

Discerning Common Themes: Theological reflection Report for Group 4

Introduction

Where does this report fit into the findings of Project Violet?

During Project Violet we have focused on three layers of Baptist life where change is needed if all women are to flourish in ministry:

1. The everyday language and behaviour we use in church life
2. The accepted ways of doing things
3. What we believe about the church and the role of ministers

The Requests for Change cover all three of these levels. However, we also wanted to share the theological ideas that we came to recognise as significant in our work together. This is the first of four theological reflection reports emerging from the work of the four groups of women co-researchers in Project Violet.

What kind of theology?

We are offering a theology of discernment, by which we mean that this is theology that arose from listening to God and to each other, drawing on Baptist ways of believing, our love of scripture, and enfolded in prayer.

We brought all that we are to these conversations of discernment - our minds, bodies, souls, and emotions - as we listened deeply to what God was saying. This report arises from a process of reflection which enabled us to listen to God and each other over a number of months.

As each group worked on their research they met to reflect upon the words of the 50 women who had written about the joys and sorrows of ministry during the MOSAIC phase of the project. Seeing their research questions reflected in these women's stories assured them that they were not alone.

As each co-researcher finished her research she reflected on what she had learned as she prepared her report.

Each group of co-researchers then met with Jane Day and Helen Cameron to reflect on their reports. Following this, their reports were read by a group of three women from our colleges who then also met as theological reflectors to begin a process of discernment on what they had read. Finally there was a joint meeting where the learning from the reflective conversations was shared and further listening, prayer, and discernment took place. This report tries to capture what was learned through that process of reflection and discernment.

This may be different from your previous experience of doing theology. Often the focus of our theological tradition has been the prioritising of making logical and convincing arguments. Perhaps that was your experience as a student. Here, however, we have sought to value the process of conversation and the experience and understanding of each co-researcher. This is reflected in the way in which each report contains more than one voice and represents more than one context, identity, and type of ministry. It is designed to start a conversation rather than be the last word.

If you would like to learn more we suggest listening to Helen Dare's interview in the Project Violet Podcast Season 2 on the Project Violet website, or released on 4 May 2024 on Podbean: <https://projectvioletpodcast.podbean.com/>

Some suggestions as you read...

Try to read this report as an invitation from another Baptist to join in a conversation rather than as an agenda paper for a meeting.

As we have read each other's work we have had these virtues in mind:

- Humility and the readiness to get it wrong
- Being confident in truth-telling and truth-seeking
- The love of the other's voice and ideas
- Owning the expertise of experience
- Living with complexity whilst seeking clarity

We have included a question following each theme of the report to stimulate reflection and discussion.

We encourage you to ask:

- How does this report resonate with your understanding of what it is to be a Baptist?
- What echoes are you hearing of scripture and the theology you are familiar with?
- What are the conversations you feel prompted to have?

Reports and co-researchers in Group 4

1. Ministering through the menopause: A study of the experience of Baptist women ministering through menopause and the support and understanding offered at the Regional Association level in the UK Baptist church - Denise Dobie
2. How do caring responsibilities, across the life cycle, shape and impact the ministry and experiences of women in Baptist chaplaincy and church ministry roles? - Laura Gilmour
3. The experiences of Deaf women ministers - Susan Myatt (*please note that Susan has produced a film as well as a report*)

Themes and issues

Ministering in a body

Jesus entered the world in a human body and experienced both the joys and limitations that brings. Our society has stereotypes about what constitutes a 'normal' body and can exclude people who through disability or chronic ill health or life circumstances fail to live up to the 'normal' stereotype.

We reflected upon the poem in Philippians 2:5-11. We looked at the way in which Jesus accommodated our human lack of understanding of God's purposes by emptying himself and taking on the human condition. We felt that we are called to accommodate one another, adjusting our language and behaviour so as to fully recognise the image of God in people who are physically different from ourselves. It cannot be fair that those with the biggest barriers to participation in church life are asked to make the biggest changes and often bear their cost. (For example, at the point at which someone acquires a disability, they have to adapt to it - it is an unfair pressure to also have to educate those around them about the disability.) It cannot be just that people are nervous about disclosing a

disability or health condition because they fear being marginalised. (The Project Violet Podcast Season 1, Episode 4 gives an example of this.)

In our research we learned of attempts to heal without seeking consent first, and of blaming people for not 'getting better'. In accommodating one another's bodies we wanted to show solidarity rather than rescue people or speak for them or pretend to understand how things are for them.

We wanted a church where women can speak freely about the impact the menopause is having and ask for accommodations to navigate this phase in their lives. We wanted to value the voice of post-menopausal women as offering wisdom rather than being inaudible or talked over.

We recognised the dangers of ministering as if we didn't have a body - for example, the dangers of burnout and portraying a harsh God by our lack of self-care. We affirmed the presidency of Geoff Colmer as an example of a man reflecting publicly on embodiment.

A question for you to consider:

Are there ways in which you minimise your body and its needs to make yourself more acceptable in the church?

The call to ministry and to caring responsibilities

Some women but not all women feel a dual call to both minister and to undertake caring responsibilities whether for children, a spouse, or parent. Offering flexibility to enable these two callings to happen at the same time or offering transitions that enable time to be spent outside ministry are valued. Encouraging men to make use of the same flexibilities presents caring as an important adult responsibility and not something reserved for women.

Many churches seek to support and encourage family life. Enabling their ministers to model this is an important witness to the value of family life. We reflected on the parable of the Good Samaritan where we are shocked that it is the foreigner who stops to care rather than the religious leader.

A question for you to consider:

In what ways do you speak of caring responsibilities as a normal part of adult life for men and women?

Is the church ready to respond when God calls ministers who don't fit previous stereotypes?

We noticed that when flexibility is offered in patterns of training and ministry, women step forward to make use of it. This is much less exhausting than having to negotiate flexibility. The question that also arises is, flexible in relation to what? The stereotype is a full-time male minister, assisted unpaid by his wife. We recognise that this stereotype can lead to overworking which in turn generates unrealistic expectations.

We noticed the additional pain that comes from ministering as a woman with a disability where it is unclear whether negative reactions are to our gender or disability. The overlapping of these stereotypes leads to experiences of confusion and marginalisation from which there was no 'day off'. In our desire to find practical solutions, it is important not to miss the pain of being stereotyped.

If local churches have had no exposure to ministers who don't fit previous stereotypes, it is difficult for them to envision a future where they look for a different kind of ministry. Actively engaging in diversity training in preparation for calling a minister is a signal of

openness. And *offering* accommodations rather than negotiating them signals a church that is receptive to those whom God has called. There is a role for moderators, Associations and Ministries Team in opening the eyes of local churches to the possibilities.

A question for you to consider:

What response can you make to move beyond previous stereotypes of ministry?

Our invitation

Now you have read this report we invite you to ask:

- How does this report resonate with my understanding of what it is to be a Baptist?
- What echoes am I hearing of scripture and the theology I am familiar with?
- What are the conversations I feel prompted to have?
- Who could help me explore these issues further?