

Receptive Space

Themes from an ecumenical workshop on 2 November 2023



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Baptist Receptive Space Participants

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Introduction

What can Baptists learn from the experience of women ministering in other denominations and traditions? This question was there from the beginning for Jane and Helen as Co-leaders of Project Violet. In seeking to understand more fully the theological, missional and structural obstacles women ministers face in the Baptist community, it seemed important to learn ecumenically. The conversation between Jane and Helen expanded to include Sally Nelson who was forming Baptist ministers in St Hild, an Anglican college, and Alison Evans who had extensive experience of working ecumenically. We were attracted by the approach of Receptive Ecumenism and had read the book by Gabrielle Thomas on using Receptive Ecumenism to explore women's experiences of the church (Thomas 2021). We wanted to meet with women from other traditions, not only to compare notes but also to see what we might receive from them to inform our work.

Through networking we identified twelve women from six different traditions and arranged for them to meet in a one-day workshop in York. Train strikes frustrated our first date but we met on 2 November 2023. The first part of the day was spent sharing our experience of ministry and looking for differences and commonalities. The second part was spent exchanging gifts that we felt we had received as women in ministry in our tradition and which might help some of the wounds women experienced in their own traditions.

Two women came from each of the Baptist, Methodists, United Reformed Church, Church of England, Independent Churches and The Salvation Army. One woman in each pair was intentionally selected as being under 40 years old and the other woman was selected as being in a position of overseeing the ministry of others.

We are grateful to Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) for giving us a grant from their Pauline Webb fund, which supports ecumenical engagement between women.

We noticed that in a room of sixteen women only one was visibly a woman of colour. Only one woman disclosed a non-heterosexual sexuality. We acknowledge that within conversations between women ministers the voices of white heterosexual women and their concerns dominate.

Common Themes

This section lists issues that most but not all women identified with.

Joy and thriving in ministry

We experienced joy in each other's company, recognising the experiences we shared as well as being curious about the differences between us and wanting to learn from them. The younger women wanted to acknowledge the difficult experiences and hard work of women in earlier generations which contributed to their acceptance as ministers. There was a shared desire that things should continue to improve so that all women thrive in ministry.

Expectations to 'fit in'

The word 'formation' which is used in some traditions to mean learning and preparing for ministry was a difficult term for some women as they had felt they had been formed into a male stereotype that they couldn't successfully match. Language about 'fitting in' could reveal assumptions about the ideal minister, often a man who was freed from domestic responsibilities by his wife and so able to overwork. We felt this was unhelpful for both women and men who were ministers and parents who wanted to share caring responsibilities.

Leadership

Most women saw leadership as relational rather than positional. This meant they avoided the jockeying for position and competitive behaviour found in some men ministers. This could lead them to self-exclude from some events and opportunities which could reinforce stereotypes about women's lack of suitability for senior roles.

Role models and allies

Most women could name role models in their tradition - both historic and contemporary - who had inspired their approach to ministry and helped legitimise their calling. Women noticed men who acted as allies calling out sexist behaviour and standing aside to provide opportunities for them.

Embodiment

The most obviously different thing about women ministers for people who have been used to men ministers is their physical appearance and clothes. Personal remarks - sometimes inappropriate or sexualised - about appearance and clothes had been experienced by most women. Where these comments were persistent they could be undermining. Women also experienced physical changes to their body particularly in pregnancy and menopause which could meet responses ranging from intrusive questioning through to ignoring obvious physical needs.

Ministry and marital status

Married women ministers frequently had to deal with concerned enquiries about how their husband was coping when they were working and ministers who were mothers were often asked about their child care arrangements when men ministers were not. Single women were seen as having no family commitments and so expected to be constantly available for church activities.

Ecumenical gifts for Baptists to receive

It is impossible to capture all the ideas that flowed in the afternoon as the participants sought to identify what they could learn from each other. Here are some of the gifts that seem relevant for Project Violet to receive.

United Reformed Church (URC)

Within the URC there was a commitment to making all the main decisions about the local church in the church meeting with an emphasis on hearing the voices of all present through collaboration and consensus. These regular practices and a theology of the priesthood of all believers meant that when difficult situations arose there was an existing practice to rely upon.

Methodists

Within the Methodists there was a wide acceptance of women in all roles at local, District and Connexional levels. Indeed women were often seen as 'a safe pair of hands' in challenging circumstances. This acceptance meant it was difficult to keep the conversation going about the unconscious bias that was still experienced, particularly in the local church and circuit. Clear expectations about inclusive language set nationally were helpful but insufficient to avoid stereotypes (Methodist Church in Britain 2023).

Church of England

The Church of England has embedded its decision to ordain women by having a Dean of Women's ministry in every diocese, who is a member of the Bishop's staff team. However, the Church of England still accepts two integrities by ordaining as priests men who do not accept the ordination of women. This is maintained by a system of alternative episcopal oversight whereby priests who do not accept women can turn to a bishop other than their Diocesan bishop for oversight. This embedding of opposition to women's ordination is a source of ongoing pain for some women but is accepted by others. Parish churches have to pass a resolution if they are unwilling to accept the ministry of a woman priest. We heard that it was important to be clear about where the authority for opposing women ministers lay and not to allow it to inhibit women from full participation at Deanery, Diocesan and national levels.

Independents

The two women from independent churches emphasised the role of church leaders in disciple-making and empowering others to do the work of the church. This put the emphasis less on the position of the leader and more on their role in enabling church members - both women and men - to live out their vocation as disciples.

The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army had had women ministers since its founding in 1865, with women being the majority of ministers although not of senior leaders. Women had experienced a pressure to say 'yes' to opportunities to open up pathways into leadership for the women who followed them. Expectations of married and single women ministers had historically differed, also creating pressures. Those pressures were reducing and so there was a desire to relax into an inheritance and expect opportunities.

Gift from the Baptist women

Due to the smaller number of women in Baptist ministry compared to others traditions there was a gift of mutual support both through Facebook and personal relationships. The fact that local churches choose their ministers rather than the denomination appointing

them was seen as positive, meaning there should be a commitment to work with that minister.

Requests for change

Maintain an openness to ecumenical learning. It is positive that many Baptist ministers are now training for ministry alongside people from other traditions.

Ensure that ecumenical observers at Baptist Council are both men and women and they have a means of feeding back the things they are noticing and offer gifts from their traditions.

Baptist congregations that do not accept the ministry of women formally review that position prior to a settlement process and then make the resolution of the church meeting known on their website.

Now that all ministers are required to undertake EDI training, produce resources that ministers can use in the induction of new deacons and trustees. Taking inspiration from safeguarding training which has a Level 1 video that would be suitable to view in a church meeting and Level 2 resources for those who have deacon and trustee responsibilities.

We ask that local churches make opportunities to try things out, and make a commitment to receive things that are different without reshaping them to fit past expectations. This applies to worship but also other aspects of church life such as church meetings.

We call for male ministers to be allies in public and in private.

We call for White ministers to be allies in public and in private.

We ask colleges to review their reading lists to ensure they reflect theology written by women and Black and Brown people.

Role models - We want church members to see a diverse range of women in church leadership and leading worship and preaching.

Next Steps

This report will be one of the reports presented as the findings of Project Violet.

This report will underpin work done by the organising group to create a resource for the theological education of future ministers

We will also report back to the funder, CTBI.

References

Church of England (2014) *The Five Guiding Principles*, [the_five_guiding_principles.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/the-five-guiding-principles.pdf) ([churchofengland.org](https://www.churchofengland.org))

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Thomas, G. (2021) *For the Good of the Church: Unity, Theology and Women*. London: SCM Press.