

MagnifyYou

The Intention

What is the difference that MagnifyYou has made to the women who took part and why was it needed?

Through this piece of work I would like those in senior leadership to recognise that intentional leadership development makes a difference and it does not need to necessarily contradict our Baptist ecclesiology.

How it all began

In October 2019, I met Jane Day, newly appointed Centenary Enabler, for a coffee as part of her tour around the country to connect with the Regional Minister Team Leaders (RMTLs). In our conversation we were talking about the challenge that, at that time, I was the only female RMTL of a group of 13 and this ratio had always been the case. We both agreed that this needed to change. Linked with that was the knowledge I had gleaned about the intentional discipleship that the Church of England had taken with their women priests prior to the Anglican Synod agreement to have women Bishops. Another factor, which I knew because of the position I was in, was that about five Regional Ministers – some Team Leaders – would be retiring within the next two to three years.

As I walked away from our meeting and went to catch my train, these facts niggled in my brain. This led to the wondering about whether, if a group of Associations worked together, we could do something to intentionally disciple and inspire ordained women leaders for the future – the phrase ‘if you keep doing the same things, you will end up with the same results’ going through my brain. We needed to do something and there seemed to be a two-year window.

From there I spoke with Phil Barnard, RMTL for the London Baptists, and Geoff Colmer, RMTL for the Central Baptist Association, suggesting to them that between the three Associations (I [at the time of writing] being Team Leader for the Eastern Baptist Association) perhaps we could run a two-year development programme for some ordained women leaders in whom we could see potential for more senior roles, not necessarily as Regional Ministers. They both instantly agreed, one saying ‘I thought it was the obvious thing to do’ and the other said: ‘I loved it straightaway. I thought this is an excellent idea ... I do believe you have to be intentional on these issues’. So with this encouragement I asked them to consider three or four women who they would like to send on this ‘programme’ or whatever it was going to become. At this point, I didn’t know what the process or programme would look like, the development of MagnifyYou was very organic. Around this time, I went back to Jane Day and said that this is what I was planning to do, would she be interested in joining me in the venture? Of course she agreed!

Jane and I chatted, bounced around some ideas and then gathered 15 women together on 11th March 2020 at the London Baptists office to share our thoughts and more importantly, listen to these women about what they felt their needs for development were. These were the questions we asked of the group:

- What are the internal/external barriers which women face?
- What is the future which we imagine?
- What next?

From this discussion the following areas were identified for input and future consideration:

- Courage
- Leading as a woman
- Imposter syndrome & inner critic
- Facing criticism
- How to survive in ministry

Jane and I worked on a structure for the 'programme'; it would meet alternate months, and be based around worship, sharing, support and coaching. The core of each day was hearing the story and receiving the wisdom from significant women leaders in the Baptist family and from another denomination. From this MagnifyYou was born, thirteen ordained women ministers meeting from September 2020 until July 2022.

What difference has this made to the ordained women ministers who have participated?

I have interviewed six women who joined MagnifyYou, two from each of the three Associations, online, for about 45 mins each, addressing these five questions:

1. Why did you agree to attend MagnifyYou?
2. How did you feel about being asked to join?
3. What has changed for you as a result?
4. What would have made a difference to you or encouraged you in leadership if you hadn't been part of MagnifyYou?
5. Which part of the programme has had the greatest impact:
 - a. Being with like-minded women?
 - b. Coaching advice?
 - c. Hearing from and interacting with key women leaders in our denomination and others?
 - d. The content of what the leaders who were interviewed have shared?
 - e. Other

Before considering the answers to the above questions, I think it is fair to say that there have been what may be referred to as hard outcomes and soft outcomes.

The hard outcomes are those things which are obvious and noticeable to others, such as significant role changes or taking on new responsibilities. In this group of thirteen, two women have commenced study for a PhD; three have taken on Regional Minister roles, two others have applied for regional roles; one has become a Moderator to a Board of Association Trustees; another has represented Baptist's Together, nationally; while others have shadowed senior Colleagues or observed national BUGB meetings. All of these items are clear outcomes.

What the interviews sought to uncover are the more soft outcomes, which are perhaps more fundamental to who we are and how we function as a person and therefore in our ministry. I believe it is these outcomes which will move people towards lasting change.

Following the interviews I believe there are four main themes which have emerged:

- Intentionality
- Safe space, connection with other women and a right to be at the table
- Change of mindset and increased confidence

- Value of story and thinking beyond my immediate ministry

In the next section I will examine these in more detail and include some of what the women have communicated to me through the interviews in these areas.

Intentionality

When considering a programme which could develop ordained women leaders, there were a number of ways we could have approached this. We could have considered a national programme, centrally run and centrally funded; we could have set up a programme that we thought was needed and advertised either nationally or locally; we could have set up just an Association-wide programme; we could have worked with other Associations in partnership; we could have designed a programme around the expressed needs of the women. In any one of these instances we could have either advertised or invited ministers to join. I believe that because I had an existing relationship with the RMTLs of the London and Central Associations, it was easiest for me to talk with Phil Barnard and Geoff Colmer and ask for their involvement. I didn't ever consider advertising this development programme, as I had in my mind the Anglican model, where women priests were asked to join and this instinctively felt like the right way forward – to invite ordained women ministers to join. That decision, of working with two other Associations and inviting the participants, had been made by the time I spoke with Jane. The discussion with Jane was then highly significant about whether we presented the women with what we thought was a good course/programme or listened to their needs. I probably would have gone with the former, Jane advised the latter and I am glad that that was the route that we took. When I say MagnifyYou was highly organic, this is what I mean. The programme grew out of an identified need to develop women as future leaders and it grew from their expressed needs. This then is how it became intentional, inviting the participants and listening to their needs for development.

In discussion with the interviewees the impact of the invitation was expressed with these words: A confidence boost; privileged (used more than once); surprised; 'I didn't think of myself that way'; encouraging (used more than once); empowering; affirming. Without exception they each said that if they had seen it advertised, they would not have applied. Three of them stressed that it was the invitation coming from a Regional Minister they trusted, that made them think they could say 'yes'. One person said: 'most of the time it is stuff [that] happens unintentionally. And it's generally with the people they already know, or the guys, because they're under their nose, or they're more willing to they put themselves forward in the first place. So it kind of needs this sort of intentionality [for women]'.

My fear with the intentionality and the process of invitation was that we would be accused of favouritism – that it would be seen as those who are in the inner circle that were invited while others go under the radar. It is fair to say that this was a risk and people may have felt this way, unbeknown to me. Despite this I believe that the intentionality was hugely significant, raising expectations from the outset because of the impact of being chosen.

One person said 'So I think the fact that that it was something that you were invited to be a part of, and not that you put yourself in for or applied for, actually, in a way was helpful for me, I felt, privileged'.

Another said: 'It was a big confidence boost to think that people had thought of me ... and that I could potentially be a future leader'.

One participant summarised MagnifyYou in these terms: 'Intentional connection; intentional investment'.

The intentionality mattered a great deal and was a key part to the impact of this programme. I believe this should make us question some of our patterns of development for our ministers as Baptists, especially those who are in the minority or whose voices are easily silenced.

Safe space, connection with other women and a right to be at the table

Most of MagnifyYou had to take place over Zoom, due to lockdown restrictions from the COVID pandemic. We had a significant in-person meeting in July 2021 and following that I received an email of thanks, part of which said the following in relation to having an imposter syndrome: 'I feel a sense of liberation from it. I really feel I have a place now at the table'.

This statement was certainly backed up through the interviews. It has to be recognised that for the majority of our time, ordained women ministers function and sit in a male space. We have usually been in the minority at college; in any cluster group we are lucky if there is one other woman; at minister's conferences we may represent about a quarter of those attending and so on. It is the landscape in which we dwell and, sadly, become quite accustomed to. MagnifyYou enabled these women to inhabit a different space and many described the gift as a 'safe space'.

One participant said this: 'having been in this group, I realise that, yeah, that's what is really different about it. Safe.'

It was also noted that there was a desire to cheer one another on, not to be in competition. As a consequence, this sense of safety led to deep levels of openness and honesty: 'there's an honesty about the group. Because it's a safe space'. This is even more significant bearing in mind we mainly met on Zoom; it was therefore remarkable.

One minister described the change that took place in her during the programme when she realised that she, as an associate minister was doing the senior minister role, because the senior minister had gone part-time, but she didn't have the recognition of the work she was doing or the lead she was taking. I don't believe the church or senior minister had done any of this deliberately, it had sort of happened, and she accidentally accepted that this was her role at the table. Then she said this:

'I can't just keep going on pretending that it's okay to be doing the work and not being recognised as the person in that role. And so this new me was able to say quite calmly and not aggressively at all. If you go any more part time, we need to swap roles ... I actually found that quite liberating'.

'Swapping roles' is what happened and was affirmed by both the church and the ex-senior minister. She now knew what her place was at the table. Speaking of MagnifyYou generally the same minister said: 'it's hard to estimate how much it's changed in me really, those meetings? Because it completely changed how I saw myself. Yeah, enormously, enormously.'

Change of mindset and increased confidence

It has already been alluded to that MagnifyYou has had an impact on the way the women think about themselves and how their confidence has been boosted. One of my RMTL colleagues put it this way: 'the supreme gift of MagnifyYou is the confidence that is instilled, that's my sense. And also the sense, such a real sense of belonging'. So something was obviously happening which was evident from the outside, but how do you really quantify how this has happened? I don't think one can say definitively it is because of this or that, or because this person said that or this; however, I do think one can point to a pattern that is reflected throughout all of the conversations I have had.

The increase in confidence certainly began with just the simple process of invitation to be part of something developmental, immediately giving the message that they felt valued and that someone saw something in themselves, which perhaps they had not previously recognised, for example:

'I don't think I thought of myself in this way. I think the words that [the Regional Minister] used were gifted and talented. And I didn't think of myself in that way. I just thought of myself as a minister.'

I believe there were two other common factors: the vulnerability and honesty of our speakers linked with the quality of what they shared with the group.

Each time we met we had a guest speaker who spoke about their journey into leadership and also shared something which was unique to them or a passion for them. For example Lynn Green spoke about her ethos of leadership, especially in the context of being a mum of four children; Rosa Hunt brought reflections of Sabbath Rest; Kate Coleman shared about imposter syndrome and the inner critic; then there was the perspective from the Anglican world from Sarah Mullaly, Bishop of London, and there were others too. Each one laid on the table their life experience as a woman in the context in which they served. They chose to be completely honest in this 'safe space' which was an absolute gift, summed up this way:

'I have been in this privileged position, where I've been able to hear from these women who hadn't done anything remarkably different really ... but they, in their own way had done incredible things and just being honest and vulnerable for a group of other female leaders has done so much. The honesty with which they came to the group, and shared what was going on, and the things they'd found difficult, was just really incredible.'

Another put it this way: 'the fact that some people with extremely busy schedules have valued us as a group enough to give us their time, space to think and let us ask them questions. Yeah, again, we're privileged.'

Again and again the women reported to me the thought process of: well if they could do what they have done, why shouldn't I? So while the content also had a significant impact, for example in how to approach conflict as a woman, how to deal with the inner critic or imposter syndrome, this I think says it all: 'you can't put a price on time and investment in people can you? It pays back in absolute dividends.'

Value of story and thinking beyond my immediate ministry

When reflecting on MagnifyYou for myself and its effectiveness, what I most commonly say to people is: but it's so simple. The concept of bringing a group of women leaders together to share with one another and to listen to and to ask questions of other women leaders is not difficult or

rocket science, and I think the last quote I used sums it up 'you can't put a price on time and investment in people'.

I also think it's worth noting something of the ministry of Jesus here too. He took ordinary men (and some women) and gave them his time and access to him. In that time they listened to his stories, absorbed his parables, witnessed his miracles and questioned him. They became the disciples who changed the world for him and us. So perhaps in trying to answer the question of why this has been successful, perhaps we actually have to say, but of course it would be, when we're following in the footsteps of the master.

So the value of story has been recognised right down the centuries and from the earliest ages we read stories to our children. Stories allow us to move from the cerebral to the imaginative and the emotional, engaging more of our whole being. Within a story we can recognise something of ourselves in a non-confrontational space. Within a story we can write ourselves in as either one of the characters we see or a completely new character, then we begin to own it and perhaps move within it. Within a story, perhaps it is possible to re-write the ending and imagine what that could be. In my opinion this is part of what MagnifyYou has offered to our women as they have journeyed in story with the different narratives of our speakers and of each other.

One participant when reflecting on what had changed for her said this:

'I remember being very aware of just the fact that different people actually approach things in a very different way and from very different angles. And sometimes that's one of the things that it is actually really useful to hear, I found that that was an area of growth for me ... that came a lot out of those stories that were shared, those interviews [with the senior leaders].'

Because sharing story engages us on multiple levels, the stories that were shared at MagnifyYou, also enabled hurts to rise and healing to occur: 'hearing other people's stories and hearing sometimes the pain behind their stories, as a woman leader, I think it made me recognise that I had felt that pain, but actually just pushed on through it and hadn't really dealt with it'. This experience allowed this minister to move forward on her personal journey as a minister, to take some of what she had learnt about the power of story back into her church. It also allowed her to realise she could look beyond the confines of who she thought she was, because she had seen how others had done this too.

The 'hard outcomes' that I cited at the beginning speak to the fact that MagnifyYou has called people out beyond their usual boundaries and comfort zones. Some of this is certainly credited to the teaching, to the increased confidence, but it also can be put down to opportunity and exposure.

As a result of MagnifyYou these women ministers not only had the opportunity to talk with myself and Jane and the invited leaders, but they were encouraged to take up opportunities of shadowing and observing key aspects of Baptist life and other organisations too. While these opportunities would be open to anyone who asked, the fact remains that few ask, and especially very few women would think to ask. The mindset of 'it's not for me' is still highly prevalent. MagnifyYou communicated loud and clear, yes it is for you. As a result it is more than peering over the fence and more like walking through the garden gate into new territory, but in a safe way.

What next?

When MagnifyYou met formally for the last time in July 2022 we took some time to reflect on what the journey had meant for each individual as well as what were the next steps, either for each woman or as a group. This is probably still in the embryonic stage, but I think a few things in general terms became clear.

The sense of belonging and safety of the group was of paramount importance to most of the participants and something they did not want to lose. The women voiced that for most, there was no other space where there is such felt acceptance and a place to be truly themselves. We are therefore intending to meet again in the Autumn and continue to reflect on what continuing as a group would look like.

Many in the group were still keen to look for opportunities to serve beyond their local setting. This comes from the sense of increased confidence and realisation that each one has a voice and a right to a place at the table. Therefore a key role of Jane and myself is looking how we can be enablers in this.

A fairly high proportion of the conversation with Phil Barnard and Geoff Colmer circled around the subject of where are there other glass ceilings for women in ministry? Also are we at risk of ticking boxes with a female General Secretary and an increasing (although still small) number for female RMs? It is possible therefore to remain tokenistic even where improvement is occurring, and just because there is improvement it does not mean that these are easy spaces for women to inhabit due to well-established systems. In my opinion and echoed by my colleagues, it is recognised that it is easier for a woman to move into regional ministry because it is other ministers who call that person into that role and it is a job that is applied for – compared to leaders of larger churches who are called by the members of that church. Within our church structures there are still significant prejudices against women and in particular women as senior leaders in larger churches. The reason the appointment process is significant is that the theology of most of our ministers sits comfortably with women in senior leadership; however, there are church members who have not worked through their theology of women in leadership and therefore remain stuck with what has been modelled to them. This has often been white, male, able-bodied leadership. This therefore presents a problem for not only women, but also for those from many other ethnic backgrounds or those with physical differences to move into senior church leadership. The knock on effect of this, of not changing how leadership is modelled, is around who and how the next generation of leaders are raised up.

Having listened to the women of MagnifyYou and my RMTL colleagues, my final reflection would be that if MagnifyYou has impacted these 13 women so much and been the springboard for so much change, it cannot and shouldn't stop here. My struggle is that I believe the Spirit of God birthed this through a confluence of certain leaders at a certain point in time, and it rose up organically; therefore is it 'right' to just roll it out again? I believe it is right for the baton to be passed onto the participants to raise up more women and I hope this will occur in big and small ways. But the question of myself is, should the programme be run again by me, when I had no intention of doing so.

In addition this intentional style of development should not stop with women. There have been conversations with our black and Asian leaders about how something like this could be run to equip our black and brown ministers and I pray that this will bear fruit. Male leaders also need safe spaces where they can develop, grow their gifts and let the protective walls come down. Therefore I think

MagnifyYou speaks more widely to how the Baptist denomination does leadership and personhood development. Are we prepared to be more intentional for the future or will we continue with hoping our ministers catch good leadership? Are we satisfied that actually they may seek their training in other denominations, New Wine or New Frontiers, because they do not find their needs met in the Baptist family?

So in seeking to answer the question 'What next?' I have actually raised many more questions for consideration.

Revd Beth Powney