



News: 14 March 2018

Sexism in the Church today

Churches are being urged to take steps to make their congregations safe spaces in which women can flourish, after new research released on International Women's Day revealed that 62 per cent of women have experienced sexism in the UK Church

The Minding the Gap report, published by the Sophia Network, found that institutional sexism was also seen as the number one barrier for women in church leadership in the UK, identified as such by 53 per cent of respondents in the survey.

The report also highlighted a number of other barriers facing women in leadership in the Church, including a lack of female mentoring and leaders (46 per cent); and a lack of theological understanding of women and men working in partnership for the gospel (42 per cent).

The report surveyed more than 1,200 women about their experiences within church communities in order to paint a comprehensive picture of what it is like to be a woman in the Church in UK & Ireland.

Following the survey findings, which launched in parliament on International Women's Day (Thursday, 8 March), the Sophia Network is now encouraging churches to sign up to its 'Minding the Gap Manifesto' – eight commitments to making their congregations places of gender equality. (see below).

Dr Claire Rush, vice president of Girls' Brigade International and vice-chair of the Sophia Network, said, 'The #metoo campaign shows that gender equality has still not been achieved, and it's heartbreaking to see that the Church, which should be a liberating and hope-filled community, remains a place in which some women are experiencing sexism.'

'Our hope and prayer is that leaders will take up the challenge posed by our research to make their churches spaces in which women can flourish by being released into their God-given giftings, becoming all that they have been created to be.'

The Sophia Network was started in 2007 and exists to empower and equip women in leadership, and to champion the full equality of women and men in the Church.

Baptist minister the Revd Vicky Thompson is chair of the Sophia Network. She said, 'Many assumptions are made about women's experiences within and relationship to the Church. But we are not aware of previous research that has tried to capture the range and breadth of women's experiences – including the highs and the lows.

'Although we were disappointed that so many women have experienced sexism, we were heartened to see some positive results about women's experiences of church – particularly the support they have received in their leadership journeys from male leaders.

'We hope this research will provide a useful tool to pave a way forward towards the full equality of men and women in the Church for the sake of the gospel.

'We are hoping the findings will also shape the future direction of Sophia.'

To download the Minding the Gap report, visit mindingthegapuk.com

Women speaker database launched

A database of women who can speak at local, national and regional Christian conferences and events has launched

The database has been a long held goal of Project 3:28, which since 2013 has gathered data on the number of women and men speaking on the national Christian platform. According to its statistics, women make up around 66 per cent of the UK church, yet just 34 per cent of Christian conference speakers are women.

Project 3:28 has learnt from conference organisers that one of the barriers is a lack of women across their networks who they can invite to events.

The database aims to provide a practical solution. It gives women the opportunity to be listed alongside their areas of expertise and links to their audio and video content. It has wider information about their qualifications and testimonials from referees who can vouch for their gifting.

‘Since envisaging the database back in 2013, we have been working towards creating an online resource for event organisers and Christian women that will enable the gender balance at Christian events to improve,’ said Natalie Collins of Project 3:28.

‘As we go forward we are hopeful that this database will become an invaluable resource for event organisers to increase women's representation and to broaden the topics and types of speakers who are invited to contribute to Christian events.’

Baptist theologian Steve Holmes is one of the project's backers. He tweeted that the database is designed 'to end the weasel excuse about we couldn't find a woman,' and later published a blog post expressing his hope 'that there will be a mighty army of gifted women offering themselves to the UK churches to preach the gospel and to teach the faith.'

The database will be used by two groups of people.

Women with an interest in speaking! Whether women have years of speaking experience or this is their first time putting themselves forward, Project 3:28 is encouraging women to create a profile with a photo, bio, and their specialist areas.

‘We know there is a huge wealth of knowledge and expertise among Christian women that the wider church has yet to appreciate. The database will offer a practical solution to help their work and gifts be seen, whether at local or national level.’

Conference and event organisers, producers and media people will be able to register to use the database, and by searching a name, subject, or key word discover women speakers with specialisms in Christianity, including the Bible, missions, church planting, and apologetics, and an extensive range of wider topics including politics, society, culture, the arts, media, business, ethics, and much more and then contact them directly.

Project 3:28 originates from Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Baptist women with an interest in speaking are encouraged to register on the database.

Visit <https://speaker328.info/>

'We are more than just a chippy'

The country's first community-owned chippy has opened, and Baptists are at the heart of it

Chelmund's Fish and Chips is an ethical business in North Solihull which not only serves a tasty menu, but ploughs its profits back into the community.

'We saw new shop units going up as part of the Solihull regeneration program,' says Neil Roberts, minister of Chelmsley Wood Baptist Church, 'and we thought, someone will put a chippy in there.'

'Why not us?'

Chelmsley Wood, still one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England despite the regeneration, had been without a chippy for about six years. Neil and others didn't want a large chain coming in and taking the profits to distant shareholders. Instead they saw an opportunity to benefit the local economy on every level.

The idea was pitched to developer Central England Co-Op, which was supportive and asked for a proposal. What followed was 'two years of planning, negotiating (and a few sleepless nights)', which bore fruit last Thursday (1 March), when the chippy opened to long queues at the height of the cold snap.

Chelmsley Wood Baptist Church and local ecumenical partnership St Andrew's (Anglican/Methodist) have teamed up with three local organisations to form a social enterprise to manage the business. And they stress it's a business, not a charitable project.

'We wanted to be an example of an ethical business which has the community's interests at heart,' Neil explains. 'The profits are locked in to guarantee community benefit.'

There is also a strong emphasis on local employment, as well as using local suppliers and offering a quality product. All profits will be reinvested back into the community.

Already there has been much interest, with takings above target. Neil says, 'It's early days, but it's great to see the community get it. They wanted fish and chips, and as they begin to realise about the profits, it's like a double win.'

'Once we're able to filter the money back, it will be even better.'

Chelmunds fish and chips¹

The other partners include Development in Social Enterprise (a local social enterprise consultancy firm), Olive Branch Kitchen (a community café) and Three Trees Community Centre.

It's been an empowering process, Neil says. 'It shows what the community can do when it comes together. We can do this ourselves. We don't have to be dictated to by big businesses that take their profits elsewhere.'

'And with money comes power. Hopefully as a community we can start making our own choices in the future, rather than always asking for grants.'

From the church's point of view, this is not an evangelistic project: it's missional, Neil says. 'The church is a clearly stated presence in the community.'

'How do we live the gospel here? This is a way of supporting our community.' He believes more churches will consider social enterprises in the future due to a combination of financial challenges and the opportunities they bring.

The project was supported by a grant from the Heart of England Baptist Association, which Neil said was crucial in unlocking further funding. HEBA regional minister Dave Ellis was on hand to support the opening. (Dave is pictured left, with Neil)

Chelmunds Fish and Chips

'Without the support from HEBA, we would have really struggled to get off the ground,' Neil says. 'They saw it as an innovative missional project. They were great.'

In all the project has cost a little more than £120,000. Other funders include CAF Venturesome, the North Solihull Partnership, and the Simon Digby Charitable Trust.

There has been media interest too, with pieces in the Birmingham Mail and the BBC. The One Show airs a segment on the new chippy on Wednesday (7 March).

Follow Chelmund's Fish and Chips on Facebook and Twitter

Next steps for Next Meal

A creative initiative that uses technology to connect homeless people with food and shelter is seeking to expand beyond London

How do you respond when you encounter someone who is homeless? Give some money? Buy a hot drink or some food? Walk on by?

Since October Londoners have had another option, thanks to some Baptist creativity and persistence – and the technology behind it could soon be used in other towns and cities.

Next Meal is a website which creates a database of London's soup kitchens and harnesses GPS to direct homeless people to their nearest hot meal.

It's the brainchild of Martin Stone, who leads the Muswell Hill Soup Kitchen at Muswell Hill Baptist Church.

Alongside the website he has created small cards for people to give to those who are begging for money. The cards state the Next Meal website address, which people can then access on their phones (which many homeless people have) or through a library.

Next Meal card

'It's a simple thing,' Martin explains. 'We are saying to the homeless person, "We are sorry you are homeless, but here's something that will help you – information about where you can get meals throughout the week."

'As Christians we can't walk on by. This is a way of being compassionate without giving away money that you can't trust where it goes.

'So we say to people – don't give money – give them a Next Meal card. It is more valuable than money.'

Next Meal came about when Martin wondered one day whether the same technology that told you when the next bus would arrive could "answer the question where is the next meal coming from?"

He pitched the idea to a city tech expert, who worked on the website in his free time.

Next Meal launched last autumn and has already started to make an impact, being embraced by homeless people and Londoners alike who want to help those in need.

Now Martin and his team want to take the Next Meal to the next level. Details are being gathered so it can be available in towns and cities across the country.

Martin says his team wants to cast the net wider to other cities, spread the word further and explore new ways to exploit technology.

'Our primary aim is to help people who are homeless or in acutely difficult circumstances,' he said.

'Many homeless people have phones, so Next Meal helps them directly.

'It also empowers people to respond to street homelessness by locating the nearest food and support.

'People want to know how to respond. Ultimately we are trying to reduce street homelessness and change the culture.'

To order a pack of Next Meal cards, or for more information, contact Martin on:
martin.stone@nextmeal.co.uk