

Rebel Hearts and Radical Traditions: learning from the experience of women in ministry in the Baptist Union of Great Britain

The last few years have been significant for women in ministry in our union, as 2018 marked a century since Edith Gates was recognised as the first woman to hold pastoral charge of a Baptist church in England and Wales, and 2019 was the centenary of Violet Hedger being accepted as the first woman to formally train for Baptist ministry.¹ These milestones were celebrated in a number of ways, from purple ribbons at Assembly 2019 to a special edition of *Baptists Together* to the appointment of Jane Day as Centenary Enabler, working across the union to “encourage and equip women in exercising their God-given gifting and leadership”.²

It is right that there were celebrations, but they ought not mask the fact that the last one hundred years have not been entirely happy for the women who serve our churches in pastoral ministry. In 1926, *Baptist Times* reported the view of a special committee founded to discuss the matter of women and ministry, which declared that “in Baptist belief and practice, sex is not a bar to any kind of Christian service”.³ So far so good, and yet that same committee also cautioned that “in view of the reluctance of our churches to invite women to the pastorate” it should be made “as clear as possible to all women candidates for the ministry...that the prospect of finding such spheres of service as they desire...is exceedingly small”.⁴ In short, women ministers were given the approval but not the full support of the union, and while official support has since been more forthcoming, a degree of ambivalence at grassroots level has continued ever since.

In 2018, I completed and shared a piece of research for my MA, looking at how the history and principles of the Baptist Union of Great Britain have shaped the experience of women in ministry in its churches, and as part of that study, I invited women currently or formerly serving as Baptist ministers in Great Britain to reflect on their experiences. I wrote the questionnaire early in the project, and so it was not until I had already shared it that I realised I was asking an almost identical set of questions to that posed by Dianne Tidball three decades earlier.⁵ As I watched the responses come in, my heart sank to see that the answers were almost identical too, reporting the same instances of exclusion and discrimination. It may well be that some of the respondents (and therefore some of the answers) were in fact the same across the two studies, but as one of the questions concerned length of ministry, it was clear that many of the negative experiences reported were recent.

There was much to be encouraged by in the survey, but it was impossible not to conclude that even after a hundred years, women ministers were still facing both conscious and unconscious bias. If little had changed in the thirty years prior to my study, it seems unlikely that much has changed in the three years since,⁶ but my intention here is not to present again the evidence I gathered or reflect in any detail on it. Instead, I want to explain why I felt such research was necessary, why any of this matters to anyone outside of the three hundred or so women in ministry in the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

It matters first because the current and historical situations have hurt women deeply, and this has maimed the body of Christ. Ruth Goldbourne has observed that women who are told “the gifts and willingness that they have can be used only in certain ways” are forced into the “impossible and painful situation” of having to deny either their calling or their fellowship,⁷ and when Carol McCarthy reflected on her experience of ministry she found she was “tired of being patronised...tired of surprising people...tired of being treated as a peculiarity...angry and disappointed”.⁸ These women are far from being alone, and while I have found myself in supportive environments where the slights against me personally have been few and mild, I have felt the pain of seeing other female ministers abused and rejected,

¹ For a concise history of women in ministry in BUGB, see *The Story of Women in Ministry in the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2011). This text will hereafter be referred to as *SWMBUGB*.

² See https://baptisttimes.co.uk/Articles/554164/Jane_Day_appointed.aspx

³ *Baptist Times*, quoted in *SWMBUGB*, p6

⁴ Minutes from Special Committee (1926), quoted in *SWMBUGB*, p11-12

⁵ Dianne Tidball, ‘Walking a Tightrope’ in *Baptist Quarterly* 33.8 (1990), pp388-95. Coincidentally, but meaningfully for me, the survey was conducted in the year I was born.

⁶ Indeed, with concerns about ministerial posts being lost as churches struggle financially in the pandemic, and women’s work disproportionately affected across a variety of sectors, it may well be that any progress made has already been set back.

⁷ Ruth Goldbourne, *Reinventing the Wheel* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1997), pp16-17

⁸ Carol McCarthy, ‘Ordained and Female’ in *Baptist Quarterly* 31.7 (July 1986), pp334-36 (p336)

knowing that I would have faced exactly the same thing in their place. If the Baptist Union is truly committed to the women it calls into ministry, it must recognise this hurt in order to repent and reform, and to allow the body to heal.

It matters because it is a nonsense to say that dissent must not mask prejudice, as the Baptist Union has done,⁹ if there is no attempt to delineate between the two and challenge any prejudice thus found. The Baptist Union has always been characterised by a respect for freedom of conscience, and so it does not enforce beliefs or practices on its members or expect them of its counterparts, but if it wholeheartedly affirms the ministry of women as it has claimed, it must at least engage with those who disagree, and yet Keith Jones has spoken of his regret that Baptists “have not had the deep debate some other traditions have had about the place of leadership of women”.¹⁰ Pat Took goes even further when she questions why “the matter of freeing and celebrating women” is still seen as “a diaphora, marginal, a matter of social custom” in which “churches should be free to follow their conscience”.¹¹ Insisting on the equality of women as a foundational element of Baptist ecclesiology would be a significant move, but that does not necessarily mean it would be an inappropriate limit on the liberty of the churches. In fact, extending the Declaration of Principle to affirm the equality of all before God would seem in keeping with our belief in every member ministry, and could defend against the kind of prejudice disguised as theology that the Baptist Union has specifically cautioned against, while encouraging the deep debate Jones has lamented the absence of.

It matters because the soft complementarity that underpins so much of the conversation, by which I mean the argument that women should minister because they complement men or bring their own ‘soft’ skills to ministry,¹² restricts all ministers. Adding a box labelled ‘female ministers’ to the box now reactively labelled ‘male ministers’ still keeps everyone in boxes. Goldbourne claims that the ‘different but equal’ argument has been used to limit women without doing the same for men,¹³ and it is clear that women have been limited in ways that men have not, but I believe that the marginalisation and oppression of women does affect men too, not least because it expects men to conform to stereotypes they may not be comfortable with either.

It matters because it affects our witness to the world. Mission has always been at the heart of Baptist life, but a publication from the Baptist Union claims that “when gender inequality takes root amongst the people of God, all of God’s people are diminished and the good news of Jesus Christ...is distorted”,¹⁴ although the impact that has on mission will depend on the context in which it takes place. Simon Woodman argues that “in Western culture it is no longer harmful to the proclamation of the gospel for women to minister...the converse is probably true”,¹⁵ the consequence being that in areas of the world where the equality of women is valued, the church’s real or perceived lack of commitment to it may render mission less effective. And in cultures where conservative attitudes towards women remain the norm, the church’s reluctance to push the conversation may appear to endorse already oppressive views, so that mission may become potentially destructive.

And finally, it matters because it has implications for other conversations, not least those around sexuality. For example, Beth Allison-Glenny contends that the “binary theology of embodiment” that lies behind complementarian views of gender has “shaped the interpretive landscape for our conversations around human sexuality” by insisting that partnership must be male and female.¹⁶ Focusing on the distinctive contributions of men and women in ministry has strengthened this position and indirectly served to harden the Baptist Union’s rejection of same-sex marriage. And yet where the debate around the former may have had a more positive impact on the debate around the latter, this has not materialised. With respect to women in ministry, the Baptist Union has found a way to “live with a measure of disagreement” without seeking to discipline churches,¹⁷ and yet with respect to same-sex marriages, the Baptist Council has sought to “humbly urge” churches not to register their buildings lest they cause division.¹⁸ While

⁹ *SWMBUGB*, p72

¹⁰ Keith Jones, quoted in Goldbourne, p19

¹¹ Pat Took, ‘In His image’ in *Baptist Ministers’ Journal* Vol 300 (Autumn/Winter 2008), pp2-10, p5

¹² Beth Allison-Glenny treats this line of thought in ‘Performing Baptism, Embodying Christ’ in *Reconciling Rites* (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2020)

¹³ Goldbourne, p24

¹⁴ *SWMBUGB*, p7

¹⁵ Simon Woodman, ‘A Biblical basis for affirming women in ministry (Pt 2)’ in *Baptist Ministers’ Journal* Vol 296 (January 2007), pp10-15 (p13)

¹⁶ Beth Allison-Glenny, ‘Baptist Interpretations of Scripture on the Complementarity of Male and Female’ in *Gathering Disciples* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017), pp90-111 (p90)

¹⁷ Beth Allison-Glenny et al, *The Courage to be Baptist* at

http://www.somethingtodeclare.org.uk/uploads/7/7/9/3/77938394/the_courage_to_be_baptist.pdf, p13

¹⁸ Baptist Council, ‘Council Statement on the Registration of Buildings for Same-Sex Marriage’ accessed at

the same freedom is technically allowed, it is done so begrudgingly, but the acceptance of women into Baptist ministry surely ought to serve as a model for the allowance of same-sex marriages in Baptist churches, in spirit as well as in practice. And to make a broader point, affirming the equality of all before God as suggested above would not just protect and empower women, but all those belonging to groups which have traditionally been excluded from the full welcome of the church.

Took has declared that “if the church is to be true to Jesus in the way it lives there must space in it for women who are evangelists, who are priests, who are prophets and teachers and apostles”.¹⁹ That space does exist within the Baptist Union, but many women find it an uncomfortable one to occupy, and this matters in short because it hurts the whole people of God. I do want to end with a note of hope though, because while I take seriously the importance of this conversation and the damage that will be done by ignoring it, I do have hope. In part because there has been progress, and it has accelerated within my lifetime, but mostly because my sisters in ministry give me hope. Baptists are the heirs of a radical tradition, and there is a rebel heart in the women of our union. As it beats in time with the heart of Christ, it will do glorious things.