

Discerning Common Themes: Theological Reflection Report for Group 3

Introduction

Where does this report fit into the findings of Project Violet?

During Project Violet we have focused on three layers of Baptist life where change is needed if all women are to flourish in ministry:

1. The everyday language and behaviour we use in church life
2. The accepted ways of doing things
3. What we believe about the church and the role of ministers

The Requests for Change cover all three of these levels. However, we also wanted to share the theological ideas that we came to recognise as significant in our work together. This is the first of four theological reflection reports emerging from the work of the four groups of women co-researchers in Project Violet.

What kind of theology?

We are offering a theology of discernment, by which we mean that this is theology that arose from listening to God and to each other, drawing on Baptist ways of believing, our love of scripture, and enfolded in prayer.

We brought all that we are to these conversations of discernment - our minds, bodies, souls, and emotions - as we listened deeply to what God was saying. This report arises from a process of reflection which enabled us to listen to God and each other over a number of months.

As each group worked on their research they met to reflect upon the words of the 50 women who had written about the joys and sorrows of ministry during the MOSAIC phase of the project. Seeing their research questions reflected in these women's stories assured them that they were not alone.

As each co-researcher finished her research she reflected on what she had learned as she prepared her report.

Each group of co-researchers then met with Jane Day and Helen Cameron to reflect on their reports. Following this, their reports were read by a group of three women from our colleges who then also met as theological reflectors to begin a process of discernment on what they had read. Finally there was a joint meeting where the learning from the reflective conversations was shared and further listening, prayer, and discernment took place. This report tries to capture what was learned through that process of reflection and discernment.

This may be different from your previous experience of doing theology. Often the focus of our theological tradition has been the prioritising of making logical and convincing arguments. Perhaps that was your experience as a student. Here, however, we have sought to value the process of conversation and the experience and understanding of each co-researcher. This is reflected in the way in which each report contains more than one voice and represents more than one context, identity, and type of ministry. It is designed to start a conversation rather than be the last word.

If you would like to learn more we suggest listening to Helen Dare's interview in the Project Violet Podcast Season 2 on the Project Violet website, or released on 4 May 2024 on Podbean: <https://projectvioletpodcast.podbean.com/>

Some suggestions as you read...

Try to read this report as an invitation from another Baptist to join in a conversation rather than as an agenda paper for a meeting.

As we have read each other's work we have had these virtues in mind:

- Humility and the readiness to get it wrong
- Being confident in truth-telling and truth-seeking
- The love of the other's voice and ideas
- Owning the expertise of experience
- Living with complexity whilst seeking clarity

We have included a question following each theme of the report to stimulate reflection and discussion.

We encourage you to ask:

- How does this report resonate with your understanding of what it is to be a Baptist?
- What echoes are you hearing of scripture and the theology you are familiar with?
- What are the conversations you feel prompted to have?

Reports and co-researchers in Group 3

1. Understanding the financial barriers to training and accreditation for women whose calling is recognised - Afi Kirk
2. Understanding the journey into ministry for Asian women - Amutha Devaraj
3. A brief critical analysis of the Baptists Together equality and diversity training resource, '*I Am Because You Are*' - Charmaine Mhlanga
4. Experiences of accredited ordained women Baptist ministers leaving, seconded or on long-term sabbatical within the Baptist Union - Pam Searle

Themes and issues

Seeking to imitate Christ

We rejoiced that God is calling more women with a diversity of identities and experiences into Baptist ministry. God is equipping Baptists for mission in a diverse society. God has extended his grace to us in making us aware of our unconscious bias and the realities of sexism and racism. We are now called to imitate Christ by moving beyond any stereotypes we have inherited. We want this to be seen as an imitation of Christ who in his final meal with his disciples before his death commanded them to love one another (John 13:34-35).

A question for you to consider:

How are we imitating Christ in the way in which we love one another?

Ubuntu as a way of life

Ubuntu - which is translated as 'I am because you are' - expresses a way of living that starts from our relationships rather than our individual identity. Mutual obligation, respect for elders, and honouring of those who lead are ways in which this collective identity is lived out. There was a sadness that the sense of mutual obligation can be so weak that

training about equality, diversity, and inclusion needs to be made mandatory for ministers. We recognised the need to intentionally induct Newly Accredited Ministers into networks of support that emphasise that they are held in a web of relationships rather than ministering alone. The theological language of 'covenant' roots our relationships with each other in our relationship with a faithful and loving God.

A question for you to consider:

How can we turn ministry from being about individual survival to mutual flourishing?

The Jerusalem donation

We reflected on the passages in Acts and Paul's letters where it is evident that the churches Paul visited made a collection to support the church in Jerusalem. This coincided with a time of famine and so there was a desire to meet the needs of others from their own resources. Our vision was of the name 'Baptists Together' leading to that same mutual support between churches. We were sad when the cost of training for ministry fell as a debt upon an individual rather than being a shared responsibility of the churches.

A question for you to consider:

How do we stir up generosity to meet the needs of the Baptist community?

Living with the betrayal of racism and sexism

We reflected on the way in which Ruth was drawn into God's purposes for her life through her embrace of Naomi, her mother-in-law, across the cultural differences between them. Having recognised the image of God in a face that is different from ours, we experience a sense of betrayal when that image is defaced by racist and sexist language and behaviour. Being welcomed into the life of a church only to find your face doesn't fit when a call to ministry is received is a bitter cup to drain. There was a strong desire to find everyday ways of challenging racist and sexist language, providing opportunities for learning from experience in a spirit of mutual accountability. It is important to have complaints processes for persistent or intentional language and behaviour that needs holding to account. Apologies for past ways of behaving need to have their foundations in new ways of working. Allies need to be willing to share about their journey from bystander to ally. It cannot be just that Whiteness and maleness are seen as 'normal' and Black and Brown and women ministers be expected to fit into a model they cannot adopt authentically.

A question for you to consider:

How are church members prepared for their role in the discernment of callings to ministry?

Our invitation

Now you have read this report we invite you to ask:

- How does this report resonate with my understanding of what it is to be a Baptist?
- What echoes am I hearing of scripture and the theology I am familiar with?
- What are the conversations I feel prompted to have?
- Who could help me explore these issues further?