



UNDERSTANDING THE JOURNEY INTO MINISTRY FOR ASIAN WOMEN

Currently, I am the solo minister at Ashurst Drive Baptist Church, which comes under the North-East London Baptist Association. I was originally born into a Hindu family and raised in India where I completed my PhD studies. When I got married to my husband, I was asked to take baptism so that his parents would be happy seeing their son married to a believer. For the sake of marriage, I undertook sprinkle baptism without realising the true meaning of the gospel and baptism. As a family, we came to the UK after living in Japan for around 8 years. After arriving in the UK in 2005, I came to know who my Father is and that He loved me to the extent of sacrificing His own son. After being saved, I was chased several times by this verse, 'Follow me' from Matthew 4:19. I presumed this to be a calling to follow Christ until I realised this was a discipleship calling where I would leave everything to become fishers of people. I obeyed His command and left my job at Imperial College London in 2016. God led me wonderfully then to vocational church ministry once I committed to following Him. In this entire process, my family (my husband and my children) have stood beside me and have continuously supported me. When I first disclosed my calling to ministry to my mother (who was saved and went under believer's baptism after seeing my conversion), she could not accept me leaving my career and becoming a full-time minister. When I shared this with my Asian friends, some rejoiced and some rejected this calling, because of their conviction of women not being called for church ministry.

When I shared this with my senior minister at the time, he encouraged me, and the leadership team unanimously accepted this calling and forwarded it to the church meeting. Interestingly, most of our congregation was in favour of women in ministry despite the church only having English, male ministers since 1929. As expected, a few could not accept me as their women minister claiming biblical verses from Timothy and 1 Corinthians. They were fine with women in the leadership team but could not see them on the pulpit. Strangely, they were happy with our senior minister's wife sharing the word. They said they can tolerate hearing from a woman occasionally but not regularly. I then questioned whether this was because I was a woman or that I was an Asian woman. Since only a minority opposed, and even all of them did not appear on the day of voting, I was appointed as a minister-in-training. I still don't know the reason why and how, except by relying on God, a maestro in organising. I thank God for He who has called me is equipping and empowering me with His power and presence. Scars and struggles are on the way, but His faithfulness encourages me.

I started to wonder why there were only a few Asian women Baptist ministers. At this point, I was approached by 'Project Violet' and was given the opportunity to examine my calling and its effect and understand the reason why many Asian women do not commit themselves to this ministry. This project is planned to hear from different voices to understand '*what inhibits the journey into ministry for Asian women*'. The genres that have been decided for discussion will be from within our multicultural congregation: our church youth (includes boys and girls), and three different ethnicities (women and men from Asian, English and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds). Their responses will be discussed in this project, which would enable one to understand the journey into ministry for Asian women.

Perspective through young eyes: This topic was opened for discussion in one of our youth meetings (April 2023). This youth group comprises both boys and girls of different ethnicities between 12–18-year-olds. Their first response discussed the percentage of *Asian Christian*

women in the UK. According to the national statistics census in 2021,¹ 'Asian, or Asian British' ethnic group in the UK was 9.6% (5.5 million), with the majority Hindu or other religions. The church of England published this article on 'Changes in the Ethnic Diversity of the Christian Population in England'² and the survey depicts about 443,000 Asian men and women following Christianity in 2011. Approximately, a half of this population (221,500) are women and this reflects the lack of those considering vocational calling for church ministry. To my knowledge, Cham Kaur-Mann, an Asian woman is now serving in the 'Next Leadership' programme in the UK. While I was trained at Spurgeon's college, I saw another Asian woman doing theological studies, a year below me. Perhaps other denominations have more women in church ministry.

However, Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African ethnicities remain at 4.0% (2.4 million) of the total UK population, with 1,277,000 following Christianity. Therefore, those taking up this vocational calling from this community would obviously be larger than the Asian community. This made me ponder what percentage of Asians (both men and women) are in church ministry in their own home countries. The current statistics in a country like India portrays millions of Christians, but this forms only 2.4% of the total country's population. Only 0.4% of the adult population are converts from Hinduism to Christianity.³ This leaves us with an ambiguity that Christianity is not preached widely around Asia compared to other nations. This can be the reflection of the lack of Asian male Baptist ministers in the UK.⁴ In the BUGB list produced in 2023, to my understanding, only XX ministers (112-page report – will get the number before submitting the final version) (XX male and XX female) are nationally accredited ministers. Hence, this could be one of the obvious reasons for seeing no more than two or three Asian Baptist women ministers in the UK.

The youth group's second response was that this could be due to *lifestyle priorities*. In most cases, Asian parents plan their children's future, and they decide the university studies on behalf of their children. This reflects their priority of setting up their life based on worldly positions and postponing any ministerial callings to later in life. I have heard my Asian friends say that they will think about their service to God after they retire from their present careers. If this statement is from men, what can we expect from women? When I decided to leave my career and started to explore God's ministerial calling, my parents were not happy. Their *priority* was for me to settle in a well-earning and high-ranking profession. This could be because generations are raised with the thoughts of achieving and attaining academic and professional success. After knowing my interest to enter God's ministry, one of my friends asked me if my career was going well because in India there is a general opinion that people choose church ministry only if they don't enter the career ladder. Otherwise, the ministers' children would choose this as an option first as they have seen this path their entire life. The migrated community's prime focus would be to establish a career-oriented life so that through their earnings they can support their families back home. Moreover, some would come in via an asylum status and their priority would be to provide enough for their family to settle in that foreign country. Amid all these desires and difficulties, pursuing a ministerial calling, especially for women, would be an unfulfilled dream.

¹ [https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=the%20%22Asian%2C%20or%20Asian%20British,was%204.2%25%20\(2.4%20million\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021#:~:text=the%20%22Asian%2C%20or%20Asian%20British,was%204.2%25%20(2.4%20million)) [23/05/23] (Fig.1)

² https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/north_east.pdf

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/12/8-key-findings-about-christians-in-india/>

⁴ <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=199733>

Perspective through Asian eyes: I was curious to know how the idea of Asian women in church ministry was perceived by those from the same ethnicity. An immediate response from one of the Asian men from our congregation was, 'even I have not thought about myself in the church ministry'. Sadly, it underpins a *prejudicial statement*, as it starts with 'even'. Does this imply that Asian women are still considered as a second-class citizen in this 21st century? The tradition of the patriarchal system is still there in the corner and has not yet been completely eradicated despite the many advancements that have come. I would encourage women (Asians in this context) to dream dreams and expand their visions. My prayer would be the fulfilment of Joel's prophesy, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all [everyone including men and (Asian) women] people. Your sons and daughters [Asian women too] will prophesy ... even on my servants, both men and women [also Asian women for God's ministry], I will pour out my Spirit.'⁵ In my experience, I have observed only a few Asian men placing women in leadership roles and cherishing their growth. Support from men would be a key aspect for women to advance in ministerial leadership. I am encouraging other women here because I have been encouraged by my husband, a man who has always supported me. I should also mention other men in my journey: our male senior minister, men in the diaconate team and men in the congregation. My desire is that every family and church should have gifted men to motivate women for church ministry.

An Asian woman expressed that she never thought that it was possible to serve in a ministerial capacity in the UK until she saw me as her minister. Many uncertainties hang over the hook of possibility. Traditional and societal norms have produced a *fear of being accepted*. Although Asian women want to serve in the church set-up as leaders, 'they see themselves pushed to the margins, feared as temptresses by some and their ability to cross cultural boundaries with the gospel is not fully appreciated'.⁶ This is insecurity and inferiority. When I first took the diaconate role in our church, although I was an academic, I felt inferior and side-lined in many discussions and felt that my voice was not heard. I was told that this was because I did not know British culture and history and that they could not understand my accent. Many women don't put their names forward to be nominated for this reason. This fear would have crippled many women to attempt this. They take different roles in the church like being a part of the coffee rota, welcoming stewards, etc., but not beyond that. Culture, history and language can be learnt, and this should not be a hindrance for people to take a ministerial role. Recently, when raising up a new Asian women leader in the church, there was an opposition saying that their way of doing Sunday school in their country would be different to how we do here. Surely, we all read the same Bible wherever we have come from?

Another limitation is that Asian families are formed in such a way to live in a nested community.⁷ There is a high level of dependency and for every decision, a woman needs to depend on their (husband's) family's response. Unless the family supports, women cannot come out and exercise their freedom to flourish further. Serving in church ministry is a long-time committed calling and it requires family support. Two groups need to play a major role in bringing Asian women into the ministry, one is Asian men (in their own family) and the second

⁵ Joel 2 / Acts 2

⁶ Graham Joseph Hill, Sunburnt Country, Sweeping Pains: The Experiences of Asian Australian Women in Ministry and Mission, 10th February 2022

⁷ Andrea K Iskandar, 'Honouring your Parents and Ancestors', in *Global Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. by Mark Roncace and Joseph Weaver (NJ: Pearson Education Inc., 2014), 1–348 (p.248).

is Asian women Baptist ministers. It is only through encouragement that women can be motivated to enter the other side of the fence.

Perspective through English eyes: I had a discussion with an English man and woman in our congregation. The man asked if any Asians are there working in professions other than in the NHS and IT fields. He too mentioned that when first-generation Asian Christians came to the UK, their primary focus was to settle in and that they did not have time to think about church ministry as it is a time-consuming process. There are many Asian men and women (mostly their wives) ministers in independent churches in the UK other than Baptist churches. This perhaps explicates the tedious and lengthy protocol of becoming a Baptist minister, the uncertainty of the result after three years of theology studies and facing the ministerial recognition committee, etc. A huge burden is the financial commitment to paying tuition fees and the living cost. Nowadays, the economy is clearly portraying the demand of both men and women to work to provide for their families. Moreover, Asian men or women would not get a student loan to pay their tuition fee for their ministerial studies as it would not be their first degree in most cases.⁸ Perhaps 2nd and 3rd generation Asians who were born here have a higher possibility of doing theological studies, etc., as they would get some financial support. Also, with only a single man's salary, the financial commitment of allowing women to study would be an additional burden. In my case, when I left my career at Imperial College, my husband had to manage the family with one person's salary, and it was difficult, particularly with grown-up children. If the church that calls one to ministry has any budget, it should support for this cause, and this might encourage women to consider this ministry. Initially, our church was struggling to provide financial support for me and came to the verge of almost dropping the plan to consider me. Thankfully, one of our elder's legacies to the church paid my three year's stipend cost.

When an English woman was approached to know her view on this, her response was about leadership skills. She has always observed Asian women standing behind their husbands. She is true to some extent because even if you see an Asian couple walk together, the wife walks a few yards behind the husband. She shared her experience of Asian women shutting themselves within a box and not raising or even sharing the domestic violence they have experienced. When she explained to them the social set-up around them here and how they can be supported, the only response she heard was that it would bring shame to the family. She questioned that if these women could not even stand for their rights how could they put themselves forward for a leadership role? I resonate with Esther in the scripture.⁹ She was a young, orphan girl, adopted in an exiled land. God lifted her from her non-possible circumstance to become a great leader by saving the Jews from a massacre. Yielding herself into this mission was a great contribution from her side and the rest was led by God. Esther's story was in a patriarchal society and should be shared to motivate Asian women. Times have changed and now a lot of women in leadership roles challenge the stereotype of 'submissive Asian women'¹⁰. This practice in the secular world should be incorporated into the spiritual side as well.

Perspective through Afro-Caribbean eyes: A Ghanaian responded by saying, 'We have always thought that Asians were Hindus or Buddhists until we encountered Asian Christians

⁸ [Student finance for undergraduates: Eligibility - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/student-finance-for-undergraduates-eligibility)

⁹ Book of Esther

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200807-the-dociility-myth-flattening-asian-womens-careers>

here in the UK'. She spoke about an Asian family who left the church after seeing a woman (although Asian) accepted as their minister-in-training. When they left, they quoted verses from Paul's epistles (1 Tim.2)¹¹ and were not convinced about women in ministry. She mentioned that perhaps they were originally taught by interpreting scripture in such a way as to not accept women in any ministerial or leadership role. Changing their opinion on this matter is just as hard as convincing anyone who has been born and brought up in their own religious faith to accept the gospel. I remember Nigel Wright interpreting the verses from 1 Tim. 2 in an excellent way. He said that there are two kinds of teachings that we can observe from Paul's epistles. In one way of teaching, he says 'as the spirit instructs'. In the other, he says 'in His Spirit', or 'I instruct you'. Another one is 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet' (1 Tim.2:13). This is Paul's perception based on the context. Some think that if they accept women in ministry, they are sinning. A clear teaching is required in every church to explain why they have accepted women as their ministers or why they have not. Each association can plan a series of lectures or seminars on these topics (Eph. 5; Titus) and would enlighten the congregations on the topic of gender equality in ministerial roles.

Another African who has been converted from Islamic religion found their lifestyle got closely associated with Asians. Her view was that though there can be seen an advancement in gender equality and men coming forward in accepting women in the leadership role, she wasn't sure whether is there such forward thinking among women. Are there women supporting other women, especially women of one race supporting women of another race? I have also experienced this personally after I have been called for this ministerial leadership. They mentioned that since English is not the first language, how could they be able to lead the congregation in the UK. It is an additional effort to learn and adapt themselves in a new language set-up especially when the preaching ministry is concerned – but instead receiving appreciation, they receive such negative criticisms. This would discourage people to consider accepting this leadership role. Within a women ministers' group, I have experienced the lack of consideration and acceptance. This must be changed. Every woman should be given opportunities to emerge as leaders. Women of other races should be encouraged to take this as a challenge and strive towards it instead of shrinking themselves within a shell. I have high regard of Naomi in the book of Ruth.¹² How she embraced Ruth as her daughter-in-law although she was a Moabite. The reason Ruth became so sincere and faithful to Naomi was her role model and they both worshiped the same God who is always loving. This made Ruth to say, 'Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.' (Ruth 1:16)

Conclusion: This project on exploring the ways of understanding why there are not many Asian women in the Baptist leadership ministry has given me an opportunity firstly to reflect on my personal calling. This has encouraged me to see how God has intervened throughout this journey in various ways and opened the doors for me to reach thus far. This same God is interested in others too for this vocational ministry. Seeing factors like Asians not being a large proportion of Christian community in the UK, motivates us to take up the significance of a missional approach seriously. Priorities and prejudices within the same community should be addressed and this must be brought into the light. Lack of encouragement from other communities is a serious issue and this must be worked on from both ends. One should be

¹¹ 1 Tim. 2 / Eph. 5; Titus

¹² Ruth

receiving and at the same time the other end should move forward. Self-motivation and fear of facing should be mentioned and exploring leadership-calling workshops and seminars should be organised, welcoming women from different ethnic groups to attend.