

Experiences of accredited ordained Baptist women ministers leaving, seconded or on long-term sabbatical within the Baptist Union

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Introduction

This short paper is based on the experiences of Baptist women ministers and their journeys that have led them to leave Baptist church ministry, be on long-term sabbatical leave or be seconded out of church ministry. I chose this as a topic firstly because I have come very close to leaving Baptist church ministry myself. Second, when after several years I was able to tell my own story to trusted individuals, I began to find out that my troubling experiences were not isolated but shared amongst many other Baptist women ministers – some of these women had unfortunately left Baptist ministry completely, others had side stepped into long-term sabbatical, with some in both groups suffering from serious health issues.

The experience of some of the ladies no longer in church ministry was that they did not feel that the Baptist environment was a 'safe setting', meaning they no longer felt supported, feeling that it was better to keep a distance from the structures of Baptist life.

How I carried out my research

My research has been carried out under the guidance and support of Revd Jane Day (Baptist Union Faith and Society Team, Centenary Development Enabler) and Dr Helen Cameron (Research Fellow, Centre for Baptist Studies) who lead the Project Violet study. The Project Violet study 'aims to investigate Baptist women's experiences in ministry whilst developing women ministers'. Its hope is to help the Baptist Union to 'understand more fully the theological, missional, and structural obstacles women ministers face in the Baptist community in Great Britain and identify ways forward'.

Initially, I requested a list of women in Baptist ministry. Unfortunately, due to GDPR and the records held by the Baptist Union centrally not being up to date as to the whereabouts of all ordained Baptist women ministers, it was not possible to interview women as far afield as I would have wanted. So, I spoke with people I am loosely acquainted with and was fortunate (with this being a particularly emotive subject) to be able to interview women across the country – women who have put their trust in their stories being retold.

Each woman minister has signed an agreement that parts of their stories be retold, and was asked the same set of questions listed below:

1. Please tell me what happened on entry into Church Ministry?
2. Please tell me about the relationship you had with the Church and Association.
3. What support was offered to you, if any, by the Association or Church?
4. Looking back what would have made a difference?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Issues mentioned and reasons for moving on from Baptist church ministry

Surprisingly, all the women interviewed experienced warning signs within their first or second churches.

Below are some of the reasons that women ministers have been given for leaving Baptist church ministry. Each woman gave multiple reasons that built on each other – none existed in isolation.

- Some women wanted to develop ministry beyond local church and no opportunity to do that within Baptist structures. On entering church training, their trainee skills and previous work experiences were acknowledged and encouraged. However, it was noted that after completing the required training through their Baptist college, there were, or are, no non-church opportunities for a calling within the Union as it stands due to its current structures. This means that if anybody has a ministry call that is wider and broader than the local church, there isn't really a space to investigate that call – for example, a call as an evangelist, or a forerunner wanting to either work alongside a church or to be supported as part of the church ministry. What remains apparent is that if you did not fit into 'the mould of a traditional Baptist minister' there was unfortunately no interest and certainly no church vacancies in the offering for some time.
- Some women ministers experienced a negative response when trying to investigate their calling. However, when a church vacancy interest or offer did come about women found, they found they were not being offered the same work package as their male colleagues, even when they were more qualified for the position they were being offered, and so felt forced into roles within the church that did not use all their skills.
- The women ministers interviewed each found themselves questioning whether loaded comments made to them – concerning their skin colour, attire, hair style or gender – were made because they were black ministers and/or female minister; this is because the commenting began initially as micro aggressive remarks but these grew into overtly racist and sexist remarks. Many of the women of colour ministers did not want to make a fuss so did not report or make formal complaints. They also did not feel that the person they would complain to would understand or take the complaint seriously.
- The Equality Act 2010 legally protects all people from discrimination in their workplace and in wider society. However, as ministers we are not employed, but called into ministry. For this reason ministers can feel they are not protected by this Act.
- Some ladies found they were not respected as they knew their male colleagues were, even after having been called into the role of minister. They were asked questions such as who was cooking their husband's/partner's dinner whilst they were in church preaching and leading the church. Of course, these remarks are totally unacceptable

and should be addressed instantly but the women concerned found that these kinds of sexist remarks came about at times when least expected, leaving them stunned – especially those times when it was another woman referring to their gender. On occasion some women ministers found that they were not listened to in meetings, but their male colleagues would be listened to if they came up with the same suggestions, and this was very frustrating and demoralising.

Some of the ladies in question experienced a negative change in behaviour towards them from members of the church, from when they contributed as a lay member to entering church leadership within their own sending churches. Some commented that women offer a difference to ministry because of who we are, more so for women of colour, particularly because of what we can contribute – yet this was not always welcomed or acknowledged.

- Some women found that churches felt unable to accept them in leadership. This was sometimes perceived to be because they are black women, and sometimes simply because they are a woman. Their experiences were that certain churches were willing for women to take a lead in the children's work or the youth work within the church and even lead in pastoral care, but felt unable to encourage a call into formal, accredited ministerial leadership. While exploring these issues to help develop their churches, some women found that some volunteers had stood back from their roles, not wanting to be led by either a woman of colour or indeed a woman at all. However, some of these churches were given clear teaching and then felt able to shift perspective and accept a woman as their minister. There were instances of it helping when a key leader from outside the church taught on women in leadership, but strong resistance remained.
- Some of the female ministers' experiences were such that as trainees and newly accredited ministers, they were responsible for leading the church in some settings as sole leaders. Here they were needing to make key decisions for the furtherance of the church, whilst dealing with some very difficult pastoral situations within the church – including around safeguarding and removal of ministers – but there was little to no help offered from overseers. In some of these instances, the church was content for the women ministers to be dealing with these situations, in effect leading the church while still trainees or associates, but did not feel they should be formally recognised as leading the church. In some situations, this action was repented of and apologised for. Whether the lack of support occurred because they were women or women of colour is hard to define as you cannot stop being one or the other and differentiate.
- A number of women ministers were told from both the Baptist colleges and their Associations that they would have to change the way they preached, the way they dressed, the way they carried themselves, if they wanted to pursue or continue to train as Baptist ministers. Some women whilst training for ministry at college were pushed into studying modules in homiletics in an attempt to teach/change their preaching styles into a supposedly more Baptist way of preaching – three-point sermons. In some instances when the women resisted and stood firm – assured within themselves that whilst they were willing to learn in general, God was not

calling them to change but to remain as they were on this issue – the women trainees were threatened as to whether they would be permitted to be ordained, or accredited. These women experienced resistance at various stages of their learning journeys.

- Some women were threatened with withdrawal of their contractual funding or the removal of their agreed stipend in order to control their ministries. It was only when the women refused to accept funding from the Associations concerned that the women ministers were released to be able to continue in their agreed ministries.
- Some college curriculums did not reflect on gender or race in a way relevant to the Baptist ministry these women had chosen to follow, even though the colleges had advertised this. Some women wanted to advance their studies into womanism, or black or Asian theology, but unfortunately there was at that time little to no understanding available in certain colleges. This led to the trainee ministers changing colleges or applying for further studies outside the Baptist family so that they could advance in their ministries. Unfortunately, in one instance the college concerned did not encourage or agree to the studies and it was frowned upon; so this woman minister found that there was a lack of flexibility for them whilst studying at college, and even felt that the rules were being selectively applied to their disadvantage.
- Some female ministers found it unclear as to who they should turn to in conflictual situations, especially where the Association had a conflict in supporting both the minister and church. Women ministers found that known friendships turned less supportive, and in some instances they were not supported at all with information instead being withheld.
- Women of colour received racist remarks about the depth of colour of their skin. For example, 'I'm glad you are wearing white, as I might not be able to see you'. Disgraceful racist remarks such as this have caused great upset and in some instances have brought about fears and concern about moving to a new Baptist setting where they will be vulnerable to similar unkind, unacceptable behaviour.
- The majority of the women interviewed felt it was very difficult, if not impossible, to be themselves. They felt that there was no room to grow further in using their skills, especially when they were continually patronised and/or paternalised, referring to adult women as 'young ladies' and enquiring of their preaching style, or whether they wrote their sermon themselves – even going to the lengths of correcting them on how to pronounce words and their use of the English language.
- Many of the women ministers found they were not treated like their male colleagues. In one instance, a male colleague was provided with an office and paid a full minister's stipend (in fact, above the recommended Baptist Union stipend), whereas the woman minister was required to share in the central office and paid a proportion of the stipend.

What would have made a difference?

The women concerned accepted that pioneers will always experience resistance, perhaps because people have to embrace the unknown, which is often feared. However, some women of colour felt that if there were more women of colour coming into ministry and in spaces of Baptist leadership, there would be less threats trying to change them from the called women they are, and then they may have felt encouraged to stay. However, the Baptist Union has and continues to feel like an old boys' club where women are allowed into some spaces as long as they can be controlled.

Some women of colour ministers felt they would have felt less traumatised if there were more women of colour included in the decision making and interview process. 'If you see it you can be it!' But also recognising that Acts – Gentiles to Jews.

Other things that would have made a difference:

- Recognising the differences between women of colour, such as the cultural differences between different Africans and Asians.
- Recognising the diversity of cultural leadership and where the needs are.
- Learning from the different denominations, it was felt that Baptist are no longer forerunners and have a lot to learn.
- Providing and continually developing training in cultural competence and nuance.
- Helping to provide women of colour with other women of colour for support and mentoring. Likewise for white British women, as experiences and knowledge are different.
- Accepting that women of colour do not have to become white British or as white culturally as possible to be accepted into the parameters of the Baptist world, as this causes frustrations on both sides within the current system.
- Treating women ministers fairly in relation to their male colleagues – stipends being the same as those of their male colleagues and offering women the same working conditions from the outset as their male colleagues.
- Encouragement – Women ministers found that encouragement in their various ministries was received from bodies and people from outside the Baptist structures yet rarely from within. Some women would have liked to have been asked to take up opportunities to further the advancement of women in the theological world (such as speaking engagements and positions of responsibility) but have not because their faces (races) do not fit.
- For colleges especially, and some churches, to recognise difference – potentially through training – and to understand that Baptists have a culture of their own and

they are not cultureless. The approach to ministry currently taught is only one approach and not the only approach. They also need to accept that women do not need to or want to be moulded into mini men. Furthermore, their approach should not be to impose that cultural approach upon women, but more so to encourage women to find their niche.

- Changing structures, so that women do not feel they have to survive Baptist structures but that they are part of the Baptist structures.
- Associations not controlling how women of colour lead their ministries.