

An Object of Wonder in an Offensive Tee-shirt

Reflections on being the First Ordained, Accredited, Woman Minister in Sole Pastoral Charge of a Baptist Church in Scotland

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This paper was first presented at the Project Violet Symposium on Wednesday 15th January 2025. This public version includes minor edits in the light of participating in that symposium, mainly recognising my own unconscious bias as a white woman who trained for Baptist ministry at an English Baptist College, and whose experience reflects unconscious privilege (being white and English) as well as that of being a minority (an English woman) in Scotland. Rather than either disrupt the ‘flow’ of the original, or pretend that the bias wasn’t present, the edits are by way of additional footnotes.

It is Friday 30th October 2009. I am wearing my favourite, teal green suit and standing on the platform at the front of Queen’s Park Baptist Church in Glasgow. It is the moment when the Baptist Union of Scotland officially welcomes ministers who are newly settled here. By chance, I am right in the middle of the line, centre stage, able to see the gathered Assembly, and my smile cannot be hidden – history has been made as the first Baptist church in Scotland has called and appointed an ordained, accredited woman in sole pastoral charge – thank you, Hillhead Baptist Church, Glasgow. As the ceremony continues, names are read aloud of ministers who are retiring, and, one by one, they join us on the platform. The last name to be read is that of a woman, a wheelchair user, who quietly propels herself forward, unable to access the stage. Our eyes meet and we exchange smiles.

What I do not know, and will only discover years later when researching this conference paper, is that she was one of the first two women to be accredited as minister in the Baptist Union of Scotland in 2003, some four years after the decision was made for this to be possible.¹ Her name is Marjorie Taylor; the woman accredited at the same time as her was Beth Dunlop. It is these women who should be honoured yet, sadly, in Scotland they are largely unknown.

¹ The Assembly of the Baptist Union of Scotland voted on 16th October 1999 to allow women to be accredited as ministers, with 247 votes in favour and 113 against (68.6% in favour). Historian and minister, Brian Talbot, notes “It was a significant milestone for Scottish Baptists. It was a big step to trust one another to honour this decision in the future life of the Union. It must be noted that this new position was one of neutrality for the Union equally respecting the differing views in its ranks. This was distinct from the BUGB position, as that body actively promotes an egalitarian position at a national level”. Talbot, B, *Building on a Common Foundation*, Oregon, Pickwick Publications, 2021, page 308.



Rev Beth Dunlop



Rev Marjorie Taylor

This paper centres on my story and is part of an ongoing story centred on Violet Hedger. It is also the story of Edith Gates and Maria Living Taylor in England, and the story of Jane Henderson, Mary Flora MacArthur, Marjorie Taylor and Beth Dunlop in Scotland, the giantesses upon whose shoulders I am privileged to stand... And it is part of the story of every woman who has sought to follow God's call upon her life to serve as an ordained, accredited Baptist minister in these British Isles.²

Before going any further, it is important to establish some clear parameters for the story I will tell, and the framework within which I will tell it.

This is my story, and so, inevitably it is partial. Partial because it is incomplete, and partial, too, because it is selective, nuanced, told with a purpose in mind. It centres on my recollections of events, moments, comments and observations which may, or may not, be entirely accurate – it is not therefore 'history' in any true sense of the word. Neither is it memoir, if by that we understand an unreflected retelling of a story. Rather, it aims to be a theologically rooted reflection on experience, loosely shaped by Brueggemann's threefold schema of the psalms, namely orientation, disorientation and reorientation³, and shamelessly appropriates the single phrase 'obstreperous theology of hope'⁴ from the writing of Jurgen Moltmann.

This is my story, and, whilst it is a story that must be told as honestly as I can, including the parts that are hard to hear, it is a story that needs to be told carefully, sensitively. The Scottish Baptist world is tiny, and it would be easy to recognise individuals were I to identify their roles, so I have intentionally used elision (combining several individuals into one) and generic terms such as 'senior official' in order to preserve their anonymity when referring to events and comments.

Orientation – An Object of Wonder!

It's October 2009, and it's the Baptist Assembly. I am chatting with the Principal of the Scottish Baptist College, who has been interim moderator for Hillhead Baptist Church. Some of his students approach to say 'hello', among them a bright-eyed, smiling young woman. He introduces me to them, and their excitement is palpable. Later that woman will recall how she had seen me as an 'object of wonder' because she had never seen a real live woman Baptist minister.

² During the Symposium, Gale Richards shared a paper *White Women's Violet and Black Women's Kate*, which highlighted the (unconscious) bias of a story centred on the experiences of white women, and the importance of the unique experience of black and brown (BAME and GMH) women. The omission of Kate from my list of names is an unintended oversight arising from unconscious bias. This footnote acknowledges that with regret.

³ Brueggemann, W, *The Message of the Psalms*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1984

⁴ Moltmann, J., ed. *How I have Changed: Reflection on Thirty Years of Theology*, London, SCM Press 1997, page 16

In his Assembly report for 2009, Rev Andrew Rollinson, then Ministry Advisor for the Baptist Union of Scotland, wrote:

‘God’s calling of Rev Catriona Gorton to Hillhead Baptist Church is a significant occasion among us. Catriona will be the first woman as sole pastor in one of our churches for a long, long time. I personally hope this will be the first of many.’⁵

A significant detail, not stated in this report, is identified in Brian Talbot’s history of the Baptist Union of Scotland, where he observes

‘... Catriona Gorton was appointed as the minister of Hillhead Baptist Church, the first female pastor in sole pastoral charge since the 1920s, and *the first to do so as an accredited minister.*’⁶ (emphasis mine).

It is fair to say that the early days of my ministry at Hillhead were characterised by excitement and rejoicing, at least among those who had long dreamed of such a day. At the same time, I was always conscious of the responsibility entrusted to me – not only to serve this church as well as I could, but not to step out of line in any way that would ‘queer the pitch’ for other women who felt called to ordained ministry within the Baptist Union of Scotland. Whilst day-to-day I simply got on with being the minister at Hillhead, the shadow of responsibility never left me, and at times felt quite oppressive, especially as my own theology continued to develop, allowing me to fully embrace an affirming position in relation to human sexuality. I well recall the day when a senior official, aware of the outlier position held by the church and myself observed, ‘we can trust you not to say anything stupid’ (i.e. not to speak out against the prevailing, traditional/conservative standpoint).

It is important to record the joys – they were many and varied – even if, sometimes, they were, inevitably, bittersweet.

Sadly, many women seeking to become accredited as Baptist ministers were not permitted to preach or lead worship in their own churches, and so it was our privilege at Hillhead to host many capable preachers for their ‘assessed preach’ and to follow their progress through the Board of Ministry. Among them, I recall Rev Frances Bloomfield, who went on to serve for a time as Convener for the Council of the Baptist Union of Scotland.

I was privileged to act as a Ministry Mentor for two women in Scotland, one of them the young woman who had made the ‘object of wonder’ observation, and another who now serves as a workplace chaplain.

For approximately seven years (extended due to the Covid Pandemic) I served on the Board of Ministry, interviewing those who sought accreditation as Baptist ministers. It was a joy to see an increase in the number of women coming forward, and to reinterview them for full accreditation some years later. Among my most precious memories of that time is the deep friendship I forged with a male minister who was open about his complementarian theology, yet who showed humility, grace and respect in all he did. Sometimes we find unexpected allies, and this man, who to this day calls me ‘Boss’, is one such.

Fifteen years on from being viewed as an ‘object of wonder’, I believe I was able to exercise a good and fruitful ministry in Scotland, at the same time as seeing a steady increase in the number of women being able to exercise their calling as accredited Baptist ministers – and for this I rejoice.

⁵ Baptist Union of Scotland, *Assembly Handbook 2009*, Ministry Advisors Report, page 37

⁶ Talbot, Brian R., *Building on a Common Foundation: The Baptist Union of Scotland 1869 – 2019*, Oregon, Pickwick Publications, 2021

Disorientation - An Offensive Tee-shirt

It's summer of 2010, I am attending the Annual Ministers' Conference. This is essentially a gathering of men – there is only one other woman there. The misogynistic language and 'rugby club' humour is a shock: had I encountered such behaviour at an event in England, I would have walked out. But I can't, I am this strange 'object of curiosity' so I stay put.

As we queue for dinner, no-one speaks to me. I collect my meal and look around for somewhere to sit, some familiar face, someone who might invite me to join them – they don't. Suddenly, I call to mind the names of the pioneering women Edith Gates and Violet Hedger... they had known only this kind of experience, they had no peers, no-one to look out for them. So begins a mantra that will be oft-repeated over the coming years: 'Edith Gates, Violet Hedger... Edith Gates, Violet Hedger.'

My memory here is imperfect, but now it is either June 2011 or June 2012. After I completed treatment for breast cancer in 2011, and my hair was growing back following chemotherapy, a member of my congregation gifted me a tee-shirt from the USA Baptist Women in Ministry Network which bore the slogan 'This is what a Preacher looks like.' Having experienced both significant physical changes and loss of confidence, this tee-shirt brought me a lot of joy. Attending the annual ministers' conference in St Andrews, I chose to wear the tee-shirt. It is fair to say that it caused a stir. Whilst a few people delighted in the humour, others did not; so much so, that I was taken aside and asked to remove it, as it was 'offensive'.

Over the years, there were many occasions when I would be saddened, angered or just bemused by things that were said, either to me, or to groups of women, by senior Baptist officials. A reminder to the reader, these are my recollections and, whilst valid, are partial in every sense.

On one occasion, I was told that 'the way for women is to become Associates, then, when the Senior Minister moves on, if they're good, they might get promoted.'

At a gathering of women ministers, invited to share stories of their experiences, the question was asked of the senior Baptist official hosting the event, 'does this shock you?' His response, that it didn't, left me furious, because there was absolutely no indication that anything would – or even should – change. To have been given a space to speak was, it felt, all that was deemed necessary.

A third example relates to the practice of one senior Baptist official of meeting with each accredited minister in turn for a catch-up over lunch – an admirable practice, and one I appreciated. On one occasion, we met in a restaurant which had booths. As we took our seats, he commented 'this would be a great place for an assignation!' Whilst I hoped that he was being flippant, it left me disturbed – an inappropriate remark, and one that threw into question the purpose of our meeting.

More than twenty years ago, when I was training for ministry, a fellow student would often use the phrase 'make like the Psalmist' to describe an appropriate response to such experiences. The psalmists are not shy in expressing their anger, frustration or hurt – from the relatively mild 'how long, oh God' to requests for vengeance and violence, such as 'dashing the heads of babies on rocks'.

All too often we – and I - settle for polite frustration or passive aggression rather than naming and challenging what is wrong. If not literally, then maybe metaphorically, I took off my tee-shirt and towed the line for fear of consequences that would impact the women who came after me.

Reorientation – An Obstreperous Theology of Hope

It's August 2023, my last service as minister at Hillhead Baptist Church; people are sharing memories and stories, as we prepare to say goodbye. There are so many kind words that it's hard to take them in, hard to own them, and yet I know that – however imperfectly I recall them – I will remember this

moment. Among the tributes is one from a woman newly accredited as a Baptist minister who speaks of the path being just that little bit easier because of what I have achieved. Dare I believe that this is so? I hope so – and I hope so with determination.

In Brueggeman's schema, reorientation (new, or renewed orientation) arises from a place of determined hope – the 'and yet' or 'even so' that refuses to accept that nothing can or will change. Moltmann's phrase an 'obstreperous theology of hope' captures the essence of this 'and yet...'

It is several years into my time in Scotland. I am once again at Baptist Assembly, chatting to the head of a major Baptist organisation, and we are reflecting on the challenges of my work and role in Scotland. I recall the words of the BUGB Regional Minister who had, years earlier, told me he'd been asked if he knew of any women tough enough to survive in the BUS, before going on to describe myself as 'a stropky cow'.

Obstreperous – determined, stropky, defiant... this seems to me to be the kind of hope that the psalmist imagines, and that the gospel teaches. Perhaps the language of a stropky cow is a little crude, but it expresses the reality as I experienced it at the time. I didn't always speak out when I should have, and sometimes I was less gracious than would have been helpful, but that tenacious conviction that God calls women to accredited ordained ministry in Scotland contributed, if only in small ways, to a brighter hope.

The appointment by the BUS of Rev Lisa Holmes as Deeper Church Lead saw a significant step forward in supporting women in leadership (the term 'ministry' is intentionally not used by the BUS for this work) providing spaces for women to meet, reflect, pray and learn together. Overall, the number of women in leadership roles with the BUS is increasing – as is the number of those seeking accreditation as ministers. Whilst it is difficult to obtain precise figures, since the distinction between accredited and non-accredited women in ministry appears to have been lost, the direction of travel seems positive.

If I have left the path a little wider, a little smoother, and if the horizon is just a little closer and a little brighter, that obstreperous theology of hope is well founded. I am more than happy to have been 'an object of wonder in an offensive tee-shirt' – a stropky cow whose obstreperous theology of hope is part of a much wider story of women in Baptist Ministry in Scotland.

In Lieu of a Conclusion - A Lament or Rant

In Christian contexts, the word 'lament' is used frequently in response to things that are regretful, embarrassing or just plain wrong. All too often, it seems to me, that lament is reduced to a nice polite saying 'sorry' and a vague desire to do better. I have even been told that a lament is not a rant – though based on any reading of the psalms I'd beg to differ. Throughout history, laments have been expressed in poetic and musical form, and in Scotland there is a powerful tradition of pipe and fiddle music explicitly titled as lament, including a piece I learned to play as a teenager, entitled 'McPherson's Lament or Rant'. Typically in the style of a pibroch, these pieces are written in response to tragedy, loss, or injustice. I hoped to find a Scottish, woman piper who would be able to compose a lament for me, alas without success. Widening my scope to include men and non-Scots, a wonderful piece, entitled 'Violet's Lament' is the result⁷.

⁷ *Violet's Lament*, original composed and performed by Tim Brewster © Tim Brewster 2024 shared with permission

This paper will be read beyond the context of the seminar, where a recording of Violet's Lament will be (was) played, so I have also written a lament inspired by Psalm 137, expressing what Brueggemann describes as 'the ongoing practice of [-] hope against enormous odds'⁸

In the company of Baptists, we sat down and wept
When we remembered our fore-mothers in faith:
How can we celebrate women in ministry
And not recall their names?

If we forget you, Pioneers in England,
Edith Gates, Violet Hedger, Maria Loving Taylor,
May our voices be silenced too.

If we do not learn your names, our hidden Scottish sisters,
Jane Henderson, Mary Flora McArthur, Marjorie Taylor, Beth Dunlop,
And if we fail to tell your stories,
May our stories be forgotten too.⁹

Remember, oh God,
Those who blocked the way;
Who silenced our sisters
In the name of 'gospel truth'.

Remember, oh God,
The times we were ignored,
Excluded, ill-treated
Simply for being women.

Would that you would avenge us...
Call them to account,
Let them know the hurt we have known,
Even let them experience it for themselves...

And yet, your ways are not our ways,
And vengeance begets only vengeance.

Show us instead the ways of obstreperous hope.

Teach us to live as 'objects of wonder' bearing witness to your love.
Show us when to wear 'offensive tee-shirts' calling out what is wrong.

⁸ Brueggemann, W., *The Message of the Psalms*, Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1984, p75

⁹ During the course of the symposium, I learned the names of other women whose stories are every bit as important to their own contexts as those named in this psalm of lament – there are many of us who are 'firsts' who find ourselves official parts of global Baptist history, and whose names must be named, and whose stories must be told. I now offer an additional stanza to my psalm:

We confess with shame and regret
Our unconscious white, western, Anglo-centric biases
Asking that we might be forgiven,
Honour our black, brown and GMH sisters
And learn from their wisdom and grace.

Help us to cling to the hope that heals,
The gospel that redeems all things,
The truth that, in Christ, all human distinctions disappear,
And the eschatological promise that all things will be made new.

And, until then, may we continue to widen the path and smooth the road
For the sisters who will follow us into Baptist ministry.
Amen.