

Podcast – Season 2 – Claire Nicholls

Season Intro

	Music
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 – Claire Nicholls

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Helen and Claire	<p>Helen Cameron Today I'm speaking to Claire Nicholls. Welcome, Claire. To start with can you tell us about your current ministry role?</p> <p>Claire Nicholls So I'm currently a Regional Minister with London Baptists and I work with and care for churches in southeast London. I also lead on justice in the association, as well as many other things that a Regional Minister does. I recently started in this role – well, last year in April – and before then, when I wrote my report for Project Violet, I was minister of New Addington Baptist Church in South Croydon. So life has changed since I wrote my report.</p> <p>Helen Cameron Thank you for sharing that. We're inviting people to go back to the beginning of their ministry and just explain how they came into Baptist ministry.</p> <p>Claire Nicholls So I grew up in Baptist churches; I was a child of the manse. So I've been in Baptist churches all my life. And I was always encouraged in my faith. And I had some great examples around me of ministers and leaders, who were trying to follow the call of God, as best as they could. I went to university to do maths with finance. And it was at university I first encountered opposition to women in ministry, and my reactions quite surprised me. And I wondered why I reacted so</p>

badly to that. And it wasn't until I was considering what to do after university, that I realized that God might be calling me to some kind of full time Christian ministry. I didn't believe it was the right time then. And I took a year out working with university Christian unions. And I went on to train to be a maths teacher. So I wasn't going into ministry that much. During that time, I was given opportunities to preach and to lead. And it became clear that this was something I was called to be. I was definitely called to preach, and to be a leader. And I was wrestling with a call beyond that. And I wrestled with a call for a long time. Was I good enough? Was I too introvert? Was I better off as a maths teacher and serving in the local church? And I bought a house, and I was quite happy living in Derby. But I never thought I was going to be a teacher forever. In that time, I was invited to be part of the Baptist Union younger leaders forum. And there I met with other younger leaders, and some of them were women. And some of them were ministers. And it encouraged me that I could probably do this because they were just like me. And they were ministers. And my call to ministry then never went away. I've got diaries from that time that where every week something would be said to me that suggested this was the journey I should take. My ministers at the time saw it in me. I met a minister that encouraged me to preach – friends or family did, and also random people. The people that I hardly knew would say, I think this might be you. So I waited for some years. And I ended up at Baptist Assembly. I go every year, because I'm a good Baptist. And Pat Took was preaching. And that's when I made my final decision. It's been a real privilege, as a Regional Minister in London to hear stories of people who have been inspired by Pat. Pat's name keeps on coming up. And her name comes up in my story quite a lot. Because those role models and encouragements have been really important and are so important to us on that journey. But that sermon, I remember, I don't remember what the content of the sermon was, or the passage, but I remember two things she said. She said, women, you need to get on with it and go into ministry. And don't let your mortgage get in the way. And I felt that those things were said directly to me. And I felt that I could do nothing other than explore the call more fully. And so that's how I ended up here. And I was sent from a tiny but great church in Derby to Northern Baptist College, where I studied alongside being a minister in a little place called Ramsbottom, just north of Manchester. And that's how the story began.

Helen Cameron

That's wonderful. Thank you for sharing your story and the influences that helped you reach that decision to respond to God's call. Now, you're a part of the second group of Project Violet co researchers. Would you like to talk about the issue or question which you looked at in your research?

Claire Nicholls

So I decided to write reflections on developing a London Baptists women's justice hub. I was tasked in 2021 to help set up that area of work in London Baptists and it was helpful to be able to link Project Violet in with that. Justice issues have always really been really important to me. When I was a teenager, I learned the song I will speak out for those who have no voices at Spring Harvest, and I really felt that God was speaking to me and what he wanted me to do, as I grew up at that point in life, but I forgot about that. Until my first few days at college, and the principal said to me, 'You're really into justice. What do you

think?’ And I was like, I’m not really into justice. But apparently I am. It appears, justice just kind of flows out me. I want to speak out for where things are wrong, because that’s who I am. That’s who God made me to be. Women’s justice has always been really important to me, because I’ve encountered opposition to my own ministry on the way to where I am today. And I see where women are not treated equally, or with respect, when theological differences are there. I’ve had people say to me that I can’t be their minister because I’m a woman. And I’ve had people walk out as well, because I’m a woman. I recognize that I am judged more harshly because of my gender. And I know I’m not the only one who is judged much more harshly. So my commitment to the London Baptist women’s justice came about because I was asked, because someone saw that all in me. I’ve spent a lot of time in conversation with Jane Day about the experience of women in ministry in London, and some of the statistics on female ministers. The women’s justice group was just beginning to form when I got involved with Project Violet. And we had a lot of questions about barriers to women in ministry, why women weren’t coming forward for accreditation, and the settlement process. And questions about the real situation on the ground in London Baptists and so much more and, and it felt helpful to reflect on the process as part of the project. So we could learn, and so we might share some of our experiences in setting up the hub with other associations who are looking to do the same thing.

Helen Cameron

So it sounds as if the way you went about the research was that you were in the midst of all this doing, and you just took time to step back and reflect and think about what you’re learning if I correctly understood the approach. Yeah, okay. It sounds as if that might give you some space to be the introvert that you named yourself out as, somebody who likes to reflect as well as to do. I don’t know if that’s, perhaps I’m pushing something onto you there.

Claire Nicholls

Yes, I’m naturally a reflective practitioner. It is something I learned as a teacher. And so it’s something I’ve always done in ministry as well. I am a reflector.

Helen Cameron

Thank you very much. So you’ve told us a topic that you took, and you told us about your approach that you took, can you now tell us why you want people to read the report that you’ve written?

Claire Nicholls

So I guess it’s because I hope it might inspire people as to how active participation and asking questions can lead to change if we don’t choose to actively begin to question where gates have been closed, and barriers have been the experiences of people who are on the margins? And if we don’t question the places where there seems to be unconscious bias, and where words aren’t followed into action, then things don’t change. And along this journey I’ve encountered people who said that there’s not an issue with women in ministry anymore. People are just accepting women. No, all right. But my story and the stories of those who I work with would suggest differently. Being actively involved in women’s justice is a really good thing and something we should all have eye on. Even if it’s not something we feel we’re called to, we should all

	<p>have our eye on. And I hope that in reading my report, it might inspire some people to open their eyes a bit better.</p> <p>Helen Cameron Thank you. Thanks very much for talking to us today, Claire.</p> <p>Claire Nicholls Thank you.</p>
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Season Outro

Helen	<p>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</p>
Jane	<p>And don't forget to tell others about the Project Violet podcast. You can follow us on Facebook and X formerly Twitter.</p>
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