

## **How do caring responsibilities, across the life cycle, shape and impact the ministry and experiences of women in Baptist chaplaincy and church ministry roles?**

### **Introduction**

As an ordained chaplain in the Baptist Union of Scotland (BUS), who came into ministry in my 40s with caring responsibilities for 2 children, this question had both professional and personal resonance. This research project attempts to give voice to women who experience the dual responsibilities of ministry and carer. I hadn't envisaged that it would also prove so powerful in helping me make sense of my own experiences and to find my own voice as I inhabit these dual roles. The report presented here highlights the main themes arising from interviews, and these will serve as a well to draw from as I find the words to produce an autoethnographic piece, weaving my own story with the experiences of the women interviewed. In this way the project has served as an empowering experience, both on a personal level helping me find the words to make sense of my own experiences, and by providing a space for the voices of interviewees to be heard.

### **The Context**

The research is situated within the context of the BUS in 2022–2023. The BUS has considered and accepted women for accredited Baptist ministry since 1999. As of 2023 there are 18 women currently accredited by the BUS for Baptist church / chaplaincy ministry out of a total 171 accredited. In 2009 Rev. Catriona Gorton was appointed the first female minister in sole charge of a Baptist church. As of September 2023, there are 3 female ministers in post as senior / sole pastors in Scottish Baptist churches.

Initial observations and assumptions were that women tend to respond to the call to ministry later than their male counterparts and so are likely to have significant caring responsibilities when they do respond to that call and they tend to take on part-time and associate roles.

### **Participants**

A convenience sample of 5 women was selected and approached for interview by utilising personal contacts and publicly available information on women in Baptist ministry in Scotland. Staff at the BUS kindly agreed to facilitate introductions in order to adhere to GDPR requirements. Selection of the female participants was designed to reflect the breadth of caring responsibilities across the life cycle and the differing roles that female Baptist ministers<sup>1</sup> were engaged in. Selection for inclusion was restricted to women approved by the Board of Ministry to embark on the BUS pre-accreditation program, or who were currently working as non-accredited ministers in Scotland. In order to better understand the Scottish context it was felt that restricting the scope of location to Scotland was beneficial.

During the recruitment phase these aspirations proved challenging and it was necessary to recruit one participant from England, a female minister who had responsibility for caring for parents. On reflection this is likely due to the limited pool of potential participants in Scotland.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Minister' – encompasses those called in to church ministry and chaplaincy, as well as other expressions of leadership in the church.

There are currently 18 women working in accredited Baptist church ministry or chaplaincy. It can be deduced that as the number of women being approved for accredited Baptist ministry increases, and as those currently in ministry grow older, the demands of caring for elderly relatives will increase.

In summary, the participants selected broadly fall into the following categories.

- Ministry roles: Chaplain, Minister (Sole) or Associate Minister
- Accreditation status: Accredited, Non-Accredited or Retired
- Caring responsibilities: Children, Spouse and/or Parents
- Household situation: Sole Parent or Married

Due to the limitations of time and the scope of this project, but also in part due to the limited number of potential participants in Scotland, there are no representatives from the BAME community, no co-pastors and no people with disabilities.

Male counterpart participants (reflectors) produced a written reflection based on transcripts of the women's interviews. Identification and recruitment of reflectors proved less challenging. Potential participants were identified and approached. This was facilitated by BUS staff. All reflectors worked within a Scottish context, providing comparability and familiarity of context between interviewee and reflector. The women's interviews were transcribed, approved and consent was given before being shared with male reflectors. A total of 4 reflections were returned.

## **Arising Themes**

### **Call to Ministry Later in Life**

All interviewees described responding to the call to ministry later in life (typically in their 40s) by which time they had gathered significant caring responsibilities. In some cases the women had heard the initial whispers of a call to ministry decades earlier. Prior to a decision to actively discern that call, they had been involved in voluntary service in the church for many years including leading services and establishing missional communities.

One participant described that *'I heard from God when I was a teenager that I was being called to some kind of Christian service'* [Female Interviewee 2], but only responded to that call in her 40s after changed circumstances in life and employment made it necessary to reconsider her life. Changes in the status quo often act as a transition point at which serious consideration is given to responding to those initial whispers.

*'It was only after my husband's death that I began to think about ministry again and specifically about accreditation. I have been thinking about church leadership for about 15 years. It has been in the background all that time. I have had a sense that God is calling me to pastor a church.'* [Female Interviewee 3]

One male participant, reflecting on the woman's calling commented:

*'So familiar was [her] awareness of the Divine voice in those of her children and other members of her church it felt to me almost as if I was hearing his voice on the page. It became so obvious that yes, of course she should do it, that I was mentally preparing for the inevitable, triumphant conversation with a trusted elder in which [her] calling was recognised and swiftly acted upon.'* (Reader, it wasn't.) [Male Reflector 5]

And in reflecting on the difference between the pattern of male and female calling:

*'...while [she] had full, formal theological training, including ministerial training before starting a family, and long before coming into church leadership, I had only undergone a few months residential training after University.'* [Male Reflector 5]

Significant in this theme of call later in life is that despite hearing the call early, the women interviewed were either a) not noticed to possess the gifts and skills necessary for ministry, b) not encouraged to pursue ministry even if those skills were noticed or c) led in a voluntary capacity without being encouraged to pursue ministry accreditation. By the time the interviewees decided to act on (or could no longer ignore) that call, they had typically amassed significant caring responsibilities, such that the possibility of pursuing that call while at the same time attending to their role as carer was elusive. This serves as a reminder for church and denominational leaders that we need to encourage young women to ministry in the same way that we encourage young men. Similarly, we should not overlook the gifting and calling of older women in our congregation. It is feasible that they have been overlooked in the past, suppressing the whispers of God's call for decades so that they might attend to the more practical and immediate needs of their families.

### Modelling

The theme of modelling played an important part in interviewees' decision to move from hearing the whispers of calling to active discernment of that call. Notable was the importance of seeing other women in the role of minister, with or without caring responsibilities being also apparent. The only interviewee who did not comment on this significance was one of the first women to be ordained in Baptist ministry in Scotland. It was at the Induction of a female minister that one interviewee first felt that call to ministry, and for another it was being afforded the opportunity to serve in a chaplaincy context as part of theological educational training by the Scottish Baptist College.

In the Scottish context, not all churches will agree theologically with women engaging in leadership and preaching, so it is important that examples can be seen in other arenas, such as wider denominational events. This allows women opportunities to see others 'like them' inhabiting such roles. The BUS might also have a role in facilitating connection between women currently in ministry and those discerning a call. In all cases described, by the time the woman formally approached the Board of Ministry, or staff at the BUS, they had become convinced of their call to ministry.

One participant reflects on the female role models she had when her children were small:

*'The women who were leading in the church were older than me and so they were in a different stage of life with their families. ... Preaching, leading, being on the church leadership team, they had come into those things later in life. In that sense they were not peers. They did have caring responsibilities but for older children.'* [Female Interviewee 3]

When women don't see ministers 'like them' – be it female, be it carers – it is easy for them to internalise the message that 'this can't be done'. In a prevailing church culture which is predominantly male led, also called cultural patriarchy<sup>2</sup>, the need for female role models is heightened. One interviewee reflects:

*'Even when my kids were crawling all over me and I was still trying to lead, I used to think, well, if other women don't see someone trying to do this, then they just think that it's not possible... I think it's difficult to do something you can't see other people like you doing. There can be an issue around visibility that I feel passionate about. [The message is that] it's too difficult to attempt, or worse, that it's not okay. That's worse isn't it? Not just, it's impractical, but it's not wanted.'* [Female Interviewee 3]

### Encouragement

Given the limited number of women leading churches in Scotland, it is not surprising that women discerning God's call talk about the importance of encouragement. The Scottish context shows a mix of egalitarian and complementarian churches across the nation; this coupled with a lack of role models outside of churches means that women cannot take for granted that their churches will agree with their decision to discern and pursue a call to ministry. As such, there is a concern that women may not receive the necessary space and encouragement to discern such a call. Indeed, in some cases it may be actively discouraged if the woman finds herself in a complementarian church. Of note is that a church's theology on this matter is not always explicit and even a constitutionally egalitarian church may have a culture which is more complementarian. The distinction between egalitarianism and complementarianism is not always as clear cut as we might like. Women may need to look outside their local churches for sage advice, discussion and exploration of their call.

*'While there are clearly many and varied reasons why she didn't [pursue ministry at an earlier age], the one that stuck out is that 25 years ago it would have been very difficult for her to do so in many evangelical churches, because she's a woman.'* [Male Reflector 5]

Church culture has moved on in the last 25 years, but we still have a long way to go before women ministers can enter spaces, including churches, without wondering whether others in that space believe their gender excludes them from doing their job.<sup>3</sup> How much more so for women who have the dual role as carers? As one interviewee commented:

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<sup>2</sup> 'Cultural patriarchy' – the dominant culture of Baptist churches in Scotland which are predominantly led by males regardless of their theological stance on the matter of women in leadership. The prevailing culture is male created and led.

<sup>3</sup> When we talk of 'calling' it is of note that it is never just 'a job'; rather, it is an expression of 'who we are'. In the context I describe, disagreement over whether women can do the 'job' of being a minister is therefore

*'I have never felt that my male colleagues have given any space to the fact that I am a carer. Or any credence to that. Because I think, certainly in the early days, there was no credence given to the fact that it was alright for a woman to be a Baptist minister.'* [Female Interviewee 1]

Where this encouragement had not initially been forthcoming from their church, two interviewees found an encouraging and welcoming space to discern through theological education at the Scottish Baptist College.

*'the staff and students there were really supportive... the call to the Scottish Baptist College began the call into ministry.'* [Female Interviewee 2]

The theme of persistent encouragement is intertwined with lack of role models for both women and carers. Cultural patriarchy in churches means that women do not see women leading in their churches and so when they hear the whispering call of God, they are inevitably being asked to respond as pioneers. In God's whispers they are asked to go against the grain of the prevailing culture in pursuit of a higher calling. This is a courageous and brave thing to do and will likely meet opposition and so the support and encouragement of their faith communities (whether this is found in an academic setting or a church setting) becomes of heightened importance to sustain them as they walk this path. This need for support and encouragement is not limited to the discernment of call, but also in the living out of their call. As one interviewee responded:

*'I feel very much when I preach somewhere, I'm not just preaching a sermon, but I'm normalising women in the pulpit preaching a sermon. It's this extra responsibility ... I want women to know that what they sense God saying to them might actually be true and that they don't have to go to England to fulfil God's calling on their life because they seem to embrace women in ministry more readily there.'* [Female Interviewee 2]

### Provision of Opportunities

Being involved in ministry in ways that work around caring is an important factor enabling women to discern their call. On occasion these opportunities come from within the church, as with one interviewee who was encouraged to go on a leadership development course and lead a missional community, which worked well around her caring responsibilities.

*'It's about balance and valuing and creating opportunities to serve... I think doing that [leadership] program was some recognition that I was stepping into a leadership role; a recognition that I was a leader in that context of missional community.'* [Female Interviewee 3]

In other occasions women had to seek these opportunities outside of their church:

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fundamentally a disagreement of whether that women can and should be able to live out an authentic, full expression of 'who she is'.

*'My own church wouldn't let me preach... I was commended by a Church of Scotland minister, who trained me and allowed me to preach when my own church community wouldn't do that.'* [Female Interviewee 1]

Or through opportunities for work-based learning placements in theological education:

*'I did [a placement] at [the place] where I work now. I remember thinking this is exactly where I want to be and I'd love to do this some more. ... I suddenly realised that Chaplaincy was what God had designed me to do – so I began the process of applying to the Board of Ministry.'* [Female Interviewee 2]

Another still seized the opportunities that were presented to her in the pandemic.

*'I was shooting sermons on Facebook to help people who have been locked down and [the church] heard one of my sermons, an Easter sermon and just said 'Look, would you preach for us on Zoom over lockdown?''* [Female Interviewee 4]

The tenacity of these women in thinking creatively about opportunities for them to serve and discern their call is remarkable.

Be it missional communities, creating opportunities to try out different ministries or making use of opportunities in the wider faith community, these are a necessary part of discernment as well as bringing experience to go before the Board of Ministry. The opportunities that interviewees describe were flexible in terms of time commitment and balancing the needs of caring. One interviewee notes how continuation of this has been an important factor in her work now, as she takes her parent with her to church on a Sunday:

*'They've just accepted him [the parent she cares for]... They've accepted him, and they love him, they got to know his quirks.'* [Female Interviewee 5]

Flexibility of opportunities extends beyond the churches to flexibility in theological education. three of the interviewees talk about the 'game changer' that online provision of theological training has been.

*'Studying is only possible for me because the training has moved online. I don't have to go in person and try to fit that in around everything else... I have an opportunity to train now. There is an opportunity for me to do my theological training because I can study on Zoom. That's been a game changer.'* [Female Interviewee 3]

*'That formed part of the decision making about going to college, because the classes began at 10 o'clock. So I knew that I could do the school run and get over to Paisley for the college. ... Similarly, I could get back for the school run at the other end of the day, because I could leave at 2pm and be back for 3pm.'* [Female Interviewee 2]

## Flexibility in Working

Creativity in ministry was a persistent theme for all interviewees. This included flexibility in working hours (evenings, school days, part-time, term time); creativity in delivery of ministry (online, recorded sermons, working in the community, creating a portfolio of work, bivocational ministry, missional communities) and flexibility in delivery of required training. Such flexibility arose from the need to juggle dual roles of carer and minister but conversely required flexibility from the faith communities in which they served. This flexible, solutions-based approach served their ministry in the longer term.

*'I just recently said to the Board that I'd like to take some time off. My dad's poorly... They were really supportive and generous with me.'* [Female Interviewee 4]

*'I've got a very flexible boss, and she's a female boss who's a bit older than me and has three grown up children. ... She allows me to work more days for shorter hours [when my husband is working away.]'* [Female Interviewee 2]

This theme was echoed by the male reflectors, in particular those with caring responsibilities, who felt that flexible working would help them managed their caring roles.

*'Because the context [of caring] is so private, the everyday lives of those with chronic illness and of their caregivers often goes unexposed; people do not like to pry – especially in cases where the caregiver is also the person's spouse... no matter how well-intentioned the end product is neglect... others quite simply do not see the unique cost involved in our ministry and cannot therefore see where they could help mitigate that.'* [Male Reflector 1]

*'I am very thankful to lead alongside incredible women in ministry in my current context, and one of the many benefits of it is enabling me to also take my role as carer (as father of 2) seriously and not sacrifice family because of a drive in ministry.'* [Male Reflector 4]

There was an overarching theme in both interviewees and reflectors that the stereotypical, traditional, full-time ministry role lends itself to an expectation of 24/7 availability and the subsequent pressure to overwork. It was felt that this was unhelpful in maintaining a good balance between family/personal life and work.

*'on the odd occasion that people believe that I am a caregiver... I have been given the impression that this gets in the way of my ministry and is not a legitimate part of the life of one with that calling... What was at stake [through having caring responsibilities for my wife] was my availability to overwork.'* [Male Reflector 5]

*'One of the things I've learned is about expectations, that is expectations particularly around my availability... I'm committed to ministry in team... The reality is that no one is available 24/7. Not even ministers who are single and have no children... It raises questions about personal boundaries and looking after yourself.'* [Female Interviewee 3]

## Caring Responsibilities Developing Skills for Ministry

When asked how they felt their caring responsibilities had impacted and shaped their ministry, all interviewees described how they felt that caring made them more empathetic and they felt better able to minister to those who they came into contact with. This is not to say that those without caring responsibilities do not also possess those qualities, but the interviewees described that as a lasting impact of their dual role as ministers and carers.

*'These life lessons in caring, that come from being a mother in my case, can't but make me a better pastor – owning my own particular faults and failings, being authentic, loving [beyond] and accepting people's faults... [are] just the way a good parent cares for their children.'* [Female Interviewee 4]

*'[My kids] give me a reason not to be at work. So lets' say I was a single woman, or man. I would probably spend a lot more time at work than I should... that's actually helpful... they have helped me to limit access.'* [Female Interviewee 2]

*'There's an empathy that comes from a place of experience. So, every person will, who cared or will, have something in their caring role, that equips them uniquely to minister in situations that I'm sure the Lord will undoubtedly bring across their lives.'* [Female Interviewee 1]

These conversations demonstrate that rather than discounting those with caring responsibilities, or diminishing the importance of the caring role, we can look on these as positive experiences which enhance the skills of the minister. Such skills are not easily taught, rather are developed in the 'doing'; empathetic response, enhanced skills in balancing work/life balance, multitasking and creative problem solving are inherent skills in inhabiting these dual roles. Women (and men) who inhabit these dual roles are adept in coming up with creative responses to manage these roles; we might consider how that creativity could be utilised in other areas, such as creating flexible new models of ministry and church, or perhaps pioneering ministry and evangelism.

## Recommendations

### **1. Opportunities**

There is a need for provision of opportunities for women to serve, both once accredited and as part of their discernment process – opportunities for new ministries, new expressions of churches or ways that faith communities may help women (and men) manage dual roles of carer and minister. These might include missional communities, micro churches, pioneering ministries, or they may be as simple as churches being more open to flexibility in working hours alongside management of expectations around availability. It should be noted that opportunities should be available to all women, of any age, not solely targeted at young leaders, which is demonstrable in the fact that many women come to ministry later in life when they already have caring responsibility.

## **2. Role Models**

As many of the interviewees noted, it is difficult to imagine that you might be hearing God's call to ministry correctly when seeing women inhabit that role is unusual. Responding to a call in that environment requires great courage and bravery. In the Scottish context a woman in ministry is unusual (thankfully this is changing), and seeing one who also visibly has caring responsibilities is more unusual still. An increase in visibility of women doing ministry – which includes senior roles not restricted to children's ministry or leading worship – is required to normalise women in ministry in general. The women interviewed felt a weight of responsibility to be these role models as an additional pressure on their ministry and calling. It is noted that caring responsibilities are not solely the domain of women, and part of the normalisation of inhabiting ministry and caring includes male carers and fathers talking about their caring responsibilities, which may include allowing their children to be visible as they minister from the front. One woman talks of ministering with children 'crawling all over her'; might we also normalise fathers delivering a sermon with babe in arms?

## **3. Support in the Discernment Process**

The length of time that women took to respond to the call to ministry was a consistent theme in the interviews. It is notable that by the time the women contact the Union to talk about accreditation they are mostly convinced of their call. We could consider a space for women's discernment prior to application to the Board of Ministry [BOM], in recognition that some women may be experiencing this call in complementarian churches. This situation would pose problems in obtaining preaching experience, or gaining a commendation from their church, which is required as part of the application process to the BOM. This may be as simple as a women-only 'explore your call' / retreat day, or it may be a more formal buddy system matching women discerning a call with those already in ministry. In my own experience, I contacted women in ministry for these conversations as part of my own discernment process, though these contacts were made through Twitter in an ad hoc way. A more comprehensive system might serve those less bold in their tendencies towards messaging strangers on Twitter.

## **4. Listening**

When I approached interviewees to ask them about their experiences of caring and ministering there was a sense that these women were grateful to be asked, almost as if they had been waiting for a chance to tell their stories and share their experiences with someone. Women, particularly women called into ministry, can experience marginalisation due to their gender. Even when this is not the case in their churches, the wider Baptist denomination in Scotland, which is majority complementarian in its theology, marginalises women's experiences of ministry. As such, women cannot walk into ANY faith affiliated space and expect that others in that space approve of, or are even neutral on the matter of whether they have a right to inhabit that space. This requires mental and emotional energy on the part of a woman minister entering a faith-based space that male ministers simply do not face. On this background there is a pressure on women to downplay or not talk openly about their caring responsibilities for fear of further marginalisation, or worse, weaponisation of those caring responsibilities as a means to discredit or undermine their call to ministry. As one

reflector points out *'Having one's experience believed is a powerful, albeit small, first step towards legitimisation... We who do not feel ourselves under constant suspicion merely because of our chromosomes have a duty to be especially careful when responding to the experiences of women, and also of other demographics marginalised by patriarchal structures.'* [Male Reflector 1]

## **5. Avoiding Unintentional Discrimination**

Participants described the ways in which events, meetings and ministries can exclude them from becoming involved in ministry, progressing within leadership and even accessing the support they require as they try to discern their call. One male reflects that *'the experience of the caregiver – which almost definitively features a lack of support – appears to be the forgotten category of discrimination'* [Male Reflector 1]. We have seen how making changes to the way that people access support has enabled women to access theological education, as described by the women who accessed training at the Scottish Baptist College. Including an online stream for their whole degree program has been a 'game changer' and has enabled an avenue for women to pursue their calling which would have precluded them otherwise. Other examples of making adaptations for inclusion might be considering the provision of childcare at meetings and events, or explicitly stating that children are welcome; offering the option of online attendance; ensuring that there is an offering of online provision for continuing ministry development training; and even considering the timing of events in light of school pick up/drop offs and evening meetings. As one interviewee notes, *'Not thinking about the implications for people with caring responsibilities can discourage those people from getting involved or could make them think that having kids has become a hindrance in church ministry'* [Female Interviewee 3]. We must also note that these adaptations would not only benefit those who are carers but also those who are differently abled. When we consider the people that we want to reach at any given meeting, the failure to consider the potential adaptations needed for caregivers demonstrates an unseen (and unintentional) discrimination which for women and the differently abled is compounded by existing gender and ableist discrimination.

## **6. Creativity in Ministry and Flexibility of Leadership**

Almost all interviewees and reflectors expressed a desire for renewed thinking in what being a 'minister' looks like and flexibility in how 'being in ministry' was expressed. One reflective pair (male and female) both describe feeling diminished by the stereotype of 'minister' that was placed on them. The female interviewee recalls *'they thought that I couldn't be a minister because of my caring responsibilities'* [Female Interviewee 1] and conversely the male reflector responds *'[she] describes how she fell victim to the sexist trope that it is inconceivable that a woman – and certainly one with caring responsibilities – should become a minister. The harm of this dual stereotype cuts both ways: while women may care but never pastor; men may pastor but ought to leave the caring responsibilities to their spouse'* [Male Reflector 1]. There is a sense in which both feel constrained by the traditional models of ministry and its gendered assumptions about what 'role' one must inhabit, rather than adopting a more holistic approach to personhood in which all aspects of self must be free to be expressed. One interviewee calls this holistic approach to the 'minister' and ministry

in general a *'person-centred'* [Female Interviewee 1] approach to ministry. To adopt a person-centred approach to ministry would mean recognition of an individual's circumstances, male or female, including consideration of the factors that bring strength to that person's pastoring, which may include recognising that attending to and expressing caregiving is an essential part of what brings that person wholeness. It means church communities being open to creativity and flexibility in expression of that person's pastoring gifts in such a way that it may not conform to the traditional models of church and ministry. This calls for a compassionate approach to individuals and a recognition of the very human personhood of the minister.

In conclusion, changes to allow women to inhabit the dual roles of carer and minister start with a commitment to listening to the experiences of women in our churches, those currently in ministry and those who may be hearing the whispers of God's calling for the first time. It continues with the creation of courageous spaces for women to explore calling regardless of their age or the responsibilities that they might have amassed. Part of that creation of courageous spaces is a commitment to allowing women in ministry, including those with caring responsibilities, to be seen and heard. All of the women interviewed understood and felt the weight of responsibility to 'be seen' so that other women could begin to see that they could do it too. Important also is the creation of opportunities, inside churches and in the wider denomination, for women to test that calling, and for those that show promise as potential leaders to be encouraged. Finally, it means not unintentionally discriminating against caregivers as we plan events and training. Perhaps above all, it requires a shift away from the stereotypical view of 'minister' to a more person-centred and holistic approach to minister as human, as a person with a need to express their whole personhood, and then the boldness of churches to be flexible enough to accommodate such creativity. Allowing ministers to inhabit a holistic expression of self, demonstrates to others, including our families, that it is possible to inhabit the dual role of minister and carer and that burnout is not inevitable. I conclude with the words of one male reflector:

*'I have needed the role model of women/mothers leading in order to see another way (and I think a better way) to be present to family, to God and to my church community.'*  
[Male Reflector 5]