

Introduction to the Research



This introduction answers some of the questions about the way in which Project Violet has approached research.

What type of research is this?

This is research that was conducted by busy women ministers alongside their existing responsibilities. The technical name for this is ‘practitioner research’, as opposed to ‘academic research’ that you might undertake as part of a university degree.

The aim was to get insights into women’s experience of ministry by having women ministers conduct the research. As you read the research you will see that it deals with some challenging questions and reveals some painful truths which it would have been hard to disclose to someone from outside Baptist life.

The women who stepped forward as co-researchers showed courage in asking questions that mattered and persistence in completing their research despite other pressures that arose in their ministry and personal lives.

When was it done?

This research was undertaken as the third phase of Project Violet between November 2021 and November 2023. Four groups of women were recruited in turn and journeyed together through the research process.

How were the questions for the research chosen?

The underlying philosophy of this approach to research is that it is the people closest to the problem who know the questions that need asking. The technical name for this is ‘participatory research’. Each co-researcher discerned her question in conversation with the other women in her group, so there was shared as well as individual wisdom.

Each research question was used to interrogate the MOSAIC data of written accounts from 50 women of the joys and sorrows of their ministry. Evidence supporting all but one of the questions was found and each small group met to reflect upon that evidence. The co-researchers knew they were not alone in raising their question. The question that was not found in the MOSAIC data related to disability and we intentionally wanted to include that issue in the research.

Why have different approaches been used in different reports?

Researching experience is a challenging thing to do. Each woman minister is different and each ministers in a different context, drawing upon different past experiences. Having

different women join the project as co-researchers made it easier to find patterns in that experience without assuming that all women are the same.

Having chosen her research question, each woman met with Helen Cameron to discuss how to design research that would answer the question. Different approaches to research were used, including surveys, interviews, group discussions, reflective writing, vlogging, workshops, and artwork. This variety gives us confidence that the different ways in which women experience ministry have been accessed.

Because this is not academic research, women were invited to 'write up' their research in a way that made sense in their ministry context. Most women decided to write a report but there are also two films and a piece of artwork. Two co-researchers who are also Newly Accredited Ministers submitted their Project Violet research as part of their ongoing learning.

Taking an overview of all this variety, the family resemblance between these reports is striking. Language, behaviour, ways of working, and theology that stop women flourishing in ministry are found and build up to a bigger picture. Some people have found the metaphor of a cauliflower helpful. There are sixteen florets, or different pieces of research, but they are all recognisably the same vegetable.

What support did the researchers have?

Some co-researchers had done research before, for others it was a completely new experience. They had the support of working in small groups with other women who were also doing research. Helen Cameron was available on a one-to-one basis to help them design, carry out, and write up their research. Jane Day supported each woman with some coaching sessions on topics of their choosing.

Project Violet has been subject to ethical approval from Oxford University through Regent's Park College where the Project is based. Helen worked with each co-researcher to ensure that those she involved in her research consented to take part.

Our approach to reading the research

When we met to discuss any aspect of the research we reminded ourselves of these virtues:

- humility and the readiness to get it wrong
- the confidence of truth-telling and truth-seeking
- the love of the other's voice and ideas
- owning the expertise of experience
- living with complexity whilst seeking clarity

We tried to read/view each report as a letter from a friend rather than an agenda paper for a meeting. We encourage you to think about what you are hearing rather than what you agree or disagree with. We are using human reason, but we are also trying to discern God's intentions for the Baptist community.

Further resources

This book explains the participatory approach taken in Project Violet known as theological action research:

Cameron, H., Bhatti, D., Duce, C., Sweeney, J., and Watkins, C. (2010) *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*. London: SCM Press.

This book offers guidance on researching ministerial practice:

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