The Sacred Thread Weaving 
Our Bonds of Affection

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In 2014 women from around our Anglican Communion gathered to explore our lives of prayer under the conference banner “Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection.” This article is an adaptation of the plenary address for that conference. Using reflections from my own prayer life and the lives of women who have been research partners with me in the Pacific and in Africa, I seek to articulate the sacred thread expressed through our shared stories and prayers. Through this lens I explore, in turn, each of the three central threads of the conference theme: weaving, being bound together, and affection. These reflections seek to prompt and inspire other women to explore and share the sacred thread within their own lives of prayer. In doing so we will increase the richness with which we continue to interweave our loving connection to each other and to the different parts of this world that we call our home.

The imagery of weaving as a metaphor for prayer is warmly inviting because it holds within it a wealth of beauty and a depth of significance for so many women around the world. Weaving speaks of diversity and unity. Weaving speaks of creativity and community. For example, Miriama Evans and Ranui Ngarimu articulate the art of Maori weaving1 in a way which communicates the integrity of an

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indigenous tradition that is culturally coherent as a whole and yet is formed from a wide range of practices, materials, and objects. Such traditions maintain a profound connection to the ancestral heritage of skills which play an essential role in maintaining longstanding community cultural practice. Yet the contemporary creativity of weaving also invigorates new expressions of community. A powerful example of this creativity and community can be seen in the compilation He Kete he Korero, which tells the stories of many different woven kete (bags) from Aotearoa New Zealand, with each kete being a vehicle for the story of connection and community in our contemporary landscapes. The language of weaving therefore highlights a connection to the earth (whether through wool, rushes, flax, or cloth) and a connection to the ancestral traditions of many people groups in our world. Each different type of fiber lends itself to different techniques of weaving and different expressions of creativity, and their various combinations again provide new possibilities for self and community actualization.

For me, the imagery of weaving speaks to the two most significant strands of lineage within my own heritage: the Celtic tradition of my ancestry and the Oceanic and Pacific heritage into which I have been ordained in the Anglican Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia. Each of these strands connects the metaphor of weaving to the practice of prayer in unique ways. There is a Celtic Christian understanding of the sacred interweaving between Christ and creation and a perception of the world as a divinely interwoven act of ongoing creation. Our lives are a participation in that weaving. In the land where I now live, Aotearoa New Zealand, weaving is integral to the culture of the indigenous people. Maori wisdom speaks of a sacred thread within all weaving. This thread is called Te Aho Tapu and can be translated as the thread that never ends. This thread is sometimes

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2 Toi Te Rito Maihi and Maureen Lander, He Kete he Korero / Every Kete Has a Story (Auckland, N.Z.: Reed Books, 2005).
3 See, for example, Mick Pendergrast, Ka Tahi: Hei Tamatu Tama / Maori Fibre Techniques: A Resource Book for Maori Fibre Arts (Auckland, N.Z.: Reed Books, 2005).
referred to as the thread which holds everything together within a piece of weaving.

The sacred interweaving between Christ and creation. The thread which never ends. The sacred thread. Exploring that sacred thread in the weaving of our lives is the heart of these reflections.

We gathered together for the conference “Anglican Women at Prayer: Weaving Our Bonds of Affection” because women within the Anglican Communion recognized the need to honor their interweaving by such a thread. In the setting of our Anglican Communion, we name this sacred thread the Spirit of the Living God. When the people of God are gathered together the Spirit of the Living God is at work.

In gathering for this conference, each participant arrived having already begun a journey of reflection upon her own life and contexts. Through the pre-conference material, this thread of weaving was begun. Participants arrived already holding in their hearts and minds an integration of God’s Living Spirit through their own lives and experiences. Therefore, participants came to this new gathering of community with their reflections gathered together in their hands and ready to rework them in the creativity of a new community. In my Pacific culture I would say, we come to sit on the woven mat, to share the stories of that mat. In the words of Grace, a Tongan sister:

> Weaving has been how our mothers and our fore-mothers have taught us. It has been taught to us from one generation to another and that’s how [we look for our way of teaching and sharing]. . . . The mat is where we sit down with our stories. And every weave represents a time of something in our lives.\(^6\)

In a Pacific context the mat is one of the greatest expressions of community belonging. Woven mats play a key role in significant community rituals, such as weddings and festivals, because they represent the connection of people to their place and community of belonging. To sit upon a mat is therefore to “sit down with our stories,” in the sense of being connected to the people of our present and our past—to all who have formed and inform our experience of life.

When we come together to share our stories, to share the weaves of our lives, a new community is created. Therefore, in this writing, as

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part of the ongoing interweaving of a communion of prayerful affection, I reflect on the work of that sacred thread through some of my history and through some of my own experiences with praying women in different parts of our Anglican Communion, such as Grace whose words we have just heard. I am conscious of not wanting to dominate these reflections with my own imprint. In reference to scripture, I therefore share recognizing that we are but grass (1 Peter 2:4), and that in sharing the substance of our lives we are able to glimpse through that sharing to the hand of the weaver who works with us and in us. My hope in doing so is that these stories and reflections will draw resonance with some of the patterns that others have perceived in their own reflections, and in that resonance help us together to name and give thanks for the sacred thread which weaves among us.

There are three aspects to these reflections: the first is a reflection on the significance of weaving; the second is a reflection on being bound together; and the third is a reflection on affection. Weaving our bonds of affection. In between each reflection, I will share a prayer or poem as a way of taking a deep breath, pausing, acknowledging, and allowing space for the sacred thread to weave.

Weaving

If a thread never ends, it has no beginning and no ending. This is how we understand our Living God—the God who was, and is, and is to come. We, however, do have a beginning. We know that in our beginning we were made in the image of God; male and female, God created us. Before our beginning, our image was found in God. Exploring what it means to be a woman is part of exploring the divine image. There is a book of theological reflections compiled by women in Oceania which is called Weavings.7 Weaving was the chosen metaphor for women in Oceania studying theology, reflecting on the image of God.

A number of years ago I embarked on a research project with Anglican women in Tanzania and with an Anglican community in the Islands of Fiji. During this time I found myself increasingly being called to honor my own female identity and to honor the women who were part of my research. I began to move away from conventional research methods, which did not always provide the space for that

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7 Lydia Johnson and Joan Alleluia Filemoni-Tofaeono, eds., Weavings: Women Doing Theology in Oceania (Suva, Fiji: South Pacific Association of Theological Schools and Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2003).
You have bound me into your way of creativity. Without explicit speech, you enfolded me into your way of expression, your way of gathering together. I weave with you, following your rhythms and gradually releasing the anxiety caused by my trained need to disentangle, separate out, and name the individual parts.

You taught me the value of weaving and the sometimes invisible life that your weaving creates. You show me how your sisterhood is bound together as you come to teach and learn each others’ skills and share in the benefit of your work. You teach me how your weaving is a weaving together of your community, how your skill ensures the ceremonial practice of community life. You bind me into your community through your weaving, as my own ceremonial life becomes bound to yours.

You teach me, without words, that I weave. That my creativity is weaving; a binding together of expressions of divine life.\(^8\)

In many communities around our world, weaving is the very heart of community life and contains its own honor and dignity. In the above extract I refer to my ceremonial life being bound together with the community in Fiji. The women of the village made me a Fijian mat for my ordination ceremony. In Fijian culture, important moments and ceremonies take place on a mat to indicate that you are never alone in those moments; you stand on and upon your integration into the community. I was therefore ordained in a deep connection to this village; we belonged to each other. This is one of the richest gifts that I have ever been given! Yet simple woven objects can feel as though they have little currency in the prevailing economics or values of our dominant societies. Weaving is not always appreciated as important. This reminds me that so often as women, we can consider that the traditional things we do don’t really count, aren’t really significant, aren’t really proper work. Reclaiming the value and imagery of weaving is important.

I was very grateful that accommodation was made by my Pakeha diocese for me to be ordained on that mat. However, I had to explain

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the significance and cultural meaning behind it—despite the fact that we are an Anglican Church, specifically structured along cultural lineage. As the gift was translated into my Pakeha culture, realistically, practical necessities had to take precedence over some of the Polynesian wisdom tradition surrounding the mat—shoes were worn on the mat and everyone ordained in that service was ordained on the mat. Practical things had to happen in such a big service, which I fully appreciate. However, it has caused me to reflect that, amid the practical reality of our global culture, to weave sometimes means that what you create may be trodden on in a way not intended by your creativity. To be a weaver means you may not necessarily be at the center of society and honored, no matter how important and beautiful your skill.

The sacred thread within the significance of that particular woven mat ran very deep within the story of my life. When I was eighteen years old, I was traveling alone from my English home, completing voluntary work and exploring this earth, and I came to the Islands of Fiji for the first time. On a remote outer island, after a number of uncomfortable days, I realized that I had appendicitis. It took several more days before I was eventually able to be taken to a hospital and have the necessary operation. In the dark nights of those intervening days, when life was more than a little fragile, I spoke with God in the silence of my heart about life and death. Then, to be ordained, to dedicate my life to Christ's ministry, upon a mat which symbolized my integration into the community and land of the place where I almost lost my life, was a grace of God that not even the women from that village knew. There is a hiddenness of God in our world. Sometimes, our weaving conveys the hidden yet very real presence of God, communicating and speaking to the innermost secret parts of our souls.

After I had begun to write about weaving, and through sharing this writing with my mother, I discovered that my great-grandfather was a weaver. He had a disability which meant he was not able to work outside of the home. At that time, a charity in England used to bring rushes and reeds to the homes of such people and they would make baskets to be sold as a source of income. So my weaver great-grandfather reminds me that to weave can be a redemptive act for either a man or a woman.

Is it not often the foundation of intercession, to join with the Sacred Spirit to seek recreation, redemption, and the giving of life? Within the body of work in which I wrote of Writing as Weaving, there were also sections titled “Writing as Weeping.” I could not write
about the lives shared with me by either the men or women of these communities without weeping. Weaving connects us to the reality of a land, the reality of our boundedness to creation—a creation which groans as in the pains of childbirth (to speak in relation to Romans 8:22). Weaving refutes disembodied knowledge and emphasizes our belonging to the reality of this earth in all its pain and joy, because each woven object is made of the earth and through the various cultural traditions with which weaving is imbued, we are explicitly reminded of our connection to that earth. As I have already shared, in Oceania it is the women who are the traditional custodians of the weaving tradition. To speak about weaving in relation to Anglican women praying is therefore to speak in a language that connects us into the community life of many women, to be cognizant of one another's pains and joys.

I have been reflecting that the prayers of women in our churches are often like our weavings—undergirding the fabric of the community, yet often doing so invisibly. From the very first step I took toward the church in my late teens, in coming to a confessional Christian faith, I have always been given women who pray with me. From the first church I joined, to all the other places I have found myself living and serving, one of the consistent elements of my story is that there have been women a little older and wiser than myself who seem gifted to partner me in prayer, women of my own age and stage with whom a fellowship of prayer begins, and women younger than myself for whom I am connected in order to pray. My growth and my life in the church have been marked by a progression of hands held together in prayer—one after another as I have traveled in my journey with God. Through such hands the affection of God has been communicated to me. Women gathering in small groups, in twos and threes to pray for one another, to pray for the church, to pray for the world, has been one of the most consistent expressions of my experience of the church. These integral threads within the churches have often been invisible. They grew spontaneously from women's fellowship, were not often in the church programs, and have not been restricted to particular denominations. There are many women I have prayed with from a range of denominations. There is an invisibility and a marginality to these networks of prayers, but that invisibility does not mean that they are not foundational to God's work in our world.

There are two stories in particular of women praying that I want to share with you as we reflect on the significance of weaving as a metaphor for our prayers. The first is from the Kingdom of Tonga,
an island nation in the Pacific. I had the experience of meeting with Anglican women in Tonga and I was particularly invited to go and sit and be with the senior women who were the first era of Anglican women and who gathered as part of the Mothers’ Union. They shared stories with me of their gathering together and weaving mats, making tapa and garlands, sharing skills, while at the same time praying with a depth and fervor of intercessory prayer. Stories were told of how the reputation of these women spread among their communities and people. Even politicians would come to ask for their prayers. I want to share the voice of the Reverend Toeumu, the first female Anglican priest in Tonga, reflecting on their lives:

When [these women] came for a meeting—nothing but prayer. They pray and they pray and they pray. . . . They pray and they cry to the Lord. You know, every time I sat there and watched them, I said to myself, “The Lord hears all the words these women are saying because they love prayer and they pray for life, the work of the church, their family, intercessory prayer for the kingdoms, for the nations. . . . I think that is the most important thing the Mothers’ Union has done for us here in Tonga, because their way and their lifestyle is nothing but prayer. . . . I think it has really built our little country, our little nation here in Tonga, these women, the Mothers’ Union through prayer.9

The second story is of my own praying. In my theological college in New Zealand there was the normal rhythm of offices of prayer familiar within our Anglican Communion—such a joy! During my time there, a small group of women felt called to begin meeting to share in a time of intercessory prayer in addition to the rhythm of daily offices. We felt called to intercessory prayer for our college and for our churches in our different cultural contexts. The first time that we met together to pray, there were three of us. As we met together we realized that in the room next door the main leadership meeting was being held for the governing body of theological education in our countries: a committee of bishops and leaders from our Three Tikanga Church. There we sat in the next room, three women—one Pakeha (myself), one Pacifica, and one Maori. We met and we prayed for our Three Tikanga Church. Again, hidden, invisible women seeking to work with

9 Quoted in Sanderson, A Public Theology of Relationships, 110.
the sacred thread undergirding the communal life of the church. The visual imagery which accompanies our Three Tikanga Church structure is of three differently colored threads being woven together.

Weaving is a sacred act. It is understood as a sacred act by many people’s groups. The Maori weaver Erenora Puketapu-Hetet writes, “Weaving is more than just a product of manual skills. From the simple rourou [food basket] to the prestigious kahu kiwi [kiwi cloak], weaving is endowed with the very essence of the spiritual values of Maori people. The ancient Polynesian belief is that the artist is a vehicle through whom the gods create.”

As women in our Anglican Church, when we speak of weaving our bonds of affection, we speak of ourselves as vehicles through which our Living God is creatively at work in our world. When we reflect on our own contexts, we reflect on our own connection to the creativity of God and the reality of our earth. When we reflect on our own lives of prayer, we reflect on our inspiration to be here today: that is, to feel again the creative breath of God that has blown over us and brought us to life, the breath that breathes into us and causes us to respond in thankfulness, the breath that breathes through us and our world and causes us to pray in intercession.

Our great weaver God,
you draw us from flax and fern, from bush and desert.
You who made us in your image,
hold us in your hands to soften us in love
so that we can thread one to another and
move with creative peace
through your re-creating work in our world.
Weaver God, you hold us in your hands,
we who are but grass,
you who are eternal—
the thread that never ends.
You hold us and you honor our worth to you,
a worth as neverending as your own sacred thread.

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In the Gospel of Matthew we hear Jesus say, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:20). We are called to pray together. The sacred thread intentionally weaves us together.

Weaving is a gift which binds. In any formation of community, our interiority necessarily experiences change. When we gather together to pray, we are bound together in many ways. Our stories become integrated, our hearts and our voices join together in moments of prayerful solidarity, and our spirits are re-enlivened by God’s Spirit for their sacred purposes in the body of Christ.

If in speaking of weaving we speak of coming from our own contexts, or our connection to a land, to a place, to a people, we now move to think about this process of allowing ourselves to experience the transformation of togetherness. To place ourselves in the hands of our Weaver God is to open ourselves to be used for life-giving purposes in communities. To place ourselves in each other's hands, which in part is what we do in praying together, is also a hope for such a purpose. I want to share the story of a woven basket from Tanzania, in order to share with you an example of what that process might mean.

When I visited the women in Tanzania I traveled with a woman called Ruth Newport who had been born in that community to missionary parents. This was the first time that she had returned since leaving the area when she was twelve. She was welcomed as family and affirmed that she was part of their tribe. I, through her friendship, was also welcomed as family. We therefore did not receive the treatment of official visitors but were left alone to do our own thing. So we began to visit with the women. We walked from house to house. We would go to one woman’s house and she would take us to visit with another woman. A huge part of their ministry as women was to visit each other and to share in fellowship and prayer for one another. So we would go from house to house praying with them. In one house as we sat with the women on the mud floor, sharing cooked banana and milky tea, one of the women said, “Here you must take a photo because this is the real church, women sharing food and homes across cultures, meeting together with God in prayer—this is the real church.”

When it came time for me to leave, they gave me the gift of a beautiful woven basket and said:
You have drawn us to you. Other people might have stayed away from this place, but you have gone out into the villages: you’ve met with us, and that has really encouraged us and built up our hearts. We have fellowshipped together and shared with you and we want to give you a remembrance so at home you will remember us. Receive this basket and take it home, and you can put fruit in it for your husband and for visitors that you have in your house.¹¹

There is a significance to the words “heart” and “home” that were used in giving me this gift. When describing their life and work as women in the church, one of the leaders said, “Our hearts are our homes and our homes are our hearts. If our homes are not open to the Spirit of God then neither are our hearts and if our hearts are not open to the Spirit of God then neither are our homes.”¹²

By welcoming me into their homes, they changed my heart as well as their own. In giving me the gift of the basket with the encouragement toward my own life of hospitality, they invited me to continue that transformation. This is the transformation Ruth speaks about in her own words:

> I cannot write about the love of these women without crying. The love for each other that kept depressed women from committing suicide, battered wives from losing hope that life can change; the love for others that inspired many to open their homes to refugee children and raise them as their own; the love of God that led them to sacrifice and help beyond the call of duty, and to offer us abundant food in the midst of famine. I saw the transforming power of this love that changed and impacted women in relationships. In fact, by being, walking and learning from these women I was changed.¹³

It is in being bound together, in being woven together that the sacredness of life is found. Because this is the life that was given by

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¹¹ Sanderson, *Within Arms’ Reach*, 128.

¹² See Eleanor Sanderson, Ruth Newport, and Lilly Emo, *Our Hearts Are Our Homes and Our Homes Are Our Hearts: Reflections and Prayers from Members of the Mothers’ Union in Tanzania* (Dodoma, Tanzania: Mothers’ Union, 2006).

¹³ Quoted in Sanderson, *Within Arms’ Reach*, 255.
God—the life given in relationship, and given for relationship. I want to share a reflection by Tina from Tonga who expresses this beautifully:

What really touches my heart is prayer. The power of prayer. And it is so powerful. Powerful for the women of the church. Not only there but for our fellowship... you feel in the Spirit of the Lord. And fellowship is not only because we pray for our family, but it brings us more alive for our friends, our neighbours. And we extend [that fellowship]... it brings us closer to God. And not only that, but it gives us a new vision so that we see everybody as a sister.14

It is in being woven together that we come to perceive and embody the God of love and it is through that sacred loving, in which we become enfolded, that we are bound together and find the heart for prayer. In the hospitality of such a heart of prayer we become a home for the eternally interceding Spirit of God.

The first join is the cross:
the flax lies pointing north and south,
east and west,
a cross laid bare.
The cross which marks the reality of human relationships with each other with the earth with God, the distance the brokenness the frustration and ending of that which was breathed with a perpetual life-giving intention and desire, something that should not end and yet now does.
Again and again our community is built cross upon cross, cross upon cross, bound one to another: a network of reconciliation, of touching together in community,

14 Quoted in Sanderson, A Public Theology of Relationships, 110.
The Sacred Thread

of brokenness redeemed.
Resurrection.
And in our basket made of cross upon cross
we again are invited to gather fruit from God’s garden.

Affection

Do you think we might call the sacred thread, the thread which never ends, love? God is love (1 John 4:8). Love never ends (1 Cor. 13:8). It is the spirit of love, love which never ends, which binds us together and breathes through our prayers.

Why do we pray with intercession and thanksgiving? Is it because we are compelled by love? Love for the company of God. Love for the companionship of God’s family and love for God’s world. Love for our world. Yet to speak of love is often not a very acceptable part of our public life. It is so often seen as the private thing, the thing of homes, of families. Love does not have the integrity to guide public policy or shape our economics. Do we teach love—love which is stronger even than death—as a core part of our schools and our society? Do we feel foolish when we speak of love, and speak with love?

Yet it has been the language of love that has so powerfully dominated all my time spent with different cultures of women in our Anglican Communion from around our world. As one of our sisters in Tanzania affirms, “Christian women are doing things together for the glory of God and in all of those things we get love. Everything of life—we know what is happening in your life, whether you’ve had a child or whether you are sick. It is the love. We are all in love.”

Before I moved to the parish where I am now vicar, I journeyed on an extended time of discernment for where our family should next locate. In that process I narrowed it down to a single question, a question which reflected the way that my own way of thinking and discerning has been profoundly changed by the many women with whom I have had the privilege of sharing my life. This question was: Whom do you want me to love? The final story I want to share as part of my reflections is a story from the people God has given me to love. This final story, and gift of weaving, links directly my own location on this earth to the new gathering of Anglican Women at Prayer. A few weeks before the conference, Mary Higby, a member of the Society of the

15 Sanderson, Newport, and Emo, Our Hearts Are Our Homes, 5.
Companions of the Holy Cross and one of our conference organizers, was in Aotearoa New Zealand. She and members of her family joined me and some of the women from my church in a service of night prayer and a time of weaving. Ann Best, a member of my church, one of God’s truly inspiring women, and a komatua in the Marae near our parish, taught us to weave. We were weaving flowers, specifically the English rose—the rose, the flower of love.

We made woven flax roses to be given to each of our conference small group leaders. As we gathered that evening and I shared the hope that we would make fifteen of these flowers, we were disbelieving that our group would be able to achieve that number. As we began to learn to weave, it is fair to say that our disbelief grew. We were not confident we knew what we were doing; many of us had to restart, and then restart again. Eventually, however, we realized we were actually doing the right thing and had learned correctly. At the end of the evening we had many more roses than fifteen—many, many more. Each rose is unique and individual. They are all beautiful, despite the protestations to the contrary by the weavers. They are all beautiful.

As I have reflected on that evening, I have thought that story resonates with our love and with our prayers. Who of us would say we really know what it is to love? Who of us would say that we fully know God who is love? Who of us would say that we fully understand how to pray? We so often express our inadequacy, we so often feel the littleness of our selves. Yet, in weaving the bonds of affection among praying women, we are woven into a celebration and encouragement of women from all around our Communion, rejoicing in the gifts of prayer and love. Sharing together those gifts is the true heart of our participation in God’s ongoing creativity in our world.

When we allow ourselves to be woven together in love by the sacred thread of our God, we must be prepared for the life-giving consequences of our willingness to achieve more than we can think or imagine. God consistently chooses the little things, little acts of love inspired by Godself, to change the world. God consistently chooses those who are marginal in society to bring about transformation. When we pray with intercession or thanksgiving, our voices join with millions of women and men around the globe, and we participate in a weaving so incredible, so beautiful, it is beyond our comprehension. Even if what is woven is trodden upon in ways not intended, even if it remains almost invisible. Know this: all of us are invited by God to
enter the sanctuary of God’s heart through our prayers, to participate in a sacred conversation that will never end. Because to pray is to love. To pray is to love.

Christ, you pick a flower from God’s garden and come to bring it to your bride; you love us, you sing of us as the apple of your eye. You pierce our hearts with love for you. Songs of the spirit rise through our lives of prayer, we offer them to you, our great Weaver God. We do not know what you will create, but we trust in your love. We offer ourselves, our love, our prayers to you: seeds to be used in your garden to grow and become the flax to weave the sacred mat beneath your holy feet, ready for the celebration of your wedding banquet.