

Podcast – Season 2 – Beth Powney

Season Intro

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Jane	Hello, I'm Jane Day, Centenary Development Enabler for Baptists Together
Helen	And I'm Helen Cameron, Research Fellow at the Centre for Baptist Studies at Regent's Park College Oxford. Together we are the co-leaders of Project Violet.
Jane	Welcome to Season 2 of the Project Violet podcast. Project Violet is a research project investigating women's experiences in ministry whilst developing women ministers. We are trying to understand better the theological, missional and structural obstacles women ministers face and identify ways forward.
Helen	In this second season, we will introduce you to some of the women who have taken part in the project and the research they have done.
Jane	We hope that listening to these episodes will help you engage with the findings of the project which can be found on the Project Violet website.

Interview – Beth Powney

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Helen and Beth	<p>Helen Cameron Today I'm speaking to Beth Powney.</p> <p>Beth Powney Thank you, Helen. It's lovely to be here.</p> <p>Helen Cameron Now you've retired since you took part in Project Violet. So perhaps you'd like to introduce yourself by saying what you're doing now. And what you were doing when you took part in the project?</p> <p>Beth Powney Um, so I retired in May 2023, from being the Regional Minister Team Leader of the Eastern Baptist Association, which has to be one of the longest job titles anybody could ever have, I think. And so technically, I've retired from being in ministry. I think my phrase is I now have a portfolio ministry, because that sounds posh, which means I can cherry pick what I do. So we have moved to East Sussex, I'm trying to learn how to relax and chill out and do things I enjoy. Which I'm sometimes succeeding at. But I'm also beginning to pick up aspects of ministry, the places where my heart, where the heartstrings are still really pulled. And that one of those is developing women in ministry. So I'm going to be doing some work with the association down here, the South Eastern Baptist Association, to continue to develop our women ministers across the Baptist</p>

family, having realized that intentional development makes such a difference. So I'm doing a whole range of things now.

Helen Cameron

That's lovely. And that's great to hear about the transition into retirement. Perhaps I can take you back to the beginning. Can you just say a bit about how you first entered Baptist ministry?

Beth Powney

Yes, I entered Baptist ministry from a difficult context, as many women seem to have done. I think it's improving to some extent. I was part of a church that didn't believe in women being ordained or preaching at that time or being elders. I was working for a parachurch organization where my skills were fully used and encouraged. And it was out of that context, through various ways that I felt the Lord beginning to say to me, you need to move into ordained ministry, pastoral ministry, and that was very challenging with the church that I was a member of, because in the Baptist world, you're called from within your church, and how was that going to happen? Obviously, I got there, because I'm sitting here. But that was very much because of a female Regional Minister at that time, who I knew, who came alongside and we negotiated our way through the quagmire in order to release me to do what God's called me to do. So I think that tricky journey informs some of what I've wanted to do since then.

Helen Cameron

Thank you for sharing that. Now, you came along into Project Violet, and in the first group of co researchers. Um, can you just say what the question or issue was that you looked at, and why it was important to you.

Beth Powney

Along with Jane Day, I had been running a program, which we called MagnifyYou, which was an intentional piece of work to develop ministers, female ministers, who we felt perhaps had greater potential to go on to larger roles of some sort or other. And we had, I think, it started as 15 women on this program, and it dropped to about 13 and 14 as these things do. And this ran over two years, from 2020 to 2022. And we met every other month, mostly on Zoom because of that timeframe. And I realized, as this was coming to a conclusion as partway through probably when Project Violet began to be birthed, that it was having a huge impact on these women in a way that was incredibly exciting. But also I couldn't quite grasp why, because what we were doing felt so simple, and so straightforward. And so the piece of research I picked up on was looking at what was the impact of this intentional leadership development? And how does that sit with our Baptist ecclesiology when we don't do that very easily or comfortably. So that was, that was the question I entered into the Project Violet research team with.

Helen Cameron

And you, from things you've already said about your own entry into ministry, I can see why development of women mattered so much to you. Was there a particular reason why at that time in your ministry journey doing this was important?

Beth Powney

I think being a Regional Minister, you had a greater overview of what was going on in the Baptist family. At this particular time, I was the only female team leader amongst 13 Regional Minister Team Leaders. And then across regional ministry, in general, the percentage of women was, I don't know, something like 25%, something like that – was very small. And I could see coming up that there were a number of Regional Minister Team Leaders and Regional Ministers who were going to retire within a couple of years. And so I think God just sparked a thought in my brain that what if we did some preparation for this? What if? And so yes, there was a particular reason why it was at this time that we decided to do this in conversation with Jane. Because often women don't consider more senior roles, or larger roles or academic roles, because perhaps they think it's not for me, or they haven't seen the role models in those places. And so some of the thinking behind it was at the very least to broaden these women's experience of what could be. What they and God then did with it was beyond our remit. All that we could do was, if you like, expose people to those who are already in senior leadership, and enable these women's have conversations with significant leaders across our Baptists family and Christian world, who were women. And that's why I say it was incredibly simple, but had an amazing impact.

Helen Cameron

So you wanted to investigate the impact of this MagnifyYou program? How did you go about doing that in practice?

Beth Powney

Well, I interviewed six women who had been on the program, and they came from three different associations. And they were asked five questions. Why did they agree to attend MagnifyYou? How did they feel about being asked to join? (Because they were asked to join.) What changed for them as a result? And what might have made a difference to their leadership, if they hadn't been part of MagnifyYou, as in if they can imagine it hadn't happened? Or what might have happened instead? And then asking which part of the program impacted them most greatly? These were fascinating conversations. And there were key, there were key patterns that came out of these of these questions. And one of the strongest was the intentionality of what we did, the fact that we invited them was hugely significant. And bearing in mind, we really stumbled over that – the whole thing almost didn't happen because of that, because it felt like as soon as you ask one person, you're excluding another person. And that didn't fit comfortably. But we still went ahead and did that. And that very intentionality had a big impact, because the women immediately thought, 'Oh, somebody sees something in me, oh, perhaps I better go then,' as opposed to if they'd seen an advert for this happening. And they'd think, 'Oh, that's not for me.' It's probably what would have happened in a number of situations. They also said it was a very safe space. And I think the significance of that can be hugely recognized as we look at other aspects of Project Violet research – the need for women to have a safe space and connect. And to have a right to be at the table was a big thing.

Helen Cameron

	<p>Well you've given us some great tasters as for what's in your report. Can you just finally say why you'd like people to go away now and read the research that you've done?</p> <p>Beth Powney I think it's a very positive piece of research, and an encouraging piece of research. And I think that in itself makes it worth reading. But even though it's positive and encouraging, I think it brings a challenge to each minister in each church, as to how can they intentionally develop... I'll say women and men in that church, because I still think men need to be empowered. Of course they do. But we happen to be talking about women here. What can they do as individuals – if intentionality is important, if safe space is important, if building women's confidence is important – what can they do? So that's the challenge that comes with it. But yeah, that's probably enough said today.</p> <p>Helen Cameron Well, thanks very much for discussing your research with us. And people can go to the website and download what you've written. Thank you, Beth.</p> <p>Beth Powney Thank you, Helen.</p>
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Season Outro

Helen	Thank you for listening to this episode of the Project Violet podcast. We invite you to go to the website and download the reports if you have not yet done so. www.projectviolet.org.uk
Jane	And don't forget to tell others about the Project Violet podcast. You can follow us on Facebook and X formerly Twitter.
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