

Women's Experience of Pioneering Contexts

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with artwork from Dawn Savidge

Introduction

For this project, we had three conversations with 2 groups of women, all of whom are involved in Urban Expression¹. Reflecting on the conversations, we noticed that the stories shared followed a similar pattern:

- Before training for Baptist Ministry many of the participants described feeling supported and **nurtured**. They were given the opportunity to explore their gifts and 'have a go' before or alongside applying to train.
- During the process of exploring their call, applying to train and being a 'minister in training' they experienced more struggle. There were numerous examples of where their calling was undermined or questioned, both subtly and overtly, and they felt **disillusioned**.
- The Urban Expression community offered space to breathe. It was described as a place where people don't have to justify themselves but are free to get on with what they feel called to do. It's a place of **flourishing**.

Artwork explanation

We have therefore chosen to present our findings under those three distinct headings, while acknowledging they are far from this in reality. However, by way of illustrating this complexity, we commissioned artist Dawn Savidge to create a triptych, a piece of art over three panels, to highlight both the interconnectedness and distinctiveness of the experiences.



¹ <https://www.urbanexpression.org.uk> Urban Expression is a church planting mission agency committed to living and ministering alongside those who are experiencing marginalisation and deprivation, and discovering together how to follow Jesus in those contexts. People join Urban Expression as 'mission partners', these folk are supported by a small team of coordinators, who offer support, encouragement, and opportunities for learning.



Nurtured

Our participants come from a range of backgrounds and family connections with church. Some grew up in Christian homes and went to church from a young age, others joined the church later on in life. For those who were part of Christian communities from a young age, the majority spoke positively about their childhood experiences of church. Church was a 'safe place', where they had found belonging and meaningful relationships.

Male leaders encouraging and recognising gifts

"I flourished as a teenager, because people gave me opportunities to get involved and to lead youth groups and to teach in Sunday school. And I was taken seriously, which is really nice."

There were positive examples of male church leaders and ministers giving young women opportunities for development. A significant story from one woman was the encouragement from the male minister of her church, who started talking to her about going to Spurgeon's when she was still a teenager - his support was a key factor in her going into ministry. This was an important time of flourishing and development.

One of our participants who had become a Christian in adulthood shared her experience of a church community that was characterised by healing and acceptance. She shared movingly about how much she was cared for and nurtured by her church community, noting that she was 'loved back to life'. It was in this context of compassionate support that she was given opportunities to serve in many different ministries of the church and through that freedom to explore, found that she discovered her calling as an evangelist and someone who loved those who were beyond the walls of the church.

"My minister did nothing but honour and affirm me all the time."

With the support of her minister, she then went to college and trained for ministry. She was guided, supported and encouraged each step of the way and her self-confidence and self-awareness also deepened through this process.

We discussed the role of men in ministry, and the male allies that we all had accompanying us at different points of our journey. Some of the women never thought that they would lead in recognised roles but were encouraged by male ministers to explore how their gifts might be expressed in that way.

Complementarian influence

For women who grew up in more culturally conservative contexts, there were very few voices challenging the status quo for the roles which women could occupy. This was paralleled in church settings, so initially women accepted their assigned roles.

One woman had grown up in a church and cultural context which expected women to be silent. In her younger years, she accepted this as normal and didn't question this.

"I grew up in the culture of being told that women are to be silent. And I was taught that from about 11, or 12, in a youth group. And given John MacArthur books that we were told

to read and talk through about that. I never questioned that, I never spoke against that. It was all I knew, I didn't really care."

However, as she moved into her twenties, she realised that gifts of leadership were stirring within her, and they could no longer be contained even though she was being told that there was no place for her in recognised ministry within the church.

Women also shared experiences of when they had been encouraged in particular ministries like prayer or pastoral care, but that these ministries were not considered leadership ministries, and women were not invited to join all-male leadership teams. So certain gifts were encouraged, or women were supported to a certain degree but it was limited and restricted to a particular shaped 'box'.

"I am very much about prayer, intercession and the prophetic. I was often restricted, and it was sometimes more with male leaders. I was not understood and my gifting was not always embraced or encouraged."

Looking back, some of the women felt that they had identified gifts of leadership in themselves in their early twenties or even teen years but they didn't have a way to express these gifts or were not encouraged to develop them.

"But as I got older and stepped into my 20s, it was very obvious that there was something going on in me that was coming out. And looking back at that young 18/19 year old, I had leadership skills and anyway, the restriction for me was within the Baptist tradition, because the more it began to bubble and surface, the more I was told you cannot go any further."

This is partly due to there being no other examples of women in leadership in their local church contexts, and the perception that leadership is male.

"But it's interesting, because with the whole leadership, I never, I never looked for that I didn't think I was good enough."

One participant shared how her gifts were developed by her male minister, despite him not allowing women to preach or have leadership roles in the church:

"So the minister liked the women to wear hats and women couldn't preach, except on ladies Bible class Sunday. But that was his beliefs, but, but he also taught me how to be a pastor. He would take me to hospital, visiting and to the elderly. And he was always really encouraging. And he's still a kind of mentor now. So he was really good."



Disillusioned

The conversations named some of the subtle things that contributed to a growing sense of disillusionment:

- Being surrounded by paintings of old, white men in the college dining room
- Discovering that the man sitting next to you in class doesn't believe you should be there
- Being the person who always makes the tea in meetings
- Noticing it's often a woman who takes the notes in meetings and men who make excuses why they can't

We also heard many difficult stories in which women felt they were blatantly treated differently because of their gender, which we have grouped into the following categories:

Gatekeepers and Power Play

The women described experiences in which they felt restricted, controlled or intimidated by men in positions of power, mostly in the contexts of colleges, associations or the wider denomination, rather than the local church. One woman recalled one such experience which happened at her final entry interview for a Baptist College:

'[it] was basically in a large room in front of about eight male tutors, maybe one women...very imposing...big dark panelled office with all of them...I remember distinctly, one of the tutors asked me just point blankly, his opening statement was, 'are you a man in a skirt?' And I just remember being completely floored by it. Like...I had no understanding of how to answer that question...you can't give a yes or no answer like that. It's just an aggressive question. I just burst into tears because I didn't know what to do with that question and I was really shocked'

Sadly, this encounter, right at the start of her training, became a defining moment in her ministry. She went on to describe how 'from then and ever since' she has felt like an 'interloper', someone who doesn't fit or belong.

There were other stories where men were using their power to remind women of their place and sure up their own position. In all the examples, women had to go to men in positions of power (Regional Ministry, National Ministry) and were dependent on them for something (e.g. - funding or permission to do something).

Male Dominated Spaces

In both conversations, women spoke of spaces that felt awkward and uncomfortable to them because they were male dominated, such as local church leader gatherings (fraternals!), Churches Together meetings and Ministers Conferences. They described how they sometimes found it difficult to even get into conversation with men in those environments because they only seemed to talk to other men! One woman described how she experienced men looking away from her when she entered a room because they didn't know what to do with her. She said it felt like they just didn't know 'how to speak to a woman'. Another said, 'it's always slightly awkward...when you go to...to like [Association] Minister's Conference...you always feel a bit of a square peg in a round hole'.

Feeling a bit overwhelmed at the thought of going to college and wanting to bridge the gap and fit into these sorts of spaces, one woman described how she purchased a briefcase to take to college because she thought that's what all the best ministers and students had. She never used it. When reflecting on this story, Alex noticed it had echoes of Saul trying to prepare David for the fight with Goliath (1 Samuel 17) by putting his armour on him but, with it being so ill-fitting, it was no use at all!

Pay differences

We heard several stories about discrepancies in pay between women and their male counterparts. One woman was essentially doing the work of a Pastor but being called a 'Community Worker' and being paid £10,000+ less than her male colleagues!

Another was sent to college to train for ministry and the church agreed to pay for her training fees but did not offer a salary or a stipend. However, when the next person went to train from the church, not only were **his** fees covered but **he** also received a stipend too. When the woman questioned this, one of the comments was 'well, if you're willing to let us see your husband's salary...we can look at it'. She said that, at the time, she probably politely declined, but *'internally said 'piss off'!*

Finally, when one woman went to her Regional Minister to talk about future funding for her part time church role, he said, given that she had such a sense of call to the place, would she carry on unpaid? She reflected, *'there's no way you would have said to a bloke, 'do you think you need paying? Why don't you do it for free?''*

The burdens we carry

One of the groups identified several things that women in ministry have to consider that their male colleagues probably never give a second thought to, such as what to wear to preach or lead a service. One woman said, *'it's just such a horrible feeling every Sunday. And I just don't think men have to think about that... they don't have to worry about if anyone's going to be...looking at their legs or commenting on how short their skirt is, or whether someone in the congregation can see your nipples'*. Then there is how to navigate people's surprise at how good you are at what you do, that's exhausting! What are you meant to say when someone comes up to you after the service and says, "Oh that was **actually** rather good"??

Family and Home Life

Across the conversations there were reflections about the cost of being a woman in ministry, many of which related to family and home life. Some felt that their families had to put up with a lot and that their support was often unseen and undervalued. One woman said, *'I'm not happy about what ministry has cost me and what it cost my husband as well who trailed around after me and was so supportive and gave so much to the church...'* There was particular concern for the families of women who have experienced a lot of opposition to their ministry. Who supports them and how?

It was also felt that greater expectations are placed on women to juggle family, home and ministry compared to male counterparts. This often means that more women have part

time roles which, because of our ecclesiology, are more likely to be offered by smaller, less well-off churches, in more marginal places.

Feeling Undervalued and Unsupported

Following on from the above, some of the women talked about feeling less seen and supported by their Regional Ministers because they were in small churches. One woman said, *'I felt that they supported the big happening churches, and they totally didn't understand the value of hidden and less sexy ministry.'* Another said, *'...if you're in the big churches, that's where all the celebrations are. But I constantly said to my church...if the big churches did half of what you do missionally...so just that real struggle that actually the small churches do a lot but don't get their stories celebrated.'*

Sometimes other women are the problem!

A couple of people voiced that sometimes it is not just men who oppress women in ministry, sometimes other women do too. One woman, when remembering a church she used to work in said, *'I could tell you lots of stories of women refusing to take communion from me because I was a woman'* and another noted that it wasn't the senior minister who made it difficult for her, but his wife.



Flourishing in Urban Expression

It was wonderful to note in our conversations that a significant number of the women talked about how they felt they were currently in a season of flourishing, in spite of ongoing challenging circumstances and questions about the legitimacy of their leadership from individuals who are part of institutions outside of Urban Expression. The women identified a number of factors for this flourishing including gaining greater wisdom through experience and age, stepping out of traditional ministry roles, and being part of secular organisations which had invested in them. The culture of Urban Expression, the community of practitioners of which they are a part and the freedom to express their gifts of ministry, were also key contributing factors. (Several of the women had also worked for UE as employed coordinators for a time, so brought that experience to bear on their reflections.)

Visibility: You can't be what you can't see

All of our participants identified that before they joined UE, they knew very few (if any) women Baptist ministers. They had not been in churches with women ministers, nor had they seen women ministers leading or serving with their unique gifts and skills in their own way. Women ministers joining UE then discovered a whole group of fantastic women in key leadership roles exercising their ministry in a range of different ways. There are also key examples of women and men leading together, as equals. We noted that the 'issue' of women in leadership was not explicitly discussed, but what UE believed was demonstrated and communicated by the intentional inclusion of women, and valuing of their voices.

"I feel highly valued for being a woman in Urban Expression."

The women spoke about 'being seen' in Urban Expression, and being able to work alongside men who encouraged and supported them. This was mentioned by those who had been employed by UE as well as those who belong to UE as 'mission partners' in communities which experience marginalisation and deprivation across the UK. For some women, being connected to UE as an organisation meant that people in other Christian structures and organisations began to recognise their gifts and vocation. A number of the women shared that they had found a welcoming, safe place in UE.

"And I think, in Urban Expression, I found that welcome. That didn't matter if I was a woman or not. And yeah, that felt like coming home to me"

Freedom and creativity

"I always felt with Urban Expression, you didn't have to justify yourself. You didn't have to explain yourself. So you could go to an Urban Expression gathering and everyone just got it."

One participant mentioned that part of what she valued about Urban Expression was the freedom to make mistakes. She didn't always need to get everything right, and that was hugely liberating to her. *"You don't have to explain yourself"*. This freedom also extended to how the women exercised their gifts in ministry. *"Urban Expression for me became a place where I could breathe. It became a place where I could truly be me."*

This extended to freedom to explore new theological perspectives, traditions and spiritual practices. UE provided a safe container for these explorations, because of a sense of a

shared journey, shared values and mutuality. Sometimes this led women into new forms of leadership and ministry, while for others it helped them to feel that their call to the margins and to those on the edges of society or outside of the church walls was legitimate. Their sense of calling to the marginalised was recognised as a true vocation.

“But as part of my training I needed, I wanted to see what church could be like, if we took it to people that had nothing to do with church.”

Being part of UE gave women leaders exposure and access to Baptist women ministering in diverse pioneering contexts. Through visits and deepening relationships, women grew in confidence to experiment in their own contexts, where traditional church and outreach were not culturally or missionally appropriate.

A supportive community

Our participants talked about how much they valued being supported by a community of equals, not a competitive ‘fraternal’ or ministers conference. Some women had been part of local ministers ‘fraternals’ where the men did not talk to them because they didn’t know what to say, or how to address them, so the experience of being welcomed and listened to in UE was transformative.

“It felt like there wasn't particularly a sense of competition. Even those that had been doing it longer and had managed to plant a church. There wasn't a sense of ‘this is how to do it.’ Wasn't that sort of condescending. I think that I really valued that sense of everyone just gets it. And we're equals, regardless as to where we are on our Urban Expression journey. Which is the opposite to what you felt whenever you went to a ministers conference, because that is all about numbers and all about achieving.”

For a number of women, this support had extended into opportunities for mentoring and development through travel and teaching with more experienced, older male colleagues. These were opportunities to demonstrate how men and women could work as equals, together, although sometimes the women were asked if they were the man’s secretary or wife! (Women’s clothing and appearance was also all too often commented on, something generally not experienced by male colleagues.)

Widening networks

Freedom in UE has given women space to explore ministry and vocation in other contexts outside of the church. Because UE has an integrated and holistic understanding of vocation, a number of the women talked about having more opportunities to serve outside of their immediate pioneering context or Christian gathering. Women felt encouraged to start new projects or initiatives and to consider this part of their calling whether this was in their immediate context or translocal work. UE does not employ their mission partners, so some women have other work which is often complementary to their local UE work. The connection with UE has facilitated wider opportunities and connections.

A number of women noted that they had experienced flourishing outside of church, denominational or UE settings. One woman spoke passionately about her experience in recent years of being developed primarily outside of church structures. She noted that her

best development as a leader, opportunities for learning and gaining skills came from working with non-faith based organisations.

Room for improvement?

Of course there is always room for improvement and some women noted that they had been part of groups in UE where people unconsciously conformed to gendered roles around basic tasks like who would chair the meetings, who would take notes, organise the gatherings etc. We also noted that UE is not currently a very diverse community with regards to women from different ethnicities and we long for a time when this will not be the case and that we would be a truly diverse community.

Recommendations

1. Congregational level:

- Encourage churches to tell stories/use illustrations that feature women's stories and experiences and highlight resources that will help ministers/ teachers/ preachers to develop an awareness of women's voices in the Biblical text.
- Help churches to challenge inherited, patriarchal, and/or cultural gender norms in their congregations. Perhaps the men could organise the food/ tea/ childcare sometimes?
- Increase the visibility of women leaders in churches. Often churches have more women in them, but the leadership is still very male.
- From the stories that we heard, the biggest impact on women's lives and their path to ordination was the support, kindness and encouragement of one or two key leaders. Frequently these were male leaders in local churches. Therefore we need those in leadership to act as advocates for women in their congregations.

2. Regional ministers:

- Encourage regional teams to consider at least one team post to be reserved for a female candidate.

3. Union level:

Could there be a Baptist version of the Anglican's 'Dean of Women'? Her duties may include, but not be limited to:

- Supporting ordained and lay women in ministry, particularly in churches which have specifically rejected (or are known to be opposed to) women in ministry.
- Advocating and raising issues with the Ministerial Recognition Committee to highlight discrimination, harassment, and abuse of women. Educating MRC as necessary on issues which women might face as they consider entering ordained ministry.
- Encouraging women ministers to apply for senior leadership posts and committees and actively facilitating opportunities for study and personal development.
- Advising other ministers on women's issues.
- Facilitating conversations, relationship-building meetings and ambitious training and CPD opportunities.
- Coming alongside women with ministerial difficulties.
- Encouraging a wholeness of ordained ministry with both men and women working happily alongside each other. (But not in a complementarian understanding!)

In terms of how this fits with pioneering, it is difficult to say. Many pioneers are tired of being wrung out for stories and just want to get on with doing their thing. They also do not want to do violence to their communities by constantly 'telling their stories'.

Women have stumbled into, or found Urban Expression by luck, accident, or relational connection. However, as we travel further into post-Christendom and inherited church feels increasingly alien, more people will want to explore other ways of being Christian community together. Urban Expression also has a particular call to those on the margins, so

for those women who are called to these types of contexts, we would want to raise the profile of Urban Expression as a place of belonging, community and freedom.

Currently, the Pioneer Roundtable is a place where UE has a seat at the table in terms of pioneering in relation to the Union, but this frequently feels too institutional. Urban Expression works best relationally, and has several positive and collaborative relationships with churches, ministers and regional ministers across the UK, but there is more that could be done to facilitate mutual learning between the Union and UE.