Leigh Greenwood | What is Good for Some of Us is Good for All of Us

When I first read the Project Violet reports and requests, I was struck by the way in which they looked beyond purely female experience, and called for changes with much broader impacts. Having been a woman in training or ministry for nearly a decade, and having done my own research into the experience of women in Baptist ministry as part of my MA,[1] I am well acquainted with some of the disparities and discrimination experienced by female ministers, and need no convincing of the significance of focusing on the reality of ministering as a woman in the Baptist Union of Great Britain. And yet I was pleased to see reflections on age and race and disability woven throughout the findings, and requests for actions which did not relate to women alone.

For example, R06 is concerned with supporting ministers to agree appropriate terms of appointment, and R26 recognises the need to improve access to funds for ministerial training, both of which have the potential to benefit ministers irrespective of gender. Looking even more broadly, R33 calls for white ministers to challenge racism in private and public, while R44 seeks a more developed theology of disability, both of which could benefit not just ministers or even congregations but society as a whole.[2] The requests for change may have been inspired by the difficulties faced by women ministers, but their evident interest in intersectional and universal experience serves as a helpful reminder that while there are particularities to our experience, we are not a monolith and we are not defined wholly by our gender, and so what benefits us will also benefit others.

This led me to reflect on a phrase often repeated by my husband, a secondary school science teacher with significant interest and expertise in pedagogical practice. "Essential for some, useful for all" is the idea that teaching techniques which are designed to support students with additional needs will often benefit all students.[3] For example, my husband only turns on alternate lights in his classroom, and deliberately keeps the walls and surfaces as clear as possible. His experience is that this more gentle atmosphere is hugely beneficial to those students who are prone to sensory overload, and even those students who can tolerate a busier environment are less easily distracted.

In some respects it should not matter that such methods are useful for everyone, because it should be enough that they are essential for anyone, but nevertheless this mantra emphasises the positive impact of paying attention to the experiences of marginalised groups and to issues of accessibility. I have long felt there is much we as ministers could learn from pedagogists which would help our congregations, as for many of us teaching is a significant part of our vocation, but perhaps here we also find something that our denominational structures could learn which would help our ministers. I think we do see something of that in the Project Violet requests. Looking back at R26 for example, while it is essential that those who are called to ministry from less affluent backgrounds are able to

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[1] An essay I wrote based on this research can be found in the Project Violet Reading Room and accessed at https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=288354

[2] These and the other requests for change can be found at https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/418283/Requests_for_Change.aspx

[3] The origin of this phrase is unclear, but it appears to be commonly used with regards to accessibility, not only in education but also in other areas such as assistive technology.

access funding for ministerial training, it is also useful for all ministers to have a greater number and diversity of colleagues to serve alongside.

But can we really extrapolate from this and from my husband's experience in the classroom to say, as the title of this paper does, that what is good for some of us is good for all of us? Perhaps not. It's a significant leap and it lacks nuance, and in all honesty I only wrote it that way because I misremembered the expression I had heard my husband use. I almost changed it when I realised my mistake, but as much as I dislike clickbait headlines, I decided a little provocation isn't always a bad thing. It can clarify our thinking to push back at ideas, so let's push back at that statement a little now.

It should be clear from the Project Violet report, and from the wider experience of those who are embodied or present as female, that what has been good for men has not always been good for women, and the inverse is just as likely to be true. It certainly seems to be the case that what is good for women does not always feel good for men, perhaps because "when you have been used to privilege, equality feels like oppression".[4] But then maybe we need to interrogate our understanding of what is good for us. Do we mean what makes our lives easiest or most successful? If we do then of course we are going to run into conflict with what makes someone else's life easiest or most successful. But is it really good for us if it is not good for someone else?

Power and favour certainly come with advantages, but I believe that we only become who we truly are through connection with others, so that we are all impoverished by injustice, and privilege is not in fact good for anyone. At an ethical and existential level, what is good for all of us is for everyone to have the freedom to live with full dignity as their complete and authentic selves. Perhaps then we should revise our statement to say that it is only good for any of us if it is good for all of us. That will mean some groups lose some of their power and favour, which may not be an altogether comfortable experience, but here I might say something about bringing down the mighty and raising up the humble.[5] In order to do that, we must pay attention to the experience of those for whom our systems have not been good, and it seems to me that this was precisely the aim of Project Violet.

I have already noted that the published findings included reflections on age and race and disability,[6] reflecting something of our complex and intersectional realities, but there are any number of other issues and identities that make up our collective experience, from economic background and sexuality to mental health and neurodiversity. I myself have a history of depression and anxiety, and I am increasingly coming to understand that I am in all probability neurodivergent. With that latter part especially in mind, I would like to use what remains of this paper to offer a personal reflection on

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[4] Again, the origin of this phrase is unclear, and its popularity in online commentary and activism makes it difficult to trace. As a sign of its widespread use, you can now find it printed on tshirts and stickers.

[5] Just in case the reference wasn't clear, see Mary's words in Luke 1:52.

[6] See for example Hayley Young on enabling Millennial women to flourish in leadership: https://www.baptist.org.uk/Media/Player.aspx?show_popout=true&show_media=320487&show_file=355390, Amutha Deveraj on the journey to ministry for Asian women: https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=349600, and Susan Myatt on the barriers faced by Deaf women: https://www.baptist.org.uk/Media/Player.aspx?show_popout=true&show_media=322889&show_file=358361

what may be essential to me and useful to others, as I continue to exercise ministry within our Baptist family.

I want to be clear here that I am merely wondering in public, in the hope that my wondering might connect with or prompt the wondering of others. I have no particular expertise in mental health or neurodiversity, and the only formal diagnosis I have ever received was for clinical depression at the age of twelve. That I struggle with anxiety is so clear that it feels unnecessary to have it medically confirmed, although I have had some counselling in relation to it. That I am neurodivergent is less certain, but I exhibit many of the traits for both autism and ADHD. I am aware that there may well be others here with far more knowledge and experience than me, and so I offer my thoughts humbly and tentatively.

One of the neurodivergent traits I have identified is that at times I find myself in hyperfocus, when I concentrate so intensely on something that the rest of the world may as well disappear. This can be really productive when the thing I am concentrating on is the thing I am supposed to be concentrating on, but it can also be really unhelpful when I lose myself down the wrong rabbit hole, and quite harmful when it causes me to fixate on a problem and fall into an anxiety spiral. It is also utterly unpredictable and uncontrollable. I can't choose when to go into hyperfocus, and once I am stuck in it I have to see it through to the end, sometimes to the extent that I don't feel physically or mentally capable of stopping.

Conversely, there are also times when I find it impossible to focus on anything, or at least not anything important, and I am guilty of chronic procrastination. When it came to writing this paper, I procrastinated so hard that in four days I ordered and built new bathroom storage, reorganised our bookshelves, and finally arranged disposal of the broken fridge that had been sitting in our garage for about six months. In the end I was still late submitting my written paper, and only finished it while I was procrastinating from doing something else. It's rare that something doesn't get done eventually, and sometimes other helpful things get done along the way, but the pressure and guilt that come from the sense that I am not functioning as I should be can be immense, and feeling like my brain is switching between a thousand open tabs is exhausting and overwhelming.

I also experience time blindness, which means I find it very difficult to judge how much time has passed or estimate how long something will take. I once popped into church to run a quick errand before going on holiday, and I genuinely thought it had been five minutes, until my husband had to come and find me to tell me it had been half an hour, and the kids were getting fractious waiting in the car. I've planned services that have run ten minutes longer than expected, and services that have run ten minutes shorter. No one has yet complained about the latter, but it can be utterly disorienting to feel like you are losing or gaining time.

Time blindness and problems with focus are a bad combination in a role where for the most part I am in charge of my own schedule, and I spend too many days chasing deadlines or my own tail. What I would give for better time management and a more predictable attention span! This all has an impact on my mental health, which then also has an impact on those around me, as I struggle to be

the non-anxious presence I aspire to at church and at home. This was made abundantly clear a couple of weeks ago, when I asked my eight year old to be gentle with me because I was feeling a bit stressed, and he responded "But Mum, you're always stressed".

I could also mention difficulties with sensory processing and rigid thinking and social expectations, or the impact on my eating and sleeping patterns, but time is short and I don't want to turn this into a therapy session. So instead let us come to the question I pointed towards earlier. What might be essential for me and useful for others? What might my experience contribute to our understanding of what is good for all of us? I really wish I knew, but as I put off writing this conclusion, it became horribly apparent that my proposal had been startlingly ambitious. I have lived with my brain for thirty six years, but I am only now beginning to appreciate how it works or sometimes doesn't, and the step from there to knowing how best to work with it is not a small one. My self understanding is perhaps too fresh and too fragile to offer very much, except that I think that word understanding is key.

Just as I need to increase my self understanding, so our structures and communities need to increase their understanding of what it means to live and minister with neurodivergence. I know conversations are happening informally,[7] and I also know there is academic work being done in this area,[8] so what I am saying is not anything new or radical, but I do think it is something that needs to keep being said. In my ministry, I have always been very open about my past experience of depression, and I have spoken too about my ongoing struggles with anxiety, and it has felt safe to do so because understanding of mental health is improving. I have not yet been so open about my suspected neurodivergence, in part because I worry about what assumptions would be made and what misunderstandings they would be based on.

I believe that at this point my congregation know me and love me well enough that I do not need to fear honesty, and I have already told my deacons that I will be sharing this paper with them and taking things from there, but I would love to be confident enough in our shared understanding of neurodivergence that I could go into the settlement system with 'autism and ADHD' on my profile, and trust that I would be met with grace and goodwill anywhere. I believe that would be good for all of us.

[7] Even within the last month, I have personally seen and participated in discussions in online spaces for Baptist ministers.
[8] See for example the work of the Centre for Autism and Theology at the University of Aberdeen: https://www.abdn.ac.uk/dhpa/research/centres/centre-for-autism-and-theology/