end, I moved to a different church.'

~ Independent Pentecostal, 53

'When I thought that God was calling me to teach the Bible, my minister explained that the Bible says women should not have authority over men, or teach them.'

~ Baptist, 56

D Pioneering

The word 'pioneering' arose a number of times in conversation, and the pain expressed by some women meant that the groups often explored this theme for quite some time. Women who identified themselves as 'pioneers' described themselves as 'constrained', either by being expected to take on a greater amount of non-pioneering work than their male counterparts, or by not being given resources equal to their male counterparts:

'I'm pioneering and missional; I want to work outside the community and yet I find myself constantly squeezed into roles inside the church.' ~ Methodist, 38

'I'm not given a budget like my male counterparts and yet I'm expected to achieve the same outcomes.' ~ Anglican, 37

— Vocation: gift and wound

During conversation on the gifts and challenges in the women's experiences, one word arose repeatedly: vocation. I noticed, during the first focus group, that it was mentioned a number of times, but wondered whether that this was simply the way the group pursued aspects of their conversation. However, in the following groups and interviews 'vocation' was the most frequently mentioned 'gift', 'challenge' or 'wound', respectively. The women did not necessarily think in the same way as one another regarding vocation.

Some women talked about vocation in a general sense; as one put it, 'my vocation is to follow Christ and to be like him as much as possible'. Others related it to being a mother 'my vocation first and foremost is to be a mum to my kids'. For some of the women, vocation was about discerning a very particular kind of call to follow Christ in a specific way, such as 'Holy Orders'. One sister, speaking on this, said 'I did not plan on living as a single woman, but in the end, after many years of prayer and conversation with others, it became clear God was calling me to become a sister. This was my vocation'.

There were noticeable differences in the language used by women in diverse traditions. For example, the Pentecostal and Baptist women tended to speak in terms of 'calling', whereas the Anglicans and Methodists spoke more of 'vocation'. The women, having discussed this together, decided they were speaking about the same thing. The Catholic women often referred to vocation with a prefix, 'lay-vocation', observing that the 'Spirit calls all Christians to serve in the body of Christ'.

'Vocation' was the pivotal point of conversation in which the diversity of the traditions rose to the fore. For the Catholic and Orthodox women, the question of vocation to priesthood is not an option. For some this was not an issue, whereas others could not discuss it without tears, due to the pain which accompanies this aspect of their experience of being a women in a church. As it becomes clear below, women have responded in various ways to the fact that, for some women at least, vocation to ordained ministry will never be a possibility.

The following comments from the women themselves represent the broad range of approaches to and experiences of living out a vocation.

— Flourishing in a vocation

Many of the women were thankful for the opportunity to live out what they believed to be their vocation. They described themselves in the following ways: ‘fulfilled’, ‘flourishing’, ‘overwhelming thankful’, and ‘in a place of wonder at having been called by God’.

*‘As a Methodist, I never considered I should leave leadership to the men and so when I sensed God calling me to be ordained deacon, the process was straight forward.’
~ Methodist, 38*

‘Despite being divorced and a whole other host of potential barriers, my vicar supported my journey to becoming a youth-worker all the way.’ ~ Anglican, 46

*‘My vocation to lay-parish work was supported all the way. Although, goodness knows what would have happened if I’d said I thought I have a vocation to priesthood.’
~ Catholic, 82*

‘As a Catholic woman in local leadership I feel empowered and supported by the men I encounter. It’s true my gender excludes me from the priesthood and diaconate but there are plenty of other opportunities to live out my vocation to spread the Good News.’ ~ Catholic, 38

‘It was all rather easy really, in the sense that my pastor listened to what I thought the Spirit was saying and then began to put me in various leadership roles so that I could gain experience. It would have been nice to have had a female role model, but somehow Jesus created a way amongst the men.’ ~ AOG, 37

— Unable to pursue a vocation

Some women shared a sense of vocation, but spoke about it using words like ‘sorrow’, ‘loss’, ‘grief’, and ‘confusion’.

The comments below show an interesting finding, which the women discovered whilst listening to one another: Even women in churches which officially permit them to explore vocation to ordained, leadership roles, spoke of encountering barriers before them because they were women. Whether churches are governed as autonomous bodies or structured with a broader accountability, it can still be problematic for a woman to discern a possible vocation from God, or test possible gifts.



In sum: if a tradition officially permits women to be ordained this does not mean that they will flourish. During the course of the research, a few of the women spoke about sensing a vocation to a role from which they were excluded. For example, for Catholic women, this was a sense that God was calling them to the priesthood, and for one of the Baptist women, it was a call to church leadership.

'Despite all I did in and around the parish, I was never able to explore a vocation... any vocation... there is no real lay vocation in our church. Vatican II might as well not have happened. It breaks my heart.' ~ Catholic, 82

'I had to go to 4 different churches before I found a minister and church which would support my sense of vocation to ordained ministry. I got there in the end but it was hardly a pain-free journey.' ~ Baptist, 46

'I thought I was called to be a deacon, but now I'm dying and I'll never know.'
~ Catholic, 67

'Vocation to what? To bake the bread for the men to break it?' ~ Orthodox, 53

'As a Pentecostal, I heard the Spirit call me to be ordained, so when my pastor would not support me because I am a woman, I went to another church because I wanted to be faithful to God.' ~ AOG, 40

'Should I leave my church to pursue vocation to the priesthood?'

'I felt like I was getting divorced. It was dreadful and I received so much judgment from fellow Catholics, from men and women. My husband was supportive, but even now it pains me that he can't receive the body of Christ when I celebrate, because he is Catholic, and of course officially they can't receive the Eucharist in other churches. But, I know I'm in the right place, being who God has called me to be.' ~ Anglican, 58

'It was not an easy decision to leave my church (Catholic), but I felt that it was more important to pursue the vocation to become a priest.' ~ Anglican, 32

— Being a Woman

Women recounted stories of sexism and sexual harassment which they believed to be related to their sex.



A Appearance

'Funeral directors can be a problem. And the comments on my appearance are always as I'm about to walk the coffin in. You can't retort at that point. I've had all kinds of comments, such as "The churches would not be dying if all the ministers had a figure like yours" through to "do you fancy sitting on my lap at the wake?" It's not great when you are about to take a funeral service.' ~ **Methodist, 41**

'I have had inappropriate flirting from men in every single congregation I've worked in. I always wear trousers these days as I've just had too many comments on my legs. It makes me sick as I just want to get on and do the job and not be seen as a sex object.' ~ **Baptist, 53**

'So, for most of the men I work alongside, I'm either the woman in the kitchen or there's a certain little flirty thing going on. They find it really hard to relate on an equal setting. My situation is I'm in a Chaplaincy team and I'm in a room with all other men.' ~ **Baptist, 49**

'On my first ever time presiding at the Eucharist, a colleague said to me afterwards, 'I thought I was watching a beauty pageant with you behind the altar. I kept expecting you to come out from behind and say, "My name's and I like animals."' It cheapened it for me.' ~ **Anglican, 39**



B**Singleness**

'My challenges have come from being a single female in ministry. I find that women in the congregation often treat me with suspicion and they seem to think that I want to steal their husbands. It makes ministry difficult.' ~ **Methodist, 49**

'As a single woman, I seem to be expected to help cater at the event as well as running it. And no one takes into account the fact that when I get home after a funeral or something, there's no one to cook the tea.' ~ **Baptist, 54**

C**Ethnicity**

'I ended up in a black majority church because I was asked to leave white people's churches because of the colour of my skin. Now I work as a chaplain and I'm the only black woman in a white man's world.' ~ **Independent Pentecostal, 53**

'I am often the only person like me in a meeting. I never know whether I'm being patronised because I'm a woman or because of the colour of my skin. It's probably both.' ~ **Anglican, 37**

D**Motherhood**

'There were lots of questions about how I would do this with a baby. And when I go to a conference, people will come up to me and say "who's looking after the children?" I tell them that my husband is and they ask me, "Will he be all right?" I hope so, he's their father.' ~ **Methodist, 42**

'Those in authority assumed I would support myself during ordained ministry because I have a disabled son. So, the assumption was that I would stay at home to care for him. When I explained that my husband supported my vocation and he would take care of our son when I'm at work, they were visibly shocked.' ~ **Anglican, 38**



E Liturgy

***'The combined impact of an exclusively male hierarchy, exclusive language in the liturgy, disciplinary edicts about even discussing the ordination of women, and contestable theological/anthropological ideas about gender convey very negative messages for many Catholic women.'* ~ Catholic, 64**

***'Working ecumenically can bring it's own challenges. I've not encountered a great deal of institutional sexism but where I rub against it is within ecumenism. For example, I asked if the men would change the title from 'Fraternal' to 'Minister's group' but they suggested that if I did not like the name of the group, then I should not come to it. Picking my battles, I go.'* ~ Methodist, 40**



F Networks

Networking arose because, in some cases, men meet together in places which exclude women. Therefore, for some women, though not for all, the opportunity to make useful contacts is limited. For example, one woman spoke about her colleague being given a job

***'In other walks of life I'm good at networking. It's not the same in the church as often the men operate their networks in places I can't get to easily. For example, the golf-course, and men-only clubs.'* ~ Anglican, 54**

This is also an issue for Catholic women, most of whom are not involved in decision making in the

***'Despite being a gifted networker in my day-job, the structure of the Catholic Church means that I'm excluded automatically from the places those making decisions are.'* ~ Catholic, 47**

RECOMMENDATION

The range of women's experiences

The most obvious finding from this research is that we cannot generalise with respect to women's experiences. This report provides a summary of many women's individual experiences within their own contexts.

Some women are flourishing and using their gifts - and others are not. Whilst some churches permit women to lead in an ordained role, how this correlates to women flourishing and using their gifts is far from obvious.

Some women have found a welcome in traditions other than their own with respect to using their gifts, whilst others have pushed the boundaries within their own contexts. Others have left traditions in order to pursue vocations.

Since the purpose of receptive ecumenism is for churches to examine themselves and learn from the other, this report will hopefully enable this process with respect to the reception of women's gifts.

— Feedback

During the feedback the women responded that they had learnt a lot from one another, and for some, they had recognised value in a tradition which they had not previously.

Below are a few of the responses which highlight:

A The women's desire for unity amongst their churches

B The positive experience of learning from one another

C The recognition that each church has something to learn with respect to women's flourishing

D The value of receptive ecumenism

'I wanted to say how inspiring it was to sit around a table of ecumenical female leaders and discuss the various challenges and issues raised of being a female in a predominately male world! The level of vulnerability was stunning and it was almost "healing" being able to talk about experiences and help one another overcome hurts and frustrations. I felt called to be a part of this research because it's so important that we recognise where we have come from and how, if at all, our workplace is changing. I love God's kingdom and want to see it grow so to be able to be unified was very special. If you want to meet new people from differing denominations and cultures this day is for you, and if you feel you can talk about your experiences it will only help us further break down barriers that need to be dismantled!' ~ AoG, 39



'I believe that talking to, and learning from, each other is vital, particularly within the various Christian churches. The most surprising thing I learnt from this was that the issues which women face within my church are almost exactly the same as faced by women in other churches, and, I suspect, will be very similar to the experiences of women within other faiths as well. To me this suggests that the issues women face within faith organisations are not to do with one particular organisation but to do with how faith groups view women in general. This is important because it highlights, once again, how far behind society at large (at least in this country) faith groups are, particularly in the matter of equality and viewing all individuals as valuable. As a result, I think others would value this experience because it allows people to see that the problems they face within their own church are not unique to them, they are part of a far wider issue.' ~ Anglican, 21

'We are not on our own and were encouraged by each other.' ~ Methodist, 37

'I listened in awe to women who never gave up, who are blessed and strong. Women who faced the challenges of life with confidence, humility, wisdom, and strong sense of purpose. Thank you! What a privilege just to be there.' ~ Independent Pentecostal, 53

'I came along thinking 'oh no, not another's women's group full of women moaning.' I went away think what a wonderful unique gift is given through receptive ecumenism. We were brought to a place of recognising brokenness without judgement and were able to receive one another's gifts, even gifts of women which had been rejected elsewhere. It was precious and powerful.' ~ URC, 82

'Change happens at grass roots. Let's continue to use our gifts even though it challenges our churches – that way eventually things will change.' ~ Catholic, 77

'I think one of the things I've learned about participating in this is that the challenges for women are not limited to one denomination so it can't be put down to varying theology or doctrine - so many of the stories could have been interchanged with Anglican written in place of Baptist etc. and still wholly believable. That tells me it is about patriarchal structures, not about doctrine.' ~ Anglican, 39

A prayer for women everywhere

In one of the groups, quite spontaneously, the women gathered decided to pray for one another. During this time, an Independent Pentecostal pastor prayed for all the women taking part in the research. Her prayer is included in this report, since it captures the fellowship experienced amongst the group, and also serves as a prayer for women who seek to serve God, in whichever church they belong.

Dear God, we thank you for every woman here. We thank you for the uniqueness of their stories, Lord God that your Holy Spirit has been working in the lives of each and every one of us. God, we thank you and we praise you and we honour you, Lord God, as women. Women that you have called, women that you have chosen, Lord God, and planted in your vineyard. God, we thank you. We feel so inadequate at times, but we thank you for your Holy Spirit who guides us, enables us and empowers us to be the mighty women that you have called us to be.

There are many challenges that we may face, but we know that you're with us and guide and direct us. We thank you for all the wonderful things that you have implanted within us, the zeal for your kingdom, to see your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And God, as we have talked and laughed and shared and cried together today, we thank you for your healing Spirit that heals broken hearts and reunites people back together; the united kingdom of your work. Not our work, but your work, that we may be one as you and your Father are one. So help us to continue to do your will.

Help us in the midst of all this to be able to embrace our full communities as we reach out. Not only just looking in, with our busy lives and busy schedules, help us to never lose focus of you and what you require us to do so that your name may be magnified and glorified because it's all about you, Lord God, and not about us. And we thank you for vision and inspiration of moving forward.

Empower us, we pray, to be effective in this generation.

We thank you in Jesus name.

Amen.

CONCLUSION

— This report highlights:

Women possess a broad range of gifts

- Some gifts are received in churches unequivocally
- Some gifts are rejected by some of the churches; such as Bible-teaching, preaching, leadership and process implementation

Women are called by God to use their God-given gifts

- Some are able to respond to this call, enabling their churches to flourish in a variety of ways and fulfilled in their vocations
- Others experience great resistance when they respond to Christ's call amidst the abuse of power in institutions which are desperately broken
- Others have pushed the official boundaries to find places where they can use their gifts even though they are not officially recognised

Women are testaments to the power of God which enables them 'to run the race set before them'

We look forward to the day when the churches will receive the fullness of the gifts women have to offer.

What next?

On the basis of how deeply the women in these groups shared with one another, and what they learnt and received from those in different traditions from their own, we commend the practice of receptive ecumenism! The following pages explain different ways of going about this.

SAMPLE MODELS

If you have been inspired by this research and would like to run similar gatherings in your local area, this section provides some ideas on how to go about it

- 3 models which can each be adapted to suit time, budget and context
- Options of half-day, full-day or evening
- These models are free to use and have no copyright attached to them
- Information can be printed off and shared widely
- The sessions are aimed at women-only groups
- Encourage attendance from as many different churches as possible because greater diversity promotes greater learning

Model 1: Receiving from the Other - Small Groups

Participants: **4-10 women**
Time: **Approx. 4 hours**
Suggested themes: **Ministry, Mission, Prayer, Liturgy, or any suitable theme**

Model 2: Receiving from the Other - Conference Style

Participants: **16 women upwards**
Time: **Approx. 6 hours**
Suggested themes: **Ministry, Mission, Prayer, Liturgy, or any suitable theme**

Model 3: Receiving from the Other - Being Inspired by Scripture

Participants: **4 women upwards**
Time: **Approx. 2 hours**
Number of Gatherings: **3**

Model 3 would work well as a three-week Advent course through Advent, particularly if women from different churches want to journey through Advent together

Each model has two versions:

- 1) Facilitator's Guide**
- 2) Participant's Guide**

Model 1 - Facilitator's Guide

Receiving from the Other – Small Groups

Participants: **4-10 women**
Time: **Approx. 4 hours**
Suggested themes: **Ministry, Mission, Prayer, Liturgy, or any suitable theme**

Outline

- Welcome and refreshments (30 mins)
- Introduction to the theme and to receptive ecumenism (15 mins)
- Prayer and Bible reading (15 mins)
- Group discussion - if there are larger numbers split into smaller groups of 4-8 women (70 mins)
- Lunch (30 mins)
- Time to reflect (15 mins)
- Feedback and group discussion (50 mins)
- Prayer and farewell (15 mins)

Resources

- A venue (with disabled access)
- A facilitator
- Seats for participants
- Tea
- Coffee
- Milk (include a dairy-free option)
- Sugar
- Biscuits/Cake/Fruit (including gluten and dairy free)
- Lunch (find out dietary requirements beforehand – or you can ask people to bring their own lunch)
- Participant guides printed if required
- Flip chart or equivalent
- Flip chart paper or equivalent
- Markers/felt- tip pens

Facilitator's job description

- Encourage people to be respectful of each other's traditions – especially where they might differ radically
- Think about how to help everyone speak and how you are going to discourage one person from dominating discussions, if this arises
- Be sensitive when wounds and challenges are shared, however small they seem to you

- Encourage a focus on gifts to be received – this will guard against the session becoming overshadowed by challenges
- Keep to time
- Be kind
- Listen well and encourage others to do the same

Welcome and refreshments (30 mins)

- Begin by offering refreshments – always. If people do not know one another, this provides an opportunity for them to chat and relax. Never underestimate the reassurance offered by a cup of tea, especially in England!

Introduction to the theme and to receptive ecumenism (15 mins)

- The facilitator or someone who is prepared should present this section
- The metaphor of the tea party is effective for helping people grasp the concept and aim of receptive ecumenism
- Explain that receptive ecumenism is a journey towards Christian unity which involves listening to, learning from and receiving gifts from the other. This gathering is about taking time to recognise the brokenness in our own church and seek to receive gifts from the other. If you prefer, you could introduce it by playing short introduction video which is available on the Durham University website:
<https://vimeopro.com/user50612072/receptivity/video/265761120>
- Say that you hope each person will feel safe and able to share what she thinks
- Encourage confidentiality
- Note that the participants are from different traditions and encourage everyone to be respectful of other

Prayer and Bible reading (15 mins)

- Be aware that people pray differently even within the same church and be sensitive. You might keep a few minutes silence for people to offer themselves to God. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead the gathering
- Ask someone prior to the gathering to read John 17:20-26, which is Jesus' last prayer for his friends, 'that they may be one':

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

Group discussion (70mins)

- Use this time for the women to introduce themselves to one another in small groups and invite them to share some of the gifts of their tradition according to the theme. For example, if the theme is ministry, the women might like to think about how their church encourages ministry for women and the different gifts and/or wounds they have experienced
- Be sure to allow time for each person to say as much as they would like to
- Invite everyone to respond to what they've heard and to explore what their church might learn and receive from the other

Lunch (30 mins)

- Break together for lunch and encourage conversations to continue

Time to reflect (30 mins)

- Back into the small groups. There 2 options for this section:
 - a. Emphasizing Gifts
In light of what they have heard and discussed, encourage the group to note (on a piece of flip chart paper) some of the prominent gifts which arose during their conversation. Encourage each person to ask 'What might I receive from the other?'
 - b. Gifts and Challenges/Wounds
In light of the discussion before lunch, gather the group to discuss what stood out to them in what other women were saying about their experiences. Write down the gifts and challenges/wounds on 2 pieces of flip chart paper respectively

Feedback and group discussion (35 mins)

- The facilitator will offer some gathering thoughts and the groups may explore together the themes which have evolved from discussions. If you like to write or create, or know someone who does, the feedback does not need to be verbal only. It can be as simple as filling two sheets of paper entitled 'Wounds' and 'Gifts' respectively. Or, let your creativity flow

Prayer and farewell (15 mins)

- Give the women the opportunity to spend some time in quiet with God
- Encourage them to ask God to show them how they might continue to receive gifts from women in different churches
- You could play some background music if you know someone who is a gifted musician and worship-leader

Conclude with this prayer:

Loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

We ask that you would help us to allow your Holy Spirit to work in us and through us.

Grant us a spirit of generosity to reach out to you and one another in trust.

Give to us, we pray, the humility to accept that our church is broken.

Give to us, we pray, the discernment to recognise where we may learn from others.

Give to us, we pray, the gift of hospitality so that we may receive gifts from others.

Thank you, gracious God, for all your gifts to us.

Amen

Model 1 – Participant’s Guide

‘Receiving from the Other’

Welcome and Refreshments

Introduction to the Theme and Receptive Ecumenism

Receptive ecumenism is a journey towards Christian unity which involves listening to, learning from and receiving gifts from the other. This gathering is about taking time to recognise the brokenness in our own church and seek to receive gifts from the other.

Prayer and Bible reading

John 17:20-26 - Jesus’ last prayer for his friends, ‘that they may be one’

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

Small Group Discussion

Lunch

Time to Reflect in Groups

Feedback and Group Discussion

Prayer and Farewell

*Loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
We ask that you would help us to allow your Holy Spirit to work in us and through us.
Grant us a spirit of generosity to reach out to you and one another in trust.
Give to us, we pray, the humility to accept that our church is broken.
Give to us, we pray, the discernment to recognise where we may learn from others.
Give to us, we pray, the gift of hospitality so that we may receive gifts from others.
Thank you, gracious God, for all your gifts to us.
Amen*

Model 2: Receiving from the Other - Conference Style

Facilitator's Guide

Participants: **16 women upwards**

Time : **Approx. 6 hours**

Suggested themes: **Ministry, Mission, Prayer, Liturgy, or any suitable theme**

- This is designed to cope with large numbers but works equally well with as few as 16 women
- You can choose the theme to suit your needs
- Once you have done one conference, it is much easier to get the next one organised so you might want to consider running a series

Outline

- Welcome and refreshments (30 mins)
- Introduction to the theme and receptive ecumenism (15 mins)
- Prayer and Bible reading (15 mins)
- Small groups meet and greet (30 mins)
- 4 short talks on the conference theme by women in different churches (60 mins)
- Lunch (30 mins)
- Small group discussion (60 mins)
- Feedback and large group discussion (50 mins)
- Prayer and farewell (10 mins)

Resources

- A venue (with disabled access)
- A facilitator
- Seats for participants
- Tea
- Coffee
- Milk (include a dairy-free option)
- Sugar
- Biscuits/Cake/Fruit (including gluten and dairy free)
- Lunch (find out dietary requirements beforehand – or you can ask people to bring their own lunch)
- Participant guides printed if required
- Flip chart or equivalent
- Flip chart paper or equivalent
- Markers/felt- tip pens
- Women designated to facilitate the small groups

Facilitator's job description

- Encourage people to be respectful of each other's traditions – especially where they might differ radically
- Think about how to help everyone speak and how you are going to discourage one person from dominating discussions, if this arises
- Be sensitive when wounds and challenges are shared, however small they seem to you
- Encourage a focus on gifts to be received – this will guard against the session becoming overshadowed by challenges
- Keep to time
- Be kind
- Listen well and encourage others to do the same

Welcome and refreshments (30 mins)

- Begin by offering refreshments – always. If people do not know one another, this provides an opportunity for them to chat and relax. Never underestimate the reassurance offered by a cup of tea, especially in England!

Introduction to the theme and to receptive ecumenism (15 mins)

- The facilitator or someone whom they have asked should deliver this section
- The metaphor of the tea party is effective for helping people grasp the concept and aim of receptive ecumenism
- Explain that receptive ecumenism is a journey towards Christian unity which involves listening to, learning from and receiving gifts from the other. This gathering is about taking time to recognise the brokenness in our own church and seek to receive gifts from the other. If you prefer, you could introduce it by playing a short introduction video which is available on the Durham University website: <https://vimeopro.com/user50612072/receptivity/video/265761120>
- Say that you hope each person will feel safe and able to share what she thinks
- Encourage confidentiality
- Note that the participants are from different traditions and encourage everyone to be respectful of the other

Prayer and Bible reading (15 mins)

- Be aware that people pray differently even within the same church and be sensitive. You might keep a few minutes silence for people to offer themselves to God. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead the gathering
- Ask someone prior to the gathering to read John 17:20-26, which is Jesus' last prayer for his friends, 'that they may be one':

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

Small groups meet and greet (30 mins)

- Gather everyone into a small group, depending on numbers. The facilitator should ask each person in their group to introduce themselves, say what church she is from, why she has come to the conference, and what she hopes to take away

4 talks on the conference theme by women in different churches (60 mins)

- When you are organising the conference think of women who would be able to come and talk very briefly on the conference theme. Try and have a broad range of churches and a broad range of ministries. Invite the women to share about what they do and what it's like being a woman in that role
- As you introduce this section, invite the women listening to think about what gifts are being spoken about and how this compares to their own church. Ask them to think about what they are learning

Lunch (30 mins)

- Break together for lunch and encourage conversations to continue

Small group discussion (60 mins)

- Move back into the same small groups as before
- Suggested discussion points
- What were your reactions to the talks?
- What is your understanding of 'ministry'?
- Do you have a ministry in your church? What ministries might you have in the world, in public life, with family, friends etc.
- Share examples of ministry inside and outside of church. What ministry have you seen in other churches that you might like to bring into your church?
- What obstacles might there be to (your) ministry?

Feedback and large group discussion (50 mins)

- Gather the small groups back together into one large group
- The facilitators from each group will offer some gathering thoughts which summarise the discussions in the groups. What gifts were shared and which challenges or wounds were identified, for example?

- If you like to write or create, or know someone who does, the feedback does not need to be verbal only. It can be as simple as filling two sheets of paper entitled 'Wounds' and 'Gifts' respectively, or you could think of a creative way to feedback the main thoughts and learnings from the day

Prayer and Farewell (15 mins)

- Give the women the opportunity to spend some time in quiet with God
- Encourage them to ask God to show them how they might continue to receive gifts from women in different churches
- You could play some background music if you know someone who is a gifted musician and worship-leader

Conclude with this prayer:

Loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

We ask that you would help us to allow your Holy Spirit to work in us and through us.

Grant us a spirit of generosity to reach out to you and one another in trust.

Give to us, we pray, the humility to accept that our church is broken.

Give to us, we pray, the discernment to recognise where we may learn from others.

Give to us, we pray, the gift of hospitality so that we may receive gifts from others.

Thank you, gracious God, for all your gifts to us.

Amen

Model 2 - Participant's Guide

Receiving from the Other

Welcome and Refreshments

Introduction to the Theme and Receptive Ecumenism

Receptive ecumenism is a journey towards Christian unity which involves listening to, learning from and receiving gifts from the other. This gathering is about taking time to recognise the brokenness in our own church and seek to receive gifts from the other.

Prayer and Bible reading

John 17:20-26 - Jesus' last prayer for his friends, 'that they may be one'

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

Small Group Meet and Greet

4 Talks on Conference Theme

Lunch

Small Group Discussion

- What were your reactions to the talks?
- What is your understanding of 'ministry'?
- Do you have a ministry in your church? What ministries might you have in the world, in public life, with family, friends etc.
- Share examples of ministry inside and outside of church. What ministry have you seen in other churches that you might like to bring into your church?
- What obstacles might there be to (your) ministry?

Feedback and Group Discussion

Prayer and Farewell

Loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

We ask that you would help us to allow your Holy Spirit to work in us and through us

Grant us a spirit of generosity to reach out to you and one another in trust

Give to us, we pray, the humility to accept that our church is broken

Give to us, we pray, the discernment to recognise where we may learn from others

Give to us, we pray, the gift of hospitality so that we may receive gifts from others

Thank you, gracious God, for all your gifts to us

Amen

Model 3 - Facilitator's Guide

Receiving from the Other – Being Inspired by Scripture

Participants: **4 women upwards**

Time: **Approx. 2 hours**

Number of Gatherings : **3**

- This could be used as a three-week course through Advent – it would particularly well if women from different churches want to journey through Advent together
- Due to the shorter timing of this model, it could be held in the morning, afternoon or evening. Venues could range from a coffee shop to a church hall, through to someone's home, if that is appropriate

Outline

- Welcome and refreshments (15 mins)
- Introduction to the theme and receptive Ecumenism (10 mins)
- Prayer (5 mins)
- Read the Passage for the week (5 minutes)
- Time to share groups of 4-6 women (60 mins)
- Time to reflect (15 mins)
- Prayer and farewell (10 mins)

Resources

- A venue (with disabled access)
- Seats for participants
- Tea
- Coffee
- Milk (include a dairy-free option)
- Sugar
- Biscuits/Cake/Fruit (including gluten and dairy free)
- Participant guides printed
- Flip chart or equivalent
- Flip chart paper or equivalent
- Markers/felt- tip pens

Facilitator's job description

- Encourage people to be respectful of each other's traditions – especially where they might differ radically
- Think about how to help everyone speak and how you are going to discourage one person from dominating discussions, if this arises
- Be sensitive when wounds and challenges are shared, however small they seem to you

- Encourage a focus on gifts to be received – this will guard against the session becoming overshadowed by challenges
- Keep to time
- Be kind
- Listen well and encourage others to do the same

Welcome and refreshments (15 mins)

- Begin by offering refreshments – always. If people do not know one another, this provides an opportunity for them to chat and relax. Never underestimate the reassurance offered by a cup of tea, especially in England!

Introduction to the theme and to receptive ecumenism (10 mins)

- The facilitator or someone who is prepared should do this section
- The metaphor of the tea party is effective for helping people grasp the concept and aim of receptive ecumenism
- Explain that receptive ecumenism is a journey towards Christian unity which involves listening to, learning from and receiving gifts from the other. This gathering is about taking time to recognise the brokenness in our own church and seek to receive gifts from the other. If you prefer, you could introduce it by playing a short introduction video which is available on the Durham University website:
<https://vimeo.com/user50612072/receptivity/video/265761120>
- Say that you hope each person will feel safe and able to share what she thinks
- Encourage confidentiality
- Note that the participants are from different traditions and encourage everyone to be respectful of the other

Prayer (5 mins)

Be aware that people pray differently even within the same church and be sensitive. You might keep a few minutes silence for people to offer themselves to God. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead the gathering

Read the Bible passage for the week (5 minutes)

- Ask 2 people earlier to be prepared to read – not everyone is comfortable with being put on the spot
- Listen to the passage twice – it can be helpful to hear different voices
- Allow silence between each reading

Week 1

John 17:20-26 - Jesus' last prayer for his friends, 'that they may be one'

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they

also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

Week 1 Discussion Questions

- Think about how Jesus has made himself known to you
- You might like to give thanks for the people in your life through whom you have come closer to God
- What do you feel about unity, and how do you see your own role regarding the unity of your local church, and churches more widely?

Week 2 The Spirit's call for churches to transform

Revelation 2:7; 2:11; 2:29

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Week 2 Discussion Questions

- In what areas do you think the Spirit might be calling for your church to be transformed?
- How do you feel about change?
- How might the Spirit be calling you to be part of the work of transformation?

Week 3 God the Giver of Good Gifts

Matthew 7:7-11

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

James 1:17

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Week 3 Discussion Questions

- What gifts do you see in other churches, which you would like to receive?
- What gifts has God given to you, through which you might bless your Church?
- What gift/s has God given to your church?
- Could these gifts be shared with others?

Discuss the questions in groups of 4-6 women (60 mins)

- Be sure to allow time for each person to say as much as they would like to. Invite every one to respond to what others are saying

Time to reflect (15 mins)

- The facilitator will offer some gathering thoughts
- Give the women the opportunity to spend some time in quiet with God.
- Encourage them to ask God to show them how they might continue to receive gifts from different churches
- Depending on your context, you could play some background music if you know some one who is a gifted musician and worship-leader

Prayer and farewell (10 mins)

Conclude with this prayer:

Loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

We ask that you would help us to allow your Holy Spirit to work in us and through us.

Grant us a spirit of generosity to reach out to you and one another in trust.

Give to us, we pray, the humility to accept that our church is broken.

Give to us, we pray, the discernment to recognise where we may learn from others.

Give to us, we pray, the gift of hospitality so that we may receive gifts from others.

Thank you, gracious God, for all your gifts to us.

Amen

Model 3 - Participant's Guide

Receiving from the Other – Being Inspired by Scripture

Welcome and Refreshments

Introduction to the Theme and Receptive Ecumenism

Receptive ecumenism is a journey towards Christian unity which involves listening to, learning from and receiving gifts from the other. This gathering is about taking time to recognise the brokenness in our own church and seek to receive gifts from the other.

Prayer

Read the Bible Passage

Week 1

John 17:20-26 - Jesus' last prayer for his friends, 'that they may be one'

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

Week 1 Discussion Questions

- Think about how Jesus has made himself known to you
- You might like to give thanks for the people in your life through whom you have come closer to God
- What do you feel about unity, and how do you see your own role regarding the unity of your local church, and churches more widely?

Week 2 - The Spirit's call for churches to transform

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Week 2 Discussion Questions

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- What gifts do you see in other churches, which you would like to receive?
- What gifts has God given to you, through which you might bless your Church?
- What gift/s has God given to your church?
- Could these gifts be shared with others?

Discuss the questions in small groups

Time to reflect

Prayer and farewell

Loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

We ask that you would help us to allow your Holy Spirit to work in us and through us.

Grant us a spirit of generosity to reach out to you and one another in trust.

Give to us, we pray, the humility to accept that our church is broken.

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Give to us, we pray, the gift of hospitality so that we may receive gifts from others.

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Amen

OUTPUTS

Articles published in the popular press

'The Gift of Methodist Women', Methodist Recorder, 8th March 2019

'Free to Share their Wounds', The Tablet, 17th May 2019

Academic articles published

Gabrielle Thomas, 'A Call for Hospitality: Learning from a Particular Example of Women's Grass Roots Practice of Receptive Ecumenism in the U.K.' Exchange 47.4 (2018), 335-350.

Gabrielle Thomas, 'Receiving Women's Gifts: An Exploration of the Role of Hospitality in the Practice of Receptive Ecumenism' in Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving in the Way of Christ, eds. Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes, ATF Press. A Forum for Theology in World Vol 5 No 2/2018, 123-134.

Chapter in edited book

'Receptive Learning Between Churches' in Global Christian Forum Third Global Gathering Proceedings April 2018, Bogotá, Columbia, edited by Larry Miller (forthcoming)

Academic articles in progress

Mutual Flourishing in the Church of England: Learning from Thomas Aquinas'
Theology of Friendship Power, Priests and Women: Voices from Below

Edited book in production

Title: *'I Changed my Mind' - Orthodox Conversations on Women in the Priesthood*
(including contributions from Met. Kalistos Ware, Prof. Mary Cunningham, Fr. Andrew Louth, and Fr. John Behr)

Global presentations on the research

April 2019 'Receptive Ecumenism Workshop' Andante Study Days, Bucharest, Romania

December 2018 'The Way of Receptive Learning', Faculty of Theology Research Seminar, University of Helsinki, Finland

April 2018 'Receptive Learning Between Churches', Keynote Presentation at the Global Christian Forum Gathering, Bogotá, Columbia

Papers presented at Academic Conferences

Apr 2019 'Five Guiding Principles, Mutual Flourishing, and Thomas Aquinas on Grace and Friendship', The Society of the Study of Theology Annual Conference

Sep 2018 'Reflections on Being a Woman Priest' Plenary Presentation at 'Orthodox Women's Initiatives' Annual Study Day, Pusey House, Oxford

Sep 2018 'Receiving the Gift: Ecclesial Learning about Women in U.K. Churches', Ecclesiology and Ethnography Conference, St John's College, Durham

Apr 2018 'Receptive Ecumenism, Women and Hospitality', Paper presented at the 10th Anniversary Conference for the Centre of Catholic Studies, Durham University

Apr 2018 'Learning from the Grass Roots: Women and Receptive Ecumenism', The Society of the Study of Theology Annual Conference

Participation in Common Award's Colloquium on Receptivity

Apr 2018 'Challenges of Receptive Ecumenism', Plenary Presentation at the 2018 Common Awards Symposium. For more information, see: www.durham.ac.uk/theology.religion/common.awards/themes/receptivity

Research Seminar

May 2019 'Women and Receptive Ecumenism' Theology and Ministry Seminar, St John's College, Durham

Outreach Presentations

Jun 2019 Presentation to the St Alban's Newman Group

Jan 2019 'Justice and Ecumenism', Invited Speaker at the Annual Service of Christian Unity, Chapel of Unity, Coventry Cathedral

Dec 2018 'Receptive Learning' at the IASCUFO gathering, Durham Cathedral

Sep 2018 'Biblical Witness to Receptive Ecumenism', Receptive Ecumenism Conference, Bromsgrove Methodist Church

May 2018 'Cappadocian Prayer', Exarchate UK Deanery Conference & Festival

Mar 2018 'Humility and Ecumenism', Service of Unity in Coventry Cathedral

FURTHER RESOURCES

Receptive Ecumenism – further information

For the most extensive list of publications and resources see the receptive ecumenism pages on the website for the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University
www.durham.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/constructivetheology/receptiveecumensim

Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church: a regional comparative research project in the North East of England
www.durham.ac.uk/theology.religion/ccs/projects/receptiveecumenism/projects/localchurch

Short video introducing receptive ecumenism
<https://vimeopro.com/user50612072/receptivity/video/265761120>

Churches Together in England and Wales provides information and further courses on receptive ecumenism
https://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/91312/Home/Resources/Theolog/Receptive_Ecumenism/What_is_Receptive/What_is_Receptive.aspx

The South Australian Council of Churches provide an introduction to receptive ecumenism
http://www.sacc.asn.au/data/Healing_Gifts_for_Wounded_Hands_May_2014.pdf

Walking Together on the Way. Learning to Be the Church—Local, Regional, Universal An Agreed Statement of the Third Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC III) Erfurt 2017
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20180521_walking-together-ontheway_en.pdf

Research on Women's Roles in Churches

'Called': Women in Ministry in Ireland 2017. Report on ecumenical research on women in ministry in Ireland by lay-Catholic theologian Dr Anne Francis. Available online:

<https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/REPORT-Women-in-Ministry-in-Ireland-Final.pdf>

Dr Anne Francis on Twitter: @abfrancis1



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