

Project Violet Findings – an Overview

Introduction

Project Violet has investigated women's experiences in ministry whilst developing women ministers. The project has helped us understand more fully the theological, missional and structural obstacles women ministers face in the Baptist community in Great Britain and identify ways forward.

Participants have been engaged in research and supported in asking questions and seeking answers. They have been accompanied through the project so that their own voice as an advocate for change has developed.

On 17-18 April 2024 the women ministers who have taken part in the research phase of the project met at Launde Abbey to agree the requests for change that they wished to make to the Baptist community. These requests arise from their research and the process of theological reflection that followed it.

The changes requested relate to:

- The everyday language and behaviour we use in church life
- The accepted ways of doing things
- What we believe about the church and the role of ministers

This report gives an overview of the 57 requests for change. You will find the requests themselves in a separate section on the website. There is a sheet for each request giving more detail - the numbers in brackets will guide you to it. There is also a list that shows which requests for change are addressed to the different stakeholders in Baptist life - such as local churches, Associations, Colleges and Specialist Teams. Please check this list so you can see which parts of Baptist life that you belong to are being asked to respond.

In this report we are presenting the requests under three headings that express our hopes and vision for the future:

- The first heading, [Vocational Pathway](#), expresses our hope that women will flourish in ministry from the point at which they first recognise a call through to retirement. We will show how the findings relate to this vocational pathway.
- The second heading, [Types of Ministry](#), expresses our hope that whatever type of ministry women find themselves in, they will be supported and valued by the Baptist community.
- The third heading, [Ways of working](#), expresses our hope that all stakeholders in the Baptist community will be willing to change the ways in which they work to ensure more just outcomes for women ministers. We hope for change even as we express the difficulties that have led to our findings.

After 105 years of women in ministry these requests for change don't exhaust everything that could be done. Women ministers not directly involved in Project Violet may have other requests. We ask that in future women will be encouraged with support to research questions that matter to them, that colleagues will come alongside them to reflect theologically and discern requests for change, and that stakeholders in the Baptist community will consider those requests carefully and respectfully.

This overview report does not describe the research itself - for that you will need to turn to the section of the website called 'Co-researcher reports'. You will find an introduction there to the way in which the research was conducted.

Vocational Pathway

Women witnessed to the importance of their teenage years as a time when they first thought they heard God's call to ministry. Their access to opportunities in their teens and twenties was important in developing that call, so appropriate information for parents about those opportunities is needed (R30). It was also at this point that hearing sexist, racist and ableist language going unchallenged made them wonder if there was a stereotype of ministry that they wouldn't be able to meet (R05). What was particularly helpful in working out whether that initial whisper from God was in fact a call was intentional support in discerning their vocation (R42). Another key influence in women's experience of being called was exposure to role models - both of women ministers but also of men who affirmed women in their ministry (R41). Seeing images of women like them used in resources was also positive (R56). Where women belonged to local churches who accepted women's call to ministry and nurtured them in their confidence to minister, the discernment discussion at the church meeting was confirmation of their call. Where the church meeting was divided or the discernment was superficial, this part of the pathway could leave painful memories (R48).

Having had a calling confirmed, women could come across barriers to accessing training. These could include lack of information about the process (R02), difficulties in navigating the college admission process (R01) and difficulty raising the money to pay for training and sustaining their household whilst they trained (R26). The role of the local church in supporting them financially was not always clear (R03).

Some women whilst in training encountered financial difficulties and needed advice from a source other than the college who was asking for their fees (R29). For some women, their experience in training included exposure to sexist, racist and ableist stereotypes, with real distress when these went unchallenged (R05). For others they were asked to study a curriculum that did not reference the works of women, Black and Brown, and disabled theologians (R08). They hoped to be equipped to minister in an intercultural environment (R34). Meeting women in different types of ministries and with different backgrounds and identities was important in building a positive identity during training (R41).

Baptist ministry training is flexible and so Ministers-in-Training both have placements in local churches and are settled in local churches as their training proceeds. The working relationship between the Colleges and the Associations in helping ministers settle was particularly crucial (R06).

On completion of training, ministers enter a period of three or more years in which they are Newly Accredited Ministers (NAMs). This is a particularly important period for building good habits that sustain ministry whether through accompaniment (R55), building a network of supportive relationships (R35), or confidence in leading church meetings (R48) and governance (R15). Support through any further experiences of settlement (R06) is also important.

On becoming a Fully Accredited Minister (FAM) the need for development and support doesn't end. Building on the CMD habits, we would like to see intentional leadership development directed at women (R04). Meetings with other ministers are important and so we want to be confident that ministers' groups are constructive and inclusive spaces (R05, R09). The online world is a forum both for ministry and support for ministry, and so we ask

that the Ministerial Recognition rules are amended to include language and behaviour in the online environment (R10).

Women want to minister confidently from their own identity and to have unhelpful and unjust stereotypes challenged. For example, ageism takes place when age and experience are confused. Terms like young and emerging leader are not appropriate for a FAM (R13). Women with a disability seek a revised theology that recognises them as made in the image of God (R44) and where they are not subject to unwanted touching no matter how well meant (R49). Good practice in inclusive communication creates a culture in which all feel their contribution is valued (R46).

Ministers are no different from other people in wanting to know there are model policies that their employing churches or organisations can adopt that deal with the life events that can happen to us all (G47). Working for a small organisation should not lead to uncertainty or confusion when they need to navigate a major life event.

Settlement is not always a positive experience for women. They can experience intrusive and inappropriate questioning (R47) and a lack of support in agreeing fair terms and conditions for their work, particularly when it is for less than a full stipend (R06). Equipping church meetings to play their part in the settlement process is also important (R48). Where a church does not accept the ministry of women it is requested that that position is made known prior to the settlement process (R52). Some women will feel called to move to other types of ministry, and value development and support for this (R04).

Finally we know very little about women's experience of the transition into retirement and so we would like to see further research on this topic (R14).

Types of Ministry

The call to ministry is recognised in the local church and most ministers will train in a local church and then spend most of their ministry in that form of ministry. However, for some women this can be an isolating experience and they would welcome a means of working more collaboratively or in a way that deploys particular skills they may have (R40). We would like to see local churches intentionally make opportunities to hear preaching and experience leadership in worship that differs from the usual (R53).

Beyond the local church, women are to be found in other forms of ministry. Pioneer ministry means going beyond the inherited understandings of church and learning how to minister to a changing culture. Improved ways of passing on that learning are sought (R25). There is a specific hope that ministry to the Deaf community can be recognised as a pioneering ministry (R45). Chaplaincy - whether in full-time roles (employed by hospitals and prisons for example) or sessional chaplaincy in a wide range of settings - provides not only pastoral care where people are in need but also a prophetic voice speaking into the wider structures of society (R18; R19). As fewer churches are able to afford a full stipend, ministers are coming forward who are willing to pursue more than one vocation. More research and theological reflection are requested on bi-vocational ministry (R14; R36).

Since summer 2021, when Project Violet started, more women have entered Regional Ministry, sometimes as the result of intentional leadership development (R04). They want to create inclusive translocal spaces where stereotypes are challenged, and so training to equip this is requested (R05; R15; R34). There are distinctive features of ministering in the translocal space that they would like to see acknowledged in an appendix to the 'Marks of Ministry' (R16). More theological reflection is needed on how to promote good association

between churches with complementarian and egalitarian theologies of women's ministry (R21).

All Baptist Colleges have women working as theological educators. They too want to create inclusive spaces in which ministers can train and where stereotypes are challenged (R05). An appendix to the 'Marks of Ministry' on translocal ministry would help them set appropriate expectations (R16). Theological reflection on holding complementarian and egalitarian theologies in the same space would benefit their work (R21). Women ministering in the Specialist Teams would also benefit from these developments.

Ways of working

Our research has shown that taken-for-granted ways of working can disadvantage women, particularly when they were designed without women's input. We see these findings as an opportunity to check that Baptist ways of working promote justice and inclusion.

We welcome the fact that there are more women in the rooms where decisions are made. We now want to ensure they are fully included in the conversation. We believe this will come through more male allies challenging sexist stereotypes (R12); through Regional Ministers ensuring that spaces they are responsible for are constructive (R09); and through training in good moderation (R43), governance (R15) and advocacy (R05). We want theological differences to be held well (R21) and for White ministers to challenge racist stereotypes (R33). Having benefited from ecumenical learning during Project Violet, we would like that to be a more prominent feature of Baptist Council (R50).

The introduction of the Continuing Ministerial Development (CMD) Handbook and the expectation that ministers should have an annual conversation to review their development is a welcome signal that continuing to learn is an essential aspect of ministry. These findings contain a number of requests for training, and we envisage collaboration between Ministries Team, Associations and Colleges in commissioning these courses (R05, R15, R32, R34, R39, R48) and evaluating their effectiveness (R31). The Handbook also places value on ministers being accompanied as a form of accountability as well as support. We make proposals about the accompaniment of women ministers (R55) and the importance of establishing accompaniment during the NAMs phase of ministry (R35). For us an ongoing commitment to training in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is important (R32) and we would like to see resources that could be used to induct Deacons and Trustees (R52).

Although there are over two thousand Baptist FAMs, most are employed by small to medium-sized charities. This means that the data a large employer might collect to monitor equality and diversity is not readily available. Given that ministers are a resource to the whole Baptist family we ask for this to change so that patterns of inequality can be identified and explored throughout the vocational pathway (R28). This will make it easier to set terms and conditions for ministers (R06; R11) and to focus what funds there are on those who are at risk of exclusion (R17). We would like to see an occupational health service for ministers (R38).

A concern raised about taking a more proactive approach to challenging stereotypes (R12; R33) is that it will generate more complaints. We are asking for training in advocacy that includes resolving things in the moment (R05) as well as guidance on inclusive language (R20). However, effective rules (R10; R37) and expectations (R16) remain important.

Finally we want a legacy of Project Violet to be effective ways of working across Baptist life that enable issues raised by women to be resolved as part of normal ways of working rather than requiring another project. This includes redefining the Centenary

Development Enabler Role (R54) and clarifying the relationship between the Women's Justice Hubs in Regional Associations and the Specialist Teams (R22) - ensuring a clear commitment to working on these issues in each Association and College (R55, R24, R14).

When the co-researchers met on 17-18 April 2024 to agree the findings, they were overwhelmed with sadness at all they had read in each other's research. They anticipate that you may have a similar reaction. So finally they are calling for a season of lament to enable the wider Baptist family to acknowledge all that has been shared (R57).

How to respond

Depending on your role and location in Baptist life, there will be specific requests that you are asked to respond to. There is a list of requests for change by stakeholder, and you are invited to turn to that. From there you can look at the greater detail available on each request for change on a numbered sheet in that section of the website. To make things easier for local churches we have drawn together their requests for change in a separate document in this section of the website.

Between 2 May and 30 September 2024 you are invited to go through a process of digesting the findings of Project Violet, discussing them with the people you work with and minister alongside, seeking the mind of Christ in deciding what response you will make. You are then invited to record your decisions on a template found in the 'How to respond' section of the website.

All the templates we receive by 30 September 2024 will be bound into a report which will be discussed at Baptist Union Council on 23 October 2024.