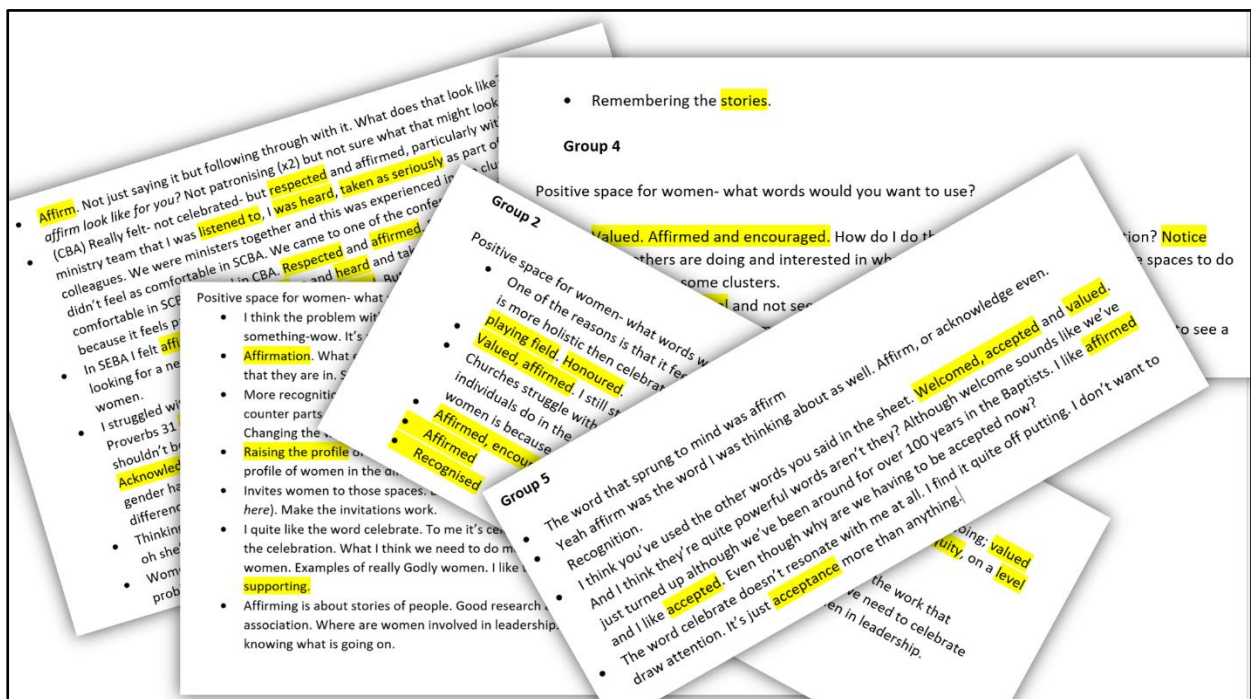


## What does affirming women leaders in our association look like?

SCBA wants the voice and presence of women to be welcomed, accepted and valued. Women are under represented in our groups and the question – ‘What does it look like when women leaders are celebrated in our association?’ – might help us consider the spaces and practices that enable women to feel noticed and heard.

### Stage One

It was clear that the word ‘celebrated’ was not owned by the vast majority of the women leaders that I had spoken with and so I listened to 5 groups of women as they explored other words to capture how a positive space for women might be described.



One of the words that was consistently used across the groups was the word ‘affirmed’ and so ‘What does affirming women leaders look like in our association?’ became the focus of this research.

### Stage Two

In 2 focus groups the methodology of Lego Serious Play was chosen to respond to the research question. My primary reason for this is because the use of metaphor can be a useful way to help people conceptualise and develop embryonic thoughts. The women were given 15 minutes to build a structure in response to the question and were asked to provide up to 5 key words that captured something of what they were communicating.



Here is some of what was shared:

'Togetherness – no hierarchy'

'Level playing field'

'Not limited'

People realising that they have the 'power to open doors' for women.

'Given freedom to try things and express things differently'

'Need to be supported and encouraged – not used as a last resort'

'The structure should be built to accommodate people, rather than people accommodating the structure'

There should be space for 'different sized voices'

When asked about the barriers to women – 'talking to people where they think theirs is the right way – their experience trumps yours'

'Everyone contributes...we can do better if all voices are heard'

'Safe environment' for those that are developing or hurting

'Do things differently' it's ok to experiment and try new things

'Valued for our skills and not our gender'

After everyone shared their model and responded to any questions that people had, we reflected together further. In the first group an image of a wheel was used, with the regional team seen as the hub of the wheel and they were responsible for creating the culture that impacted the spokes (the different groups and spaces), and the life of SCBA. This was echoed in the second group who asked 'Who sets the culture? Who are the influencers?' The first group named the culture that was preventing the women from contributing fully as one where there are dominant voices that come across as 'right' – one woman described this as the voice of the Alpha male, another as those that read scripture conservatively and are not open to another person's perspective. The culture that they were wanting was one where we all learn together, it was ok to do things differently, one where we all contributed, one that was fun to be part of. The importance of transparency was also noted and, although not unpacked, the context was in relation to a lack of hierarchy and representation; this makes me wonder if it is to do with a transparency with our processes. Different modes of communication would help with enabling the different sized voices to be heard and to contribute, and it was felt that this would need to be spelt out to people as there was a lack of self-awareness amongst some of our ministers and leaders who tended to dominate spaces.

The primary way SCBA's structures facilitate networking amongst the ministers is through clusters that are geographically defined. These were not viewed as a safe space where you could be vulnerable. They are too big, too much of a turnover of attendees, and the culture of them can lend itself to the dominant voices that often prevent women contributing in any meaningful way. It was suggested that women need to find the spaces that work for them, that might then give them the affirmation and encouragement to find their voice in the male-dominated groups. This is not to suggest that clustering is not important but to recognise the limitation of the gathering.

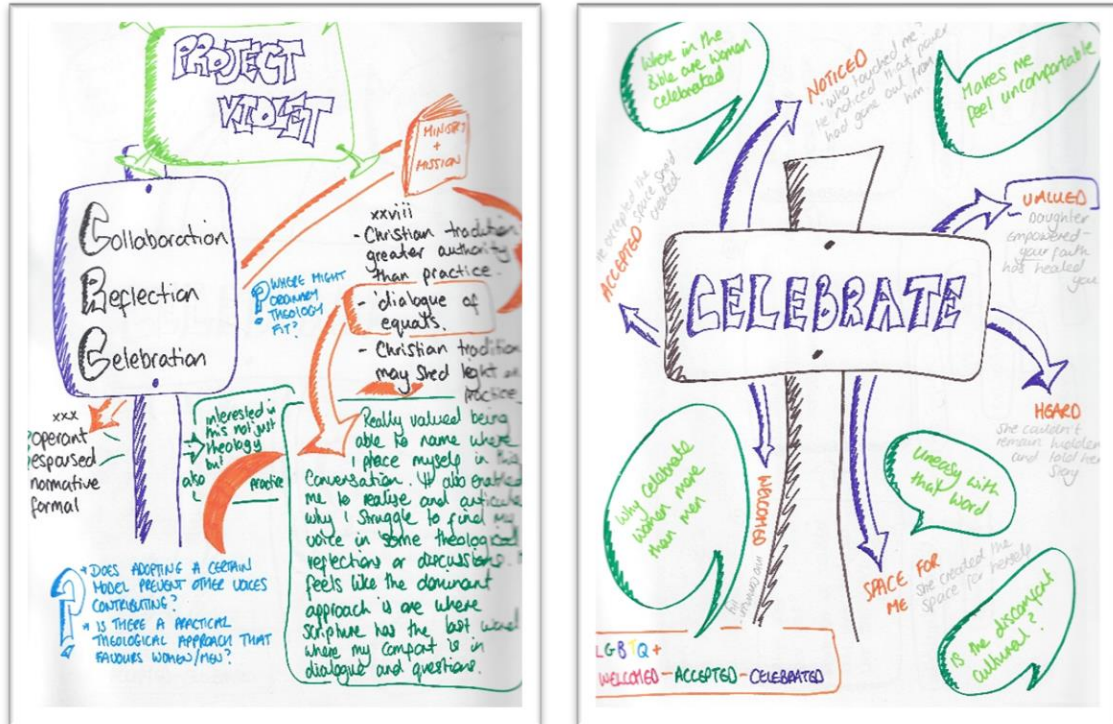
There were several aspects that both groups referenced, a couple to note are the appreciation of the men that 'fly the flag' for women in ministry, and recognising that we can be self-limiting – 'inside our head', 'lack confidence' were the the words that were used.

One of the women's key words in summing up her construction was 'concrete action' and with that in mind here are some suggestions of what grounding this research could look like:

- Training in good facilitation and chairing of groups
- Modelling learning as opposed to knowing
- When planning any of our gatherings consider how to make the space accessible to the different sized voices – eg, space for reflection and then inviting a response
- When inviting or welcoming a woman onto a group or into a space, naming their skill that we're valuing and not their gender
- Begin to gather the data regarding women in leadership in SCBA (facts and figures)
- Think through the purpose of the clusters

- Representation at our leaders' days and at the conference (who are the people that are visible?)

## Self-Reflection



I started journaling as part of this research and one of my initial questions out of reading *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission*<sup>1</sup> was – ‘Does adopting a certain model prevent other voices contributing?’ This was pertinent to me having found it difficult to find my voice in the some of the spheres I was working in. It strikes me that this resonates with the focus groups’ concern that our current structures do not have the flexibility to accommodate the different sized voices or the participation of all equally. I also recognised that my preference was for dialogue and questions, again resonating with the women who longed for our spaces to have a culture of learning and journeying with, rather than knowing (and wanting everyone else to ‘know’ and believe in a certain way).

I can lack confidence in what my gut feeling is about a situation and default to the opinion of the more knowledgeable other, but on hearing from the women in this research I am sensing that I am in a position where I can open more doors (to use their language) and create spaces that engage with different modes of communication. Their experiences and their articulation of what an affirming space would look like is helping me to grow in confidence about helping to create that culture and those spaces in SCBA.

<sup>1</sup> Cameron, H. and Duce, C. (2013) *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion*. London: SCM Press.

As part of the first stage of this research I asked the women which scripture passages they would turn to that demonstrated the celebration (or one of the many other words that they had shared) of women. This proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated. What was particularly frustrating was that no one named the story that had captured my heart and I had spent time with – the woman that touched Jesus' cloak. However, I do want to reference this, particularly an observation I had: the woman created her own space and Jesus accepted that space that she had created. This seems to have an affinity with this research in that we have asked the women what an affirming space looks like; and my hope is that together we will create that space where the different sized voices can be heard and where all can contribute because the spaces and processes will accommodate the people rather than the people having to fit in with the existing structures.

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