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To cite this article: Deborah W. Rooke (20 Aug 2024): Lady Preacher in the News: A Portrait of Violet Hedger, Baptist Quarterly, DOI: [10.1080/0005576X.2024.2390230](https://doi.org/10.1080/0005576X.2024.2390230)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0005576X.2024.2390230>



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Published online: 20 Aug 2024.



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## Lady Preacher in the News: A Portrait of Violet Hedger

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### ABSTRACT

Violet Hedger (1900-1992) is known for being the first College-trained woman in the United Kingdom to enter ordained Baptist home ministry. This article will give an outline and short assessment of her life and ministry, drawing particularly (though not exclusively) on reports in the newspapers to fill out the picture. It discusses her four pastorates, at Littlelover (1926-1929), North Parade, Halifax (1934-1937), Chatham (1937-1944), and Chalk Farm (1952-1956), and concludes that her pioneering persistence ultimately made it possible for other women to follow her into ordained pastoral ministry in the Baptist denomination.



### KEYWORDS

Violet Hedger; Baptists; woman minister; pioneer minister

Violet Hedger (1900-1992) is known for being the first College-trained woman in the United Kingdom to enter ordained Baptist home ministry. She was not the first woman as such to be recognised and ordained, but the two others who preceded her gained their status by being *de facto* pastors who added training and recognition to what they had been doing anyway.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Violet was a young woman working in the War Office,<sup>2</sup> whose sense of calling was supported and encouraged by some of the more forward-thinking and influential men of the denomination,<sup>3</sup> and who in 1919 entered Regent's Park College for training, going on to become a pioneering woman minister. This article will give an outline and short assessment of her life and ministry, drawing particularly (though not exclusively) on reports in the newspapers to fill out the picture.

### From Birth to College

Violet was born on 5 January 1900 in Hornsey, Middlesex. Her father was Thomas Hedger, a 'cleaver' (wood chopper) from Lodsworth in Sussex, and

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<sup>1</sup>See Ruth Gouldbourne, "Baptists, Women, and Ministry," *Feminist Theology* 26, no. 1 (2017): 59–68 (60).

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Violet Hedger in *The Baptist Times*, 11 January 1990, 4.

<sup>3</sup>Violet Hedger, "Some Experiences of a Woman Minister," *Baptist Quarterly* 10, no. 5 (1941): 243–53 (243).

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her mother was Alice Julia Sewell, daughter of a Hornsey greengrocer. From an early age Violet was involved with the flourishing Ferme Park Chapel in Crouch End, a Baptist church where the Rev. Dr Charles Brown was the minister, and he was a great influence and support to her in her ministerial journey. Violet later spoke of first hearing Brown preach when she was four years old,<sup>4</sup> and he would subsequently preach at her ordination and induction services. Violet also spoke of having had the advantage of a Christian home,<sup>5</sup> so the whole family probably went along to Ferme Park Chapel which was about a mile from their home.<sup>6</sup>

Violet appears to have been a gifted child. In 1912 she won a scholarship to secondary school,<sup>7</sup> and attended Hornsey High School for Girls. There she excelled at games as well as in her studies. She participated fully in the activities of the Ferme Park church, which included preaching from a soap-box in Hornsey.<sup>8</sup> She was always keen on Scripture, and when she passed the London University matriculation examination with honours at the age of 17 she gained full marks in the Scripture paper.<sup>9</sup> Initially wanting to be a missionary, she applied to Spurgeon's College for training, but was refused because they did not admit women.<sup>10</sup> Her subsequent application to Regent's Park College in 1919 was encouraged and supported by her minister Charles Brown, and is noted in the Ferme Park Church meeting minutes for 23 July 1919: '[The Pastor] also mentioned that one of our members (Miss Violet Hedger) had made application for admission to Regent's Park College, which if granted would confer on her the honor [*sic*] of being the first lady student at that college.'<sup>11</sup> At the next church meeting on 10 September 1919, 'Pastor ... reported that Miss Violet Hedger had been accepted as a Student at Regent's Park College + moved that a letter be sent her from the Church congratulating her on taking the step she had. Agreed.'<sup>12</sup> It is an extremely understated report of what was a groundbreaking event.

The notes in the Regent's Park College Committee minutes for 30 September 1919 are similarly understated when it comes to the historic decision that they were recording: 'Miss Violet Hedger, 19, Ferme Park. Accepted on probation for the usual course.' There is nothing to indicate the revolutionary nature of the move, no record of any discussion or dissent or heart-searching by the

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>*Derby Daily Telegraph*, February 4, 1926, 4.

<sup>6</sup>The Ferme Park Baptist Church Year Book for 1923 lists Violet and her parents among the members of the congregation.

<sup>7</sup>"Scholarships and Free Places," *Hornsey Journal*, September 27, 1912, 4. At this date, education beyond the age of twelve was neither free nor compulsory. Secondary education was not compulsory until 1918, and not free until 1944 ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/secondary-schools](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/secondary-schools), consulted July 10, 2024).

<sup>8</sup>Interview with Violet Hedger in *The Baptist Times*, January 11, 1990, 4.

<sup>9</sup>"Girl Clerk as a Preacher. Baptist Pastor at Age of 25," *Westminster Gazette*, January 14, 1926, 7.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Violet Hedger in *The Baptist Times*, January 11, 1990, 4.

<sup>11</sup>Ferme Park Chapel Church Minutes book 4 (September 23, 1914 to July 27, 1921), ad loc. (available in the London Metropolitan Archives).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

committee. If there was any such consternation or uncertainty, it was firmly off the record. Nor is there any further mention of her in the College Committee minutes until the summer of 1923, when it is noted that along with two other students she remains 'unsettled' (that is, without a pastorate). But the annual printed College *Reports* give a hint of the novelty of her position. The *Report* for the year ending 30 September 1919 speaks of the great number of students who have been recruited and studying since the 1918 Armistice, before continuing, 'Further applications have also been received and twelve have been accepted for the new Session, so that we now have thirty-one students, two of whom are married men and one – for the first time in the history of the College – a woman.'<sup>13</sup> Thereafter, for the next four years' *Reports*, Violet appears in the lists of students and the examination success lists, as well as being mentioned by name in the narrative 'Report of the Committee' along with the other students who have achieved exam successes. No further comment is made about her being a woman. From the 1923 *Report* onwards she is also added to the list of ministers trained at the college,<sup>14</sup> which is a part of every *Report*, initially simply as 'V. Hedger' but later as 'Violet Hedger'.<sup>15</sup>

Violet may have made her way through college with flying colours, but once she completed her training at Regent's Park it was some time before she was able to find settlement in a pastorate. The minutes from the College Committee meeting of 27 September 1923 state, 'Two of last year's students were still unsettled, Miss Hedger, BD, "a good preacher", and Mr Gay who had been taking a Sunday School course.' Precisely why she remained so is not clear, nor is it clear why her name does not appear on the General Superintendents' lists for settlement until she herself apparently wrote a year later in October 1924, asking to be put on the list. Her name was sent to four churches: Rotherham (Yorkshire), Upton Cross (Cornwall), Morcott & Barrowden (Rutland), and Malborough & Salcombe (Devon). Over the course of the next 12 months her name also went to Bethel church at Shipley (W. Yorks), Littleover, and North Parade, Halifax. In April 1925 she was apparently preaching at both these latter two; by July she was apparently preaching only at Littleover; by October her name was being sent to no more churches. Then in the new year the announcement that she was to begin a pastorate at Littleover appeared in the *Baptist Times* for 7 January 1926. The write-up is clear that this is a first not only for the church but for Baptists in Britain: 'So far as we know, Miss Hedger is the first woman student from one of our theological colleges to enter the home ministry, and the experiment made by the Littleover church will be watched with much interest.'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>*Report of the Committee of the Baptist College at Regent's Park, for 1918–1919* (London, 1919), 4.

<sup>14</sup>*Report of the Committee of the Baptist College at Regent's Park, for 1922–1923* (London, 1923), 23.

<sup>15</sup>*Report of the Committee of the Baptist College at Regent's Park, for 1924–1925* (London, 1925), 24.

<sup>16</sup>"A Woman Pastor," *The Baptist Times*, January 7, 1926, 5.

## Littleover, 1926–1929

It was not only the *Baptist Times* in which curiosity about the ‘experiment made by the Littleover church’ was expressed; Violet’s appointment also generated a good deal of interest in external press sources. Stressing the pioneering nature of the appointment on several counts, the *Derby Daily Telegraph* for 16 December 1925 proclaimed, ‘LADY MINISTER. LITTLEOVER BAPTISTS’ APPOINTMENT. The first lady minister in this district has been appointed by the Littleover Baptists to be the first minister of their church. She is the Rev. Violet Hedger, B.D., of London, and this will be her first ministry.’<sup>17</sup> Three weeks later, as Violet’s ministry began, the paper carried on the back page a half-length photo of her in gown and mortar board under the heading ‘Lady Minister’, and the accompanying caption explained that ‘Miss Hedger ... took a full four years’ theological course at Regent’s Park College, and graduated B.D. in London University.’<sup>18</sup> Clearly Violet’s educational qualifications were important for her credibility as a minister. The same day, her appointment to the pastorate was announced in *The Vote*, a weekly publication of the Women’s Freedom League: in a section giving news of women preachers, it proclaimed, ‘Miss Violet Hedger, B.D., late of Regent’s Park College, has been invited to the pastorate at Littleover Baptist Chapel, near Derby.’<sup>19</sup> Once Violet’s first weekend was complete, the *Derby Daily Telegraph* ran a report on it: ‘Littleover Baptists. The Rev. Violet Hedger heartily welcomed. Church’s new era’ (p.3).

From here the ripples spread widely, with notices and articles in the British press from London<sup>20</sup> to Belfast<sup>21</sup> and Cornwall.<sup>22</sup> One particularly intriguing notice comes in the *Manchester Guardian*, where a short report entitled ‘A Baptist Woman Pastor’ highlights Violet’s unique status as a college-trained female pastor and her reputation as a preacher.<sup>23</sup> It closes with the enigmatic statement, ‘As pastor Miss Hedger will undertake the customary duties in full’, suggesting that there might have been some doubt as to whether that could or should be the case.<sup>24</sup> Nor was it just the British Press who noticed Violet’s appointment. In the US, it was picked up by papers across the country, from Boston, MA<sup>25</sup> to Brownwood, TX<sup>26</sup> and Spokane, WA.<sup>27</sup> There are even brief reports in several Australian newspapers.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>*Derby Daily Telegraph*, December 16, 1925, 8.

<sup>18</sup>*DDT*, January 8, 1926, 8.

<sup>19</sup>*The Vote*, January 8, 1926, 10.

<sup>20</sup>“Girl Clerk as a Preacher. Baptist Pastor at Age of 25,” *Westminster Gazette*, January 14, 1926, 7.

<sup>21</sup>“Lady once War Office clerk. Now pastor of a church. Her life’s ambition realised,” *Belfast Telegraph*, January 14, 1926, 8.

<sup>22</sup>*The Cornishman and Cornish Telegraph*, January 20, 1926, 4.

<sup>23</sup>*The Manchester Guardian*, January 25, 1926, 6. Accessed July 23, 2024 via ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Guardian and The Observer*.

<sup>24</sup>Several other newspapers used this article as their source for the news. See *Hull Daily Mail*, January 28, 1926, 9; *Oxford Chronicle*, January 29, 1926, 10; *Northampton Daily Echo*, January 30, 1926, 3; *Banbury Advertiser*, February 4, 1926, 8.

<sup>25</sup>*Boston Post*, January 31, 1926

<sup>26</sup>*Brownwood Bulletin*, February 22, 1926

<sup>27</sup>*The Spokesman-Review*, February 7, 1926

<sup>28</sup>Overseas newspaper citations obtained from [www.oldnews.com](http://www.oldnews.com) (accessed July 29, 2024).

Violet's appointment to Littleover, then, excited a good deal of interest in an era when women's rights, particularly the right to vote, were being fervently contested. But the question is how Violet fared in her pioneering role, and indeed, what it involved.

Preaching was an important aspect of Violet's ministerial duties, and she was much in demand for her abilities in this regard. As well as regularly preaching twice on Sundays at Littleover, she not infrequently spoke at Sunday afternoon gatherings elsewhere in addition to filling her own pulpit morning and evening. These afternoon gatherings might be Sunday School events,<sup>29</sup> special women's services (whether Sisterhood anniversaries or other regular occasional events),<sup>30</sup> services for other smaller churches,<sup>31</sup> or 'Pleasant Sunday Afternoon' (PSA) meetings.<sup>32</sup> The PSA movement was an evangelistic and discipleship scheme aimed at men; originating in West Bromwich in the 1870s, its principle was to provide ordinary men with enjoyable and accessible presentations of the Gospel.<sup>33</sup> This was something at which Violet was adept, and her gender seems to have been no bar to her being called upon in this way. Indeed, her gifts were greatly appreciated if the *Derby Daily Telegraph's* report of the People's PSA meeting on 16 January 1927 is anything to go by; it speaks of the 'remarkable' attendance at the meeting despite a competing event, affirms that Violet's message and its delivery 'made a profound impression', outlines the message (on Martha and Mary), and closes by declaring that 'Last Sunday afternoon's service will long be remembered by those who were present as an outstanding feature in the history of the movement.'<sup>34</sup> In addition to her Sunday preaching, Violet also fulfilled a busy schedule of weekday speaking engagements: church anniversaries,<sup>35</sup> Girls' Life Brigade battalion services,<sup>36</sup> Free Church women's gatherings,<sup>37</sup> Sisterhood anniversaries,<sup>38</sup> and local and regional Baptist meetings.<sup>39</sup> Her conduct of all these engagements was greatly appreciated, as is shown by articles such as the *Derbyshire Advertiser's* report of Violet's preaching for Littleover's Sunday School anniversary services:

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<sup>29</sup>"Sunday Services," *DDT*, January 22, 1927, 2, announces a "Service of Song" by Littleover's Sunday School children on the Sunday afternoon.

<sup>30</sup>"Sunday Services," *DDT*, June 25, 1927, 2, presents Violet as the speaker at Ashbourne Rd Congregational Church Women's Bright Hour service the following afternoon, in addition to leading morning and evening services at Littleover.

<sup>31</sup>"Sunday Services," *DDT*, December 10, 1927, 2, shows Violet at her own church morning and evening and at Dairy House Road Methodist Church in the afternoon.

<sup>32</sup>"Littleover P.S.A.," *DDT*, May 25, 1926, 2

<sup>33</sup>See David Killingray, "The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Movement: Revival in the West Midlands, 1875-90?," in *Studies in Church History*. 44. *Revival and Resurgence in Christian History*, eds. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008): 262-74.

<sup>34</sup>"People's P.S.A.," *DDT*, January 18, 1927, 4.

<sup>35</sup>"Whitchurch. Baptist Chapel Anniversary," *Crewe Chronicle*, November 6, 1926, 6

<sup>36</sup>"Girls' Life Brigade. Parade Service Items," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, October 2, 1928, 5.

<sup>37</sup>E.g. "Free Church Women," *Leicester Mercury*, January 21, 1928, 7.

<sup>38</sup>E.g. "Baptists' Lady Pastor. Visit to Nuneaton Sisterhood Meeting," *Midland Counties Tribune*, November 12, 1926, 6.

<sup>39</sup>E.g. "Derby Baptist Union. The Spring Rally," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, April 10, 1926, 2; "Woman Minister Addresses Baptist Association," *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, June 12, 1929, 3

A very fine sermon was preached by the pastor, whose able discourses Sunday after Sunday are much appreciated by large congregations. ... [T]he quality of her preaching is very high. Her pulpit style and delivery is also attractive: she has a clear, beautiful voice with faultless enunciation.<sup>40</sup>

In an era and a church culture where preaching was a more central part of ministry than it has since become, Violet's gift for preaching was vital to her being accepted as a minister, and was clearly one of the reasons for her success.

But there was more to Violet's ministry than simply preaching, as the *Derbyshire Advertiser* article mentioned above commented:

The coming of Miss Hedger ... has made all the difference to the Baptist cause at Littleover, ... this gifted young lady making an admirable minister in every respect. She is popular with the young and those of all ages[.]<sup>41</sup>

Some of those 'other respects' and her popularity across the age spectrum are evidenced in the papers. On Whit Tuesday the Sunday School held outdoor and sports activities for their 'scholars', in which Violet was involved as a staff member and for which she gave out the prizes.<sup>42</sup> She attended various functions and fetes, such as the opening of the neighbouring Junction Street Baptist Church bazaar,<sup>43</sup> and of the Littleover church's own fete.<sup>44</sup> Soon after her arrival she started a young people's fellowship which proved immensely popular – even though she incurred some disapproval by taking them to mixed bathing at the local swimming pool.<sup>45</sup> In 1927 she started a Women's Bright Hour at the church, which was for all women regardless of social class, rather than having separate meetings for 'ladies' and 'women' as was the case in some other churches.<sup>46</sup> This celebrated its first anniversary on Sunday 2 December 1928, when women carried out all the duties in the services, and there was not only a special afternoon gathering with a woman speaker but a communion after the evening service.<sup>47</sup> The conviction that women were able, and should have the opportunity, to do every duty in the church was one that Violet later expressed in an article about her ministry in the *Baptist Quarterly*.<sup>48</sup>

There were also trans-local aspects to Violet's ministry in Littleover. One was her swift elevation to vice-president (October 1927)<sup>49</sup> and then president (October 1928) of the Derby and District Baptist Union.<sup>50</sup> The *Sheffield Daily*

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<sup>40</sup>Miss Violet Hedger. Conducts Littleover Anniversary Services," *The Derbyshire Advertiser*, June 3, 1927, 2.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>E.g. "Sunday Schools. How the Children Enjoyed Whit Tuesday. Littleover Baptists," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, May 27, 1926, 3.

<sup>43</sup>Junction Street Baptists. Oriental Bazaar for New Church Fund," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, November 17, 1926, 6

<sup>44</sup>Littleover Baptists. Fete Raises Funds for the Church," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, July 11, 1929, 9.

<sup>45</sup>*The Baptist Times*, January 18, 1990, 6; Sylvia Dunkley, "Women Magistrates, Ministers and Municipal Councillors in the West Riding of Yorkshire, 1918-1939," unpublished PhD thesis (University of Sheffield, 1991), 298.

<sup>46</sup>*The Baptist Times*, January 18, 1990, 6.

<sup>47</sup>"Sunday Services," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, December 1, 1928, 6.

<sup>48</sup>Violet Hedger, "Some Experiences of a Woman Minister," *The Baptist Quarterly* 10, no. 5 (1941): 243–53 (249–50).

<sup>49</sup>"Derby Baptist Rally," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, October 13, 1927, 4.

<sup>50</sup>"Rev. V. Hedger Baptist Pres. Induction at Osmaston Road Chapel," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, October 23, 1928, 3.

*Telegraph* for 23 October 1928 carries the news of her induction to the presidency in a short paragraph headed 'Honour for Lady Minister', remarking on the fact that 'she has not yet been in the locality three years'.<sup>51</sup> It is indeed a tribute to Violet that having not yet been in either the locality or the ministry for three years and as only the second woman minister in the denomination she should have been regarded as worthy of the presidency. The honour bespeaks a heartening acceptance of her. The second trans-local aspect was Violet's participation in a national conference concerning women in ministry that was initiated by the Union of Women Voters, first in 1926 at Golders Green where Violet conducted a service of worship,<sup>52</sup> and then two years later in 1928 at Somerville College, Oxford, where she was one of the conference speakers, dealing with what women can bring to ministry. Her thoughts on the matter are captured in a newspaper report about the conference: that women are especially suited to pastoral work, that they can make the church into the home it really is, that they can bring a fresh and vivid idea of God to men's hearts, and that they are especially near to God because of their creativity and their nearness to the facts of life and death.<sup>53</sup> These are aspects that she unquestionably sought to embody in her own ministry, as we shall see.

## Interlude

For all that the Littleover church's experiment with a woman pastor appears to have been a success, as the *Derby Daily Telegraph* opined,<sup>54</sup> it would not be prolonged. The church invited Violet to stay beyond the initial agreed three years,<sup>55</sup> but after lengthy consideration she refused the invitation,<sup>56</sup> although she stayed for nine months beyond the three years,<sup>57</sup> possibly to enable her to complete her presidential year for the Derby and District Baptist Union. Precisely why she refused the invitation to stay is unclear. The Littleover church history indicates that she felt she was not doing the work she wanted to do and that she was disappointed with results among the adults, although the youth work was full of potential.<sup>58</sup> Sylvia Dunkley suggests that she may have found the deacons too cautious and socially conservative, reluctant to implement new ideas.<sup>59</sup>

Whatever the reasons behind Violet leaving Littleover, it was several years before she would be in pastoral charge again. The General Superintendents' minutes show that her search for another pastorate had begun in January 1929, and over the course of the next five years her name was sent to twenty-six

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<sup>51</sup>*Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, October 23, 1928, 5.

<sup>52</sup>"Women in the Ministry," *The Vote*, September 24, 1926, 5.

<sup>53</sup>"Women Ministers in Conference at Oxford," *Oxford Chronicle*, October 19, 1928, 5.

<sup>54</sup>"Matters Feminine. Rev. Violet Hedger," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, January 26, 1928, 4.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup>"Woman Pastor Resigns. Loss to Littleover Baptists," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, June 28, 1928, 10.

<sup>57</sup>"The Rev. Violet Hedger. Leaving Littleover Fifteen Months Hence," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, June 29, 1928, 1.

<sup>58</sup>G. Measures, "Littleover Baptist Church, 1813-1980," 41.

<sup>59</sup>Dunkley, "Women Magistrates, Ministers and Municipal Councillors," 299.



situations before she managed to settle at North Parade Baptist Church, Halifax, in late 1933. During her more than four years out of pastorate (October 1929–December 1933) she continued to preach up and down the country, from Victoria in Gwent to South Shields on Tyneside, Radstock in Somerset, and Diss in Norfolk, with a couple of return visits to Littleover in between. But despite her evident popularity as a preacher and speaker, churches were unwilling to contemplate her as their pastor.<sup>60</sup> By the end of 1932 Violet's entitlement to out-of-pastorate grant aid from the Baptist Union was exhausted, and by their meeting of 17 July 1933 the General Superintendents had received a letter to say that she was now reliant entirely on preaching engagements for her finances. Under these circumstances she must have been extremely relieved when the introduction of her name to North Parade, Halifax in November 1933 – a church which she had visited when seeking her first pastorate – resulted in an invitation to the pastorate.

### Halifax, 1934–1937

As had been the case at Littleover, Violet's arrival in Halifax was greeted by upbeat reports in the local press, stressing the unusual nature of her position: 'The North-parade Baptist Church, Halifax, which has the distinction of having the first woman minister to take up work in Halifax, started the New Year with bright prospects when the Rev. Violet Hedger, L.L.A., B.D., commenced her duties yesterday.'<sup>61</sup> Violet's recognition service on Tuesday 16 January 1934 was reported in detail, including the words of Charles Brown, Violet's home minister, who was one of the participants: 'He congratulated the church on the enterprise and courage in securing Miss Hedger. But for her sex, Miss Hedger could have settled in several churches.'<sup>62</sup> One is minded to reflect on how far the same is true ninety years later for women such as Violet.

From the beginning, Violet worked to put into effect her convictions about what women could bring to ministry, as is evidenced by the *Halifax Courier's* report of the church's annual meeting on Saturday 3 February 1934. In her remarks, the paper says,

Miss Hedger pleaded for a conception of the church more as a home, a place in which people could feel 'at home', than as a frigid and formal institution meeting twice on a Sunday. The church should have all the characteristics of a home and should provide those avenues along which self-expression could reach its highest goal. To create that atmosphere of homeliness the pastor stressed the need for a greater sense of friendliness and comradeship amongst the people. The Christian life ... needed for its expression and development contact with other people, which could only be realised in a fellowship in which all took part, each bringing some contribution of personality.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Baptist Union Minutes, Sustentation Fund Sub-Committee, June 4, 1931.

<sup>61</sup>'The Trend of Things. Women Pastors,' *Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian*, January 8, 1934, 4

<sup>62</sup>'Halifax's First Woman Minister,' *Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian*, January 17, 1934, 6.

<sup>63</sup>'North Parade Baptists,' *Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian*, February 5, 1934, 6.

Such a vision was particularly meaningful in Halifax, where there were entrenched social divisions between mill owners and workers which would prove difficult to overcome.<sup>64</sup>

In some respects the pattern of Violet's ministry in Halifax was similar to that at Littleover: a packed programme of preaching and speaking, both at North Parade and elsewhere, for a variety of services. There were also additional elements. Both the Girls' Life Brigade and the Rover Scouts had groups based at North Parade, and Violet attended their events and functioned as their chaplain, carrying out special services for them.<sup>65</sup> Violet's creativity can also be seen at work. On 24 October she led the church to celebrate its 160th anniversary, the first such celebration in its history, in an effort to inspire the church to move forward in the spirit of its illustrious founder, the eighteenth-century preacher Dan Taylor.<sup>66</sup> Another extremely creative move was the format of the annual church meeting held on Saturday 26 January 1935: instead of the usual formal business meeting with spoken reports, some aspects of the church's work were presented via displays, there was an effort to create a 'cheerful domestic atmosphere',<sup>67</sup> and Violet referred to the church as 'the home' and to the balance sheet as the 'household accounts'.<sup>68</sup> As she had done at the previous annual meeting, she stressed the concept of the church as a family:

We have been trying, during this last year, to view our church as our home ... We have been trying to discover together how we can live in one great family, whose mother and whose father is God... [D]uring the coming year I want you grown-up members to concentrate upon the boys and girls of the family... If we stand aside from them we cannot expect them to have an understanding thought about God. They will think God is as stand-offish as we are.<sup>69</sup>

Here, as well as the effort to make the church into a home, there is an emphasis on gaining new insights into God, another aspect of what Violet saw as women's particular contribution to ordained pastoral ministry.

Press reports from these years show Violet's involvement in many and varied activities. At the North Parade church she instituted series of winter lectures on a range of topics, some of which she herself gave. The subjects ranged from Egyptian papyri to the Victorian age, recent developments in factories, and cathedrals of England. She served as the town's Free Church Council President from 1936-37, the first woman to hold that position; participated in two united services for peace held in the town; and is listed on two separate occasions as attending magistrates' hearings to protest against the granting or extension of alcoholic licensing for premises in the town. As she had done

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<sup>64</sup>Dunkley, "Women Magistrates, Ministers and Municipal Councillors," 299-300.

<sup>65</sup>"Girls' Brigade Chat. P. and F. Night," *HDCG*, 23 May 1934, 3. "Inauguration of Rover Scout Den," *HDCG*, October 18, 1934, 2. "New Colours for Scouts," *HDCG*, June 28, 1937, 5.

<sup>66</sup>"The Predecessor of North Parade Church," *HDCG*, October 25, 1934, 8

<sup>67</sup>"The Touch of Home in Church Life. New Ideas at North Parade Baptists," *HDCG*, January 28, 1935, 6.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*

at Littleover, she arranged and chaired a meeting at North Parade to which the renowned Anglican campaigner for women's ordination Maude Royden came and preached. At a women's meeting anniversary service in Emmanuel Church, Trowbridge, she addressed a congregation of 700 on the subject of God the Mother, delighting her listeners with her exposition of 'How often would I have gathered your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not'. But one of the biggest events of her ministry at Halifax was the Sunday evening service at North Parade for 21 March 1937, which was broadcast live on the radio. In this, as so often before, Violet was the first – the first woman to preach at a broadcast service. The day after the broadcast, the *Courier* carried a short report in which it stated that she had had 'an audience whose numbers can never be estimated ... apart from the large number of people congregated in the Baptist Church at North Parade ... there were listeners through the town and country.'<sup>70</sup> Nor were her listeners confined simply to 'town and country'. A subsequent article in the *Courier* stated that after the broadcast she had received 'over 600 "thank-you" letters from almost every county in England, as well as from Canada, India and South Africa.'<sup>71</sup>

### **Chatham, 1937–1944**

Violet's ministry in Halifax ended in September 1937, when she moved to Zion Baptist Church, Chatham. By comparison with her experience after leaving Littleover, the process of finding another pastorate after Halifax seems to have been much easier. Violet's name appears on the General Superintendents' list at their meeting for November 1936, and over their three meetings between then and February 1937 seven churches were suggested for her. Chatham was one of those suggested at the January 1937 meeting, and by the May 1937 meeting Violet is said to be 'Settled at Chatham'. The net result was that she was able to move directly from one pastorate to the other. It is interesting to note that the Chatham deacons' recommendation to invite Violet to preach with a view to the pastorate, which was agreed quite readily by the church meeting, came less than ten days after her broadcast service from Halifax, and even though there is no reference to the broadcast in the Chatham minutes one wonders whether it might have influenced the church members.

Chatham would be Violet's longest ministry (almost seven years), and a difficult one for her own health: the Chatham deacons' minutes show that at the start of May 1940 she had to take several months' leave on doctor's orders, from which she had returned by the end of July the same year. But more drastically, her ministry at Chatham came to an abrupt end almost

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<sup>70</sup>"Halifax Church Broadcast," *HDCG*, March 22, 1937, 8.

<sup>71</sup>"Rev. Violet Hedger's New Appointment. Chatham Pastorate. A Feminine Pioneer," *HDCG*, June 3, 1937, 6.

exactly four years later in 1944, when she informed the May deacons' meeting that, again on doctors' orders and following four weeks of apparently ineffective treatment, she required six months of complete rest and had been told to leave the church or the doctors would not be responsible for her condition. Her last Sunday was duly agreed for 4 June 1944. No details are given in the minutes about the nature of either illness, but other sources supply further information: her home in Chatham was bombed and she was buried in the rubble for several hours, resulting in skull and spinal injuries.<sup>72</sup> It would take her several years to regain a decent measure of health.

But there was plenty of ministry to come before then. Deacons' minutes supply some details about Violet's plans for the Chatham church during her ministry there. She encouraged the church to appoint a press correspondent to keep the local papers up to date with what the church was doing, and as a result of this weekly notices began to appear in the local press of the church's Sunday and other services, together with the morning and evening sermon titles when Violet was preaching. Sadly, this does not continue beyond the end of 1939, but it gives an intriguing snapshot of a year of Violet's pulpit ministry. The titles indicate an effort to engage those outside the church as well as meeting the needs of the existing congregation: 'Fear or friendship: On which is your life based?'<sup>73</sup> 'Clues abound pointing to truth. Can you follow them?'<sup>74</sup> 'You can begin again.'<sup>75</sup> And, on the Sunday after the declaration of war, 'God's goodness outweighs man's evil.'<sup>76</sup>

Violet was also at the forefront of forming a Free Church Council in the town and was its first president;<sup>77</sup> and in a move that now seems obvious, she raised with the church the question of admitting women as deacons,<sup>78</sup> with the result that shortly afterwards two women were welcomed to their first deacons' meeting.<sup>79</sup> The presence of women on the diaconate caused a question over the seating arrangements at the communion table, which was fully discussed before it was decided to retain the existing arrangements.<sup>80</sup>

Violet was also involved in matters outside those of local church life. As she had done while at Halifax, she went to a magistrates' hearing to oppose the granting of a provisional drinks licence for premises to be erected on a new housing estate;<sup>81</sup> this came shortly after she had accepted the position of Secretary of the Temperance and Social Services Committee for the Maidstone

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<sup>72</sup>"Five-year battle," *North London Press*, November 26, 1954, 11. In an interview she gave for the *Baptist Times*, she recalled regaining consciousness after the bomb strike to find herself still in bed covered with a blanket of snow (*BT*, January 11, 1990, 4).

<sup>73</sup>*Chatham News*, January 13, 1939, 1.

<sup>74</sup>*CN*, February 24, 1939, 1.

<sup>75</sup>*CN*, May 26, 1939, 1.

<sup>76</sup>*CN*, September 8, 1939, 1.

<sup>77</sup>Deacons' minutes, July 18, 1938.

<sup>78</sup>Deacons' minutes, November 7, 1938; Church minutes, February 2, 1939.

<sup>79</sup>Deacons' minutes, April 24, 1939.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup>"New Hotel for Chatham," *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, February 10, 1939, 18.

district of the Kent and Sussex Baptist Association.<sup>82</sup> In characteristically feisty fashion, Violet argued in the court that there was as yet no school on the estate and the children had to travel into town to school, so if children could do that, then grown men could surely walk the short distance from the estate to the existing local pubs for a drink.<sup>83</sup> Her opinion did not prevail with the magistrates. She was also involved in court hearings for two men who applied for registration as conscientious objectors; for one, a member of her own church, she attended the hearing and spoke in support of him, and for the other she wrote a letter of support.<sup>84</sup> In the months before the outbreak of war, she led the church in placing on record their conviction that war was contrary to the will of God and that they would work to promote peace and to co-operate with other organisations which had this aim.<sup>85</sup> This was followed in early 1940 by a decision not to invest the church's capital in War Loans despite a letter from the Baptist Union suggesting that they do so.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, Violet accepted an invitation from the military chaplain to speak to the men in the Chatham barracks.<sup>87</sup> She also preached around the town with an Anglican colleague, in the open air and in clubs and pubs.<sup>88</sup>

During her time at Chatham, with others' awareness of her ministry growing, Violet was invited to participate in two major trans-local events. The first was the sixth Baptist World Alliance congress held in Atlanta, Georgia, during July 1939. The programme for the event shows that Violet was invited to carry out the devotions for the women's sectional meeting on Tuesday 25 July, the fourth day of the seven-day congress.<sup>89</sup> Speaking of the experience on her return,<sup>90</sup> she was struck by both the apparent prevalence of religion in American culture and by the difficulties of so many Congress delegates who lived in areas where faith was officially discouraged or actively persecuted. She was also struck by the responsiveness of the congregations to which she preached, both in Newark and in a Black church in Georgia, as compared with British congregations. She found it a great comfort and encouragement to see that all over the world people were working for the kingdom of God.

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<sup>82</sup>Deacons' minutes, January 9, 1939.

<sup>83</sup>"New Hotel for Chatham."

<sup>84</sup>"Not Taught To Kill". Rochester Men Before Conscientious Objectors' Tribunal. Lady Minister Supports Application," *CN*, November 10, 1939, 7; "Unqualified Registration. Conscientious Objection of Chatham Journalist Sustained," *CN*, December 1, 1939, 4.

<sup>85</sup>The Chatham church minutes, signed by Violet, show that the resolution for peace was introduced by "the Pastor" and was agreed at the meeting on July 27, 1939, at which "the Pastor" presided. The deacons' minutes, however, show that the meeting was agreed for Tuesday 27 June rather than 27 July, and this must have been when it took place. On 27 July Violet would have been in Atlanta at the 1939 Baptist World Congress (see below), and so could not have presided over a church meeting in Chatham.

<sup>86</sup>Deacons' minutes, March 26, 1940.

<sup>87</sup>"Army Chaplains' Posts for Women?," *Newcastle Journal and North Mail*, Tuesday March 19, 1940, 4.

<sup>88</sup>Interview with Violet Hedger, *The Baptist Times*, January 11, 1990, 4.

<sup>89</sup>See Ernest A. Payne, *Baptists Speak to the World: Atlanta 1939*, 60, 62; *Sixth Baptist World Congress Official Report* (Atlanta, GA: Baptist World Alliance, 1939), 9.

<sup>90</sup>*Faversham Times and Mercury*, December 9, 1939, 1.

The second major event in which Violet participated was in London in 1943, where she appeared as a speaker in a conference arranged in April by the Society for Equal Ministry of Men and Women in the Church. Several papers report the comment she made there about some people not trusting women clergy to bury people properly, and how at a recent funeral the family had been happy for her to officiate at the house, but they wanted the vicar to do the interment.<sup>91</sup> She also insisted that the only relevant consideration about marriage for women ministers was whether it made them less able to preach the gospel.<sup>92</sup> It is possible to sense from these comments some of the entrenched prejudices against which she and other early women ministers struggled, and as before, one is minded to ask how far these and other prejudices still exist.

### Interlude, 1944–1951

As noted earlier, Violet's ministry at Chatham would be cut short by the bomb strike on her house in March 1944, which necessitated a lengthy convalescence. When she returned to work some five years later in 1949, it was not initially as a minister but as Secretary of the National Sisterhood, a non-denominational Christian women's organisation. She was still committed to ministry and was seeking a pastorate via the General Superintendents' meetings, but in the meantime, in her capacity as Sisterhood Secretary she travelled the country speaking at services and women's events. From her home in London her visits took her as far as Sunderland to the north, Bristol to the west, Portsmouth to the south, and Hastings and St Leonard's to the south-east. If she had hoped for a swift settlement, though, she was to be disappointed, and the Superintendents' minutes show that two years later, at the end of 1950 and again early in 1951, she wrote to them reaffirming her desire for pastoral office. But it was not until their meeting on 16–17 July 1951 that her name was suggested for Chalk Farm Baptist Church in north London, less than a mile from Regent's Park where she had originally trained for ministry, and about five miles from her home in East Finchley. Thereafter, the process was swift: the minutes for 10–11 September indicate that she had been 'invited' to Chalk Farm, and those of 12 November that she had '[a]ccepted Chalk Farm'. Her acceptance was heralded by articles in the local press which speak of her being injured in the Chatham air raid and having battled for several years to regain her health, and which quote her saying that she sees in Chalk Farm "a challenge to put over practical Christianity and to make it so gay and attractive that it becomes a living reality and a shining light in what must be confessed is a somewhat dark

<sup>91</sup>E.g. "Trend of Things Day by Day. Women Ministers," *Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian*, April 7, 1943, 2. This is a comment she also made in her article in the *Baptist Quarterly* (BQ 10.5 [1941], 247).

<sup>92</sup>"Trend of Things," *HDCG*, April 7, 1943, 2.

district.”<sup>93</sup> Clearly, despite the long years out of ministry, her sense of mission and vocation were undiminished.

### Chalk Farm, 1952-1956, and Beyond

Violet and the Chalk Farm church were well suited to each other, because both had suffered the same fate: both had been bombed out during the war. Violet had been pulled from the rubble of her home in Chatham after it was hit during an air-raid in 1944; and the Chalk Farm church had also been bombed in 1944.<sup>94</sup> Having experienced the shock and trauma of such loss and having managed to rebuild her own life, Violet was the ideal person to help the Chalk Farm congregation rebuild their premises and their formerly flourishing church life. Not that she would simply replace what was there before; ever the pioneer, her plans for the temporary worship space, the new church hall and the new chapel were decidedly unconventional. A report in the local paper describes her determination to paint their temporary worship-space yellow in the face of a deacon’s insistence that it should remain brown as it had always been, and outlines her projected interior colour scheme for the new church hall with its blues, pinks and creams.<sup>95</sup> Equally delightful, and revealing, is Violet’s reported response to the interviewer’s question.

Why? Miss Hedger’s vivid blue eyes lit up. ‘Because I think that God is light and beauty,’ she said. ‘I think we should have a light and beautiful church in which we can worship,’ she added.<sup>96</sup>

Sadly, Violet did not see the church building itself completed during her ministry at Chalk Farm, which ended in 1956. The *North London Press*, in an article on the dedication of the new church on 22 February 1958, reported that it had taken three years to get a building permit for the church following the completion of the church hall, which means that despite having made preparations and raised funds they would not have begun building the church until 1957. But the paper’s description of the new building indicates that Violet’s plans for a light and beautiful worship space were at least partially fulfilled. ‘The new church has been built in a modern style. Simplicity, light and space are the chief features. The walls are a pale cream colour, the floor is covered with linoleum and the widely-spaced pews are of polished light oak.’<sup>97</sup> It is ironical, however, that Violet is completely absent from the report, to the extent that a visiting minister present at the ceremony is said to have ‘frequently taken services during the 14 years the church has been without a minister’. The 14 years

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<sup>93</sup>“Woman Minister for Chalk Farm Church,” *Hampstead News*, December 27, 1951, 12; “Woman minister plans to bring joy to Chalk Farm,” *North London Press*, December 28, 1951, 3.

<sup>94</sup>“Golden Key Heralds Baptists’ Golden Era,” *North London Press*, May 9, 1952, 9.

<sup>95</sup>“‘Sunshine Susie’ is bringing colour to the church,” *North London Press*, November 26, 1954, 11.

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup>“Bombed six times – Baptist church is rebuilt – and paid for,” *NLP*, February 28, 1958, 11.

may well refer to the period before Violet arrived in 1952,<sup>98</sup> but the impression given is that it is 14 years since the church has had its own minister, which is not true.

After Chalk Farm, Violet returned to the pattern of an itinerant preaching ministry, remaining active and travelling widely around the world. Perhaps in some sense she was finally fulfilling her original desire to serve overseas; indeed, an article from 1980 presents her, now an octogenarian, as an inveterate traveller spending about two months of the year overseas for the purposes of 'missionary work'.<sup>99</sup> From the subject of some of her speaking engagements,<sup>100</sup> together with a comment in a paragraph about a return visit she made to Littleover in 1977,<sup>101</sup> it seems that at least some of her travelling was done under the auspices of the Bible Society.

### Closing Thoughts

What, then, is Violet's significance for our Baptist conception of ministry? Violet showed that it was possible for a woman to be not just a minister but an effective minister. By her persistent pursuit of pastoral ministry she asked questions that demanded answers; she took seriously a theoretical theological position on women's ability to serve equally with men and exposed its practical implications.<sup>102</sup> She modelled a response to a calling based on her particular gifts rather than on more traditional gender-based patterns of service; at the same time, she had a strong sense of what women *as* women could bring to the staunchly male model of ordained pastoral ministry. Although her ideas on this score are open to critique from a modern perspective, what is important is that she saw women primarily as people with gifts and vocations and secondarily as women, so that womanhood was an addition to the gifts and vocations rather than a determiner of them. She was a living experiment, which cannot have been easy; alongside the glowing reports of her successes and the demand for her preaching were the snide comments, the open challenges, the refusal to accept her as 'a proper minister', which she talked about in the *Baptist Quarterly* article.<sup>103</sup> But she persisted, and her persistence provided a

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<sup>98</sup>On March 7, 1952 the *North London Press* reported the death of the Rev. Dennis Wilkinson, "who from 1932 to 1937 was pastor of Berkley Road Baptist Church, Chalk Farm" (13). That being the case, it looks as if the 14 years mentioned in the article about the new church building do refer to the period between the end of Wilkinson's ministry at Chalk Farm and the beginning of Violet's.

<sup>99</sup>"On the World Gospel Trail," *East Grinstead Observer*, March 20, 1980, 12, 37.

<sup>100</sup>So, for example, as guest speaker at a meeting of the Worthing BFBS Auxiliary in 1965 she "drew on her recent experiences in Turkey and the near East" to stress the demand for literature (presumably Bibles) ("Bible Society's gifts doubled in nine years," *The Worthing Herald*, May 14, 1965, 20); and at a meeting of the Worthing Brotherhood and Sisterhood on December 4, 1977 she spoke on "The Gospel for Hong Kong" ("Brotherhood," *The Worthing Herald*, December 9, 1977, 20).

<sup>101</sup>"... but back in the 20's," *Derby Evening Telegraph*, October 31, 1978, 6.

<sup>102</sup>Cf. her comment in "Some Experiences": "[A]lthough our churches are built on Scripture, and sing 'Your sons and daughters shall prophesy', they never really believe it" (246).

<sup>103</sup>"Some Experiences," 246-49.



new vision of pastoral ministry that gave other women permission to follow in her footsteps. To be sure, it has taken a long time for others to follow, because it has taken a long time for them to be accepted in doing so. But in order for anyone to follow it was necessary for someone to take the difficult first steps, and she was the one who did.

Altogether, then, Violet's life reflects what the press reports her as saying at the outset of her ministry in Littleover:

As to my presence in the ministry, I could do nothing else. ... I know one thing. I must preach. Otherwise I should have no peace of conscience.<sup>104</sup>

It is hard to find a better summary of the life of this pioneering woman minister.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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<sup>104</sup>"Lady Minister Inducted to Littleover Baptist Church," *Derby Daily Telegraph*, February 4, 1926, 4.