

Podcast – Season 2 – Helen Stokley

Season Intro

	Music
Jane	Hello, I'm Jane Day, Centenary Development Enabler for Baptists Together
Helen	And I'm Helen Cameron, Research Fellow at the Centre for Baptist Studies at Regent's Park College Oxford. Together we are the co-leaders of Project Violet.
Jane	Welcome to Season 2 of the Project Violet podcast. Project Violet is a research project investigating women's experiences in ministry whilst developing women ministers. We are trying to understand better the theological, missional and structural obstacles women ministers face and identify ways forward.
Helen	In this second season, we will introduce you to some of the women who have taken part in the project and the research they have done.
Jane	We hope that listening to these episodes will help you engage with the findings of the project which can be found on the Project Violet website.

Interview – Helen Stokley

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Helen and Helen	<p>Helen Cameron Hello, today I'm talking with Helen Stokely.</p> <p>Helen Stokley Hi.</p> <p>Helen Cameron Helen, thanks for coming onto the Project Violet podcast. Perhaps you'd like to start by describing your current ministry role.</p> <p>Helen Stokley Thank you, thank you for having me. So, my current ministry role officially has the title of Deputy Vice Chancellor at Spurgeon's College. But simply, I think we can say I'm the vice principal. And my life consists of a wonderful mix of everything. Looking after college on a day-to-day basis. As Philip, the principal puts it, I make things happen. So that's everything you might expect, the mechanics of college life and the building. But I actually spend more time on strategic partnerships, on the direction of the college, on the leadership of the college, and as a sideline, I find myself overseeing some rather major building projects. And then alongside that, I also preach and speak in various contexts. And then occasionally I step into the classroom and give a lecture. So really, no two days are the same. It's extremely varied. On my desk, I have a sign that says 'in business to do ministry', and really that kind of encapsulates it because I feel</p>

called as a Baptist minister, I have some skills outside Baptist ministry, and God has good sense of humour, and has chosen just to combine the two into a unique Baptist ministry role.

Helen Cameron

Thank you, Helen. That's a really distinctive role. Thanks for describing it to us. Can I take you back to the beginning of your ministry? Can you tell us a bit about how you came to enter Baptist ministry?

Helen Stokley

Yeah, so I was a very reluctant entrant to Baptist ministry, primarily because I thought, surely Baptist ministry was for people who knew what they were doing. And I didn't put myself in that category. I felt God was calling me into leadership, I think, from my teenage years, but it was really in my 20s that I understood that God actually wanted me to be a Baptist minister. And for me, that was a really big challenge, because I was quite sure that, you know, that was meant for other people. But God made it very plain that yes, he wanted me to. And so I actually came to Spurgeon's college, I trained as a Baptist minister. And while I was training, I was a minister-in-training at Woodside Baptist Church. So yeah, so it was a bit of an adventure.

Helen Cameron

That's great. Thank you for sharing your story with us. You were in the first group of women who came forward and took part in Project Violet – can you describe the question or issue that you researched?

Helen Stokley

Yes. So the title that I ended up giving the research was: Enabling women to prepare for ministry or training, so they can engage and flourish as ministers-in-training. And I suppose the key word in that sentence really was enabling women to prepare for ministerial training, the word 'prepare'. So I didn't really look at what happens when students get into college, I was interested more in how they were getting there, what was happening before they came through the doors, and just that kind of journey of preparation for ministerial training. And so I was really, really interested in that. And it really related to my experience, because I'm involved in the interview process, as people come to college. And so it was really, I was hearing lots of stories, I was observing lots of things. I was thinking, Oh, my word. And I didn't really know what to do with all of that experience. So actually felt really important to me to actually understand what was going on. In that moment.

Helen Cameron

Thank you. So really something that you were observing in your day-to-day ministry, and which you suddenly realized, 'This is important. I need to do some more investigation.' Yeah, that's really interesting. And can you say a bit about how you conducted your research, what kind of things did you do?

Helen Stokley

Yes. So naively, I thought that it might be simple to send out a survey to every Baptist minister in the Baptist Union. So, you know, and so I did that and wasn't quite prepared for the fact that people very kindly engaged with my survey. So

114 People actually responded with over 13,000 words, which I wasn't really ready for. I was thinking a couple of friends from college and a few people who I bumped into might have been kind enough to do it. But I was quite amazed actually that people did the survey. And so I asked a series of questions, about people's journey. But I also very deliberately gave space for free text. So there were very open questions where people could actually say anything that they wanted in response to the question, and that's the bit that I found fascinating, because although I asked about preparation, I received lots of information about experience at college. And as I said, over 13,000 words, and it was just a privilege to get a peek into people's experience. So yeah, predominantly, it was a survey. And just so you know, it kept me very busy afterwards. It was great fun. But yeah, hadn't quite expected people to engage with it in the way they did.

Helen Cameron

I guess it shows that this issue isn't only important to you, but it's important to other people that many people took the trouble to respond to you. So that's quite encouraging, even although from what you say it sounds a bit overwhelming at the time.

Helen Stokley

That was really encouraging. Yeah, it felt like maybe I was asking the right question, because people were responding. So that was really interesting.

Helen Cameron

So you've written the report, which is available on the Project Violet website. Why would you like people to read your report?

Helen Stokley

Yes, it's a really good question. Because obviously, we've all got busy lives and lots going on. But I'm really conscious that if you've got anything to do with Baptist ministry, I mean, as a person, you know, as a church member, and maybe it's the person leading a church, someone involved in a pioneer or missional context, or a leader at local, regional, national or international level, I think that we can all agree that we want to be as effective as we can be – effective as a movement. It's about his family, we want to be the best that we can be for the time that God has called us. And we want to be great stewards of the gospel. So I think that's something that we can all coalesce around: we really want to see change lives. And we understand that what we bring to the table, how we do it, and how effective we are, is part of that mix – that God in His grace uses all of that. So if we all are coming together, knowing that we want to be more effective, and we together want to form leaders, the next generation of people to share the gospel. And if we come together with that fact and combine that the Baptist family have chosen to train people through various models, my research really looks at the reality on the ground of how that training model works. And as I, as I mentioned, you know, 114 people, you know, Baptist ministers have, have really given us a peek into their experience of what's going on in training. And, and I think that's really interesting, because it also gives us a peek into that question about how we can be more effective. How can we use the opportunity we have? How can we ensure that we are stewarding the gift of the gospel in the best way? So for me, if we don't hear

	<p>what’s happening on the ground, right, in the heart of training, how can we, as a Baptist family make evidence-based, informed decisions about going forward? How can we, you know, think about how we need to move what we need to change? How we can be more effective if our, if our call is to, you know, for such a time as this to use our opportunities? We need as much knowledge as we can. We need to hear as many voices as we can. Because the reality is, there’s no singular narrative. And, you know, none of the participants that replied to the survey are the same. You know, I’m on this podcast, and I’m not the same you who’s listening and you’re not the same as the people around you. And you see, we don’t want to package people into groups, because there is no singular narrative. But we do want to draw out common themes. And so from the act of doing my research, I’ve tried to highlight some of those common themes. And I suppose my question would be that if we want to be effective, if we want to, you know, if we want to take to the world for Christ, then, and if we’re committed to training Baptist ministers, and that’s the way that we’ve chosen to do this, then why wouldn’t you read my research, because actually, in reading it, we learn more about how we are doing as a movement as individuals as a Baptist family in terms of training. So I think it’s like an opportunity to just take a peek behind the curtain, and just look and reflect and hear from people who have experienced it, and just hear the reality of it, and also gain their insights. Because none of us know everything; we together, you know, we can make evidence-based decisions. And so I really want people to read it, because I want to help those that were brave enough and kind enough to answer my survey and input into it, just for their voice to be to be heard and to be noted. And as you’ll find out – when you do read it – it was costly for some of those people. And some of the things they said requires quite a bit of bravery. So I liked that phrase, ‘of humble inquiry’. So I would just invite you to come on a journey, to be a humble enquirer, to find out what people have been saying, as a result of my research.</p> <p>Helen Cameron Thank you, Helen. That’s really stirring, I can hear the passion in your voice and all that you’ve put into this. And as you say, lots of people have been very courageous in taking part in the research that the Project Violet co-researchers have done, so thank you so much for what you’ve said.</p> <p>Helen Stokley And it’s been great to be able to share.</p>
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Season Outro

Helen	Thank you for listening to this episode of the Project Violet podcast. We invite you to go to the website and download the reports if you have not yet done so. www.projectviolet.org.uk
Jane	And don’t forget to tell others about the Project Violet podcast. You can follow us on Facebook and X formerly Twitter.
	Music

